

An Introduction to the Essays in Parallel Lines
by Dr Aaron Williamson

Some of the material in my opening polemic formed the basis of a call-out for papers from six of the more critically engaged, progressive thinkers and practitioners in the field of disability art. The responses were as varied and as wide-ranging as was hoped, and each writer's response was unique so that whereas there are thematic chimes and echoes throughout, there is little repetition.

Colin Cameron

This paper rehearses the arguments supporting the social model of disability in new and refreshing ways, and leads the reader towards the more recently developed 'affirmative model'. Cameron also questions whether the dominant, debilitating narratives around disability (tragedy, affliction, cure) can be addressed through the dominant cultural forms, such as television. He describes various fascinating historical moments in disability culture – the dramatic drop in circulation in 2007, for instance, when the non-critical *Disability Arts in London* magazine became the critical *Arts Disability Culture*. Cameron links this aversion to critical discourse within the UK disability art world to a question of exclusion: 'Knowledge of what constitutes quality,' he writes, 'is acquired only at the expense of long training in the art college or the university.' His use of the word 'expense' has poignant currency as UK universities prepare to charge fees that are beyond the means of most disabled people. Cameron goes on to describe the 'affirmative' model of disability, spelling out the political need for people who are disabled by society's oppressive views and prejudices towards them to 'embrace difference' as a 'tool for resilience'.

Lennard J. Davis

In a stimulating and far-reaching essay, Davis identifies the paradoxes that the disabled subject/artist faces from the mainstream. Exploring the pitfalls of identity-specific art and films, he wonders why disability cannot just *be*, why it has to *mean*, and how this limits the agenda of disability art. One consequence of the mainstream's insistence on impairment *meaning* is the phenomenon of non-disabled actors being fast-tracked to the Oscars red carpet through 'cripping-up' (a parallel to blacking-up, as Davis rightly insists) and emoting on film. This phenomenon provides popular audiences with a cathartic release from their own fear towards inevitable physical entropy, but it also serves to ghettoise disability itself as 'an allegorical state of being'. The social exclusion of disabled people is thus impacted at the level of cultural signification, and Davis offers an interesting take on the question of ghettoisation when he suggests that it creates a form of quarantine: 'not [for] the objective fact of impairment but rather the lived experience of being impaired in a disabling culture'.

Ine Gevers

Whereas Davis questions whether, by being identity-specific, disability art can achieve the kind of universalist 'what-it-means-to-be-human' critical acclaim of much mainstream art, Ine Gevers presents an enthralling case from a rigorously relativist perspective. Gevers shifts the boundaries by setting out a non-anthropocentric worldview,

in which disability survives exclusion from the ableist ‘universal mind’ to participate in the ‘multiple mind’ of the cyborg-subject we are all increasingly coming to resemble. Her argument is not one of alleviation-through-biotechnology (the latest, returned medical model), but that technology intrinsically counters ghettoisation through facilitating what she terms an ‘expanded identity’ that is not identifiable with the old binarisms of ab/normal, them/us. Gevers presents a new and original take on the historic marginalisation of disabled people and argues that disability artists must engage audiences with complexity and contested sites of meaning rather than securities – which this essay achieves with élan.

Joseph Grigely

Emphasising the centrality of critical debate to the future of disability art, Grigely points out that most educational institutions still departmentalise disability studies in pathology rather than culture. Instead of seeing the mainstream as being obliged to ‘represent’ or commission disability artists in a tokenistic, statistical way (as attempted through the ‘tickbox’ funding system) Grigely argues that, in fact, art as a system of cultural meaning is severely limited by their exclusion. ‘Art Needs Disabled People’ indeed. In a series of compelling attestations, Grigely recounts various situations that he has encountered as a disabled artist working in the mainstream, carefully unpacking their significance in relation to the art-event that they circumscribe. Here, Grigely sees disability’s ‘disruption’ of the usual way of things to be an intervention into the established order ‘in the way that good art can effect’. The disabled artist/audience accessing the mainstream is not an encumbrance or bothersome difficulty, but a continuum of what actually constitutes art.

Georgina Kleege

Kleege takes to task those she terms ‘the Normates’ with great gusto and precision. Normates, she avers, are not simply ‘non-disabled’, they are also insistently conformist people who amble through an unchallenged life, imagining that theirs is the best existence available and pitying those they consider unable to emulate them. This is, in fact, the greatest barrier to access that disabled people face: not the practical obstacles of everyday life but the intangible, ill-informed prejudices and perceptions of lazy-minded Normates. Setting out her powerfully oppositional stance, Kleege does not accept that disability is a reduced condition. Indeed, in shaping a worldview, disability affords the individual a life-affirming sensibility not ‘in spite of’ but ‘because of’ its existence. This distinction goes to the root of the social exclusion of disabled people: the shameful failure of the majority to imagine and accept that such might be the case. Kleege’s essay is an exciting and nuanced table-turning polemic.

Juliet Robson

Reflecting upon the legacy of the ground-breaking *VITAL* festival in Nottingham in 2000, which she co-curated, Robson sets out the process and thinking behind it. As a participating artist at *VITAL*, I recall the excitement at the depth of critical debate that it invited and the pleasing sense of being challenged by the fact that an emphasis was placed on the second word in ‘disability art’. The intention of *VITAL* was ‘to put art in primary position’ in Robson’s words. She and her commissioning organisations around

Nottingham were keen to focus on the calibre and concept of the art works whilst also wishing not to downplay or erase disability as a source of knowledge and experience. Determined to tackle the Q-word ('quality') and to situate the art in a critical framework via the concluding, vibrant symposium *Vital Signs*, Robson recollects the resistance and puzzlement that she met with from both sides of the divide between disability art (as it was characterised at that time) and the mainstream. Robson's essay is a compelling account of the barriers presented by the structures of art-dissemination when faced with genuine innovation, describing issues that remain fully relevant ten years on.

Yinka Shonibare

Yinka Shonibare's work is usually identified with post-colonialism and questions of African/European identity. Less well-known is the fact that his connection to and involvement with the disability art world goes back to the 1980s, when he worked as an Arts Officer for the disability art organisation Shape, in the days when it constituted a desk and two chairs in a tiny room on the Holloway Road in London. Shape is now a fully established, leading player in the drive to contemporise politically informed disability art. Shonibare's successes and achievements in the art world are well-known and appreciated, and here he argues – as do other contributors - that disability artists must be no different from those in the mainstream in placing the rigour and quality of their work at the forefront of their ambition.