

## The OtherAbilities

–an artistic proposition that challenges our perception of 'dis'-ability–

As human beings, our culture regulates not only the ways we think but also the ways we perceive our reality and connect to the world and beings around us, or rather, how we disconnect. It is only when we encounter individuals with sensory abilities different than our own, like visually impaired people or the hard of hearing, that the illusion of uniformity becomes challenged. The disciplining power of culture also expresses itself by designing clear categories and demarcating borders around what, or rather, who is to be considered 'normal.' At least since the 19th century, the category of 'abnormal' has encompassed different types of bodies with (sensory) impairments, often stemming from the fact of being simply 'unclassifiable.'

We are prompted by disability studies, a recently established academic field as well as a political movement, to combat historical notions of disability as a medical problem – as an illness or problem that must be cured or fixed. Instead, we are invited to consider disability in social terms, to recognize it as a category of identity. This reveals how disability as a category of the 'abnormal' has functioned, and is still functioning, as a very strong tool of marginalization supporting cultural structures of oppression. As history teaches us, these types of categories, 'diagnoses' and designations, are all socially constructed and constantly changing entities. In the words of disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "disability studies points out that ability and disability are not so much a matter of the capacities and limitations of bodies but more about what we expect from a body at a particular moment and place."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, according to some, it is equally important to be vigilant about the process of inclusion as well, as it might be a mere manifestation of the desire to maintain power structures through normalization, with the aim of 'fixing' society. In this process there is an anxiety which surrounds the disabled body. An examination of this anxiety can become a tool to open up discursive spaces for the deconstruction of all discriminatory practices of categorization and marginalization. Therefore, the central idea behind the project of the OtherAbilities is to explore a variety of experiences and creative solutions to sensory challenges and impairments, those which exceed the category of mere prosthetic. This exploration opens the possibility to address larger issues around 'disabilities' in art and society: hopefully signaling a shift in the paradigm from disability to otherability.

Only recently has art history seriously examined the question of disability and the arts. As a nineteenth-century discipline which incorporated many negative aspects of the medical model, art history has largely overlooked the social and political status of disabled subjects, failing to define disability as a social and historical construct and a vital element of human diversity. Many artists were categorized as disabled, defined by art history as those who continued working "in spite of" their disability, and whose condition often influenced the interpretation of their oeuvre. Taking the individual artistic practice as a starting point, the goal of the OtherAbilities is to challenge art history's biased

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Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Disability and Representation." *PMLA*, Vol. 120, No. 2 (Mar., 2005), pp. 522-527.

approach by inviting a variety of professionals to expand the current dialogue around art and disability. Only in this way can we begin to challenge the dominant representations of disability, also supported by today's media culture - stereotypes ranging from pitiable, to heroic, to a burden on society.

The biased interpretation of the disabled as tragic individuals who need to be protected from their surroundings, will also be challenged by the creative proposals in the OtherAbilities. The environments and practical tools in our society were created as a way to help us deal with daily challenges. Nevertheless, they have been formed around the concept of an 'average' human figure, as it turns out, mostly white, male, of particular bodily measurements and sensory abilities. This concept is often considered 'ideal', becoming a sign of normality, hence anyone who falls outside of the prescribed categories will have great trouble participating and sharing in the same experiences of this 'normal' reality. As an answer to this, accompanying the exhibition and lectures, the OtherAbilities has initiated a workshop that will serve as a meeting point for artists, designers, musicians, engineers and anyone else who would like to create and develop experimental instruments which explore other ways of sensing and operating.

By merging art and technology, our aim is to explore the possibility of designing cultural events and artifacts that are not specifically meant for disabled or non-disabled audiences, but from which no body is excluded. Instead of solutions that create the illusory experience of 'normality,' what is important is to provoke a new path which crosses into our inner side of 'abnormality.' Only on the other side of this border can we encounter the possibility for a new body to even begin to emerge.

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