

**Feminist approaches to disability:
Employing personal experiences to deconstruct stereotypes about disability**

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Abstract

This paper discusses theoretical ideas developed within the feminist paradigm of Disability Studies and it draws on particular examples of women's art work. The argument is advanced that disability art reflecting how the personal experience of disability takes a political nature, can contribute in challenging disability stereotypes. The presentation focuses on the profiles and examples of paintings of three disabled women performers: Frida Kahlo, Riva Lehrer and Simona Atzori. These stories are discussed with reference to widespread disability stereotypes and points are raised with regard to the urgency of dismantling them. The paper ends with a discussion about the rationale behind politicized disability art.

Introduction

Disability has traditionally been conceptualized as a source of sadness with multiple recipients: the disabled person, the person's family and the non-disabled population (i.e. teachers, classmates, citizens, colleagues and so on). History informs us that the ideas of segregation and medicalization of disabled people were established in the prehistoric age and they further developed over the years, influenced by the rhetoric initiated from doctors, philosophers, church representatives, state officials etc. (Symeonidou, 2009a). Arguably, numerous statements have been made from non-disabled people in their attempts to define disabled people's place in the state, the church, the society, the school, the workplace and other social structures. Within this context, a series of stereotypes about disability dominate non-disabled people's thinking. Perhaps, some of the most commonly shared stereotypes are the following:

Stereotype 1: 'Disability is a source of continuous sadness'

Stereotype 2: 'Disabled people are better educated in special schools'

Stereotype 3: 'Disabled people cannot achieve much'

Stereotype 4: 'The disabled body is not beautiful'

Stereotype 5: 'Disabled people are in need of charity (except for some of them who managed to succeed)'

Disability Studies, a distinct scientific discipline which seeks to theorize and research disability issues, questions traditional and oppressive conceptualizations of disability and provides alternative modes of thought. The development of the medical and the social models of disability marked the beginning of Disability Studies in Britain¹ and until today, they continue to hold an important place in the discussions around disability (Barnes, Oliver and Barton, 2002). The medical model represents traditional understandings of disability which are related with the physical, mental or psycho-emotional impairment of the person. According to the medical model of disability, the person's impairment is seen as a 'problem' located within the individual. Experts such as doctors, educational psychologists and therapists, have

¹ The theoretical framework of this paper draws mainly upon British Disability Studies literature.

the power to identify the person's impairment and take decisions about the treatment procedure and other aspects of the person's life (i.e. schooling, living, employment). The social model sought to explain disability from a different angle and it proposed that people with physical, mental or psycho-emotional impairments become disabled due to societal barriers which prevent them from participating equally in social life. Unlike the medical model, the social model of disability locates the 'problem' in the society and not in the person, it questions the power of non-disabled people to decide for disabled people and it calls for the removal of environmental, attitudinal or technical barriers.

Disability Studies literature was enriched with materialist, feminist and postmodern/post-structural approaches in understanding disability. Put briefly, the materialist approach dealt with the relationship between economy and disability (Oliver, 1990), the feminist approach emphasized the importance of understanding the personal experience of disability and its relevance with disability politics (Morris, 1991; Thomas, 1999) and the postmodern/post-structural approach explored issues of culture, history and language with regard to disability (Corker and Shakespeare, 2002). Each approach sought to provide different and sometimes complementary ways of conceptualizing disability. In what follows, I elaborate further on the feminist approach to disability which I later employ in deconstructing stereotypes about disability.

Feminist approach to disability

In the early 1990s, Jenny Morris opened the way for the feminist approach to disability (Morris, 1991; 1992a; 1992b; 1993; 1996). Feeling 'excluded by their sisters' (Thomas, 1999: 66) disability feminists engaged in a process of building in feminist ideas to further conceptualize disability. In this section, I will discuss the contribution of the feminist tradition to disability theory through the ideas of key feminist scholars and their criticisms of the social model.

Feminists asserted that the personal experience of women is important and drew on the relationship between the personal and subjective experience with politics, expressed by the well-established feminist maxim that the 'personal is political'. Being the cornerstones of the feminist tradition, these two lines of thought were adopted by disability feminists who sought to expand disability theory in these directions. Thus, following their fellow feminists' work in the United States (Deegan and Brooks, 1985; Fine and Asch, 1988), British disability feminists addressed the importance of the personal experience of disability and they focused on the experience of disabled women associated with the inferior status of their gender and their social roles as mothers (Morris, 1992a), daughters (Morris, 1994), carers (Keith, 1992; Morris, 1995; Keith and Morris, 1996) and activists of an exclusionary male-dominated disability movement (Morris 1991; 1996; Thomas, 2001). Having their personal experience as a starting point for researching and theorizing (Morris 1991; French, 1993; Crow, 1994), disability feminists attempted to understand how personal experience of both men and women is shaped by the psycho-emotional impact of disabling practices on disabled people (Thomas, 1999; 2001) and by the type of impairment; see for example, Corker's (1998) research into people with hearing impairments.

Difference, a concept associated with other disciplines of oppressed groups, was also theorised by disability feminists with respect to gender, race and sexuality. The concept of 'double oppression' was used to describe how the experience of disabled women differs from that of disabled men, as women are seen as the recipients of oppression both by being women and disabled. However, not all feminists agree that the concept of 'double oppression' is helpful in conceptualising how disabled women's experience of disability differs from men's (see for example Morris, 1993; 1996). Furthermore, the concept of 'multiple oppression' was developed to conceptualise the other experiences of disabled people such as racism, sexism and heterosexism (Vernon, 1998). Although feminist disability research is largely reflected in the work of disabled women, feminist assumptions have been helpful for male disability studies scholars; see for example Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells and Davies (1996) who researched disabled people's sexual experiences.

The shift in researching and theorizing disability brought into question the adequacy of the social model of disability. According to Thomas (2001) disability feminists addressed the failure of the social model to: (a) recognize the importance of the personal experience of both disability and impairment, (b) acknowledge that some restrictions of activity are caused by the effects of impairment and cannot be causally attributed to 'social barriers', and (c) appreciate that the capacity to engage in political struggle is weakened if people feel that aspects of their experience are alienated or denied by the terms and conditions of that struggle. Although feminists valued the positive impact of the social model for themselves (Morris, 1991; Keith, 1996; Thomas, 1999), they emphasized its restricted capacity to identify the relationship between impairment, disability and experience, and relate them to disability politics. The proponents of the social model, however, maintain their position that the social model as it is, encourages a powerful political struggle based on a clear and unambiguous framework within which policies can be developed to change those aspects of disabled people's lives that can change and they argue that incorporating experience in the social model would do nothing but weaken it (Finkelstein, 2001; Oliver, 1996; Barnes, 1998).

The feminist approach has widened disability theory, not only with its fundamental assumptions about experience and the 'personal is political' assertion, but also with its capacity to bring different feminist approaches into dialogue. The open dialogue between Carol Thomas and Marian Corker, expressed in their jointly-authored paper, is a representative example (Thomas and Corker, 2002). Thomas describes herself as a 'materialist feminist' and 'sociologist' and Corker as a 'poststructuralist feminist' and 'sociolinguist'. However, they are engaged in a fruitful discussion that reveals the tensions between modernism and postmodernism with regard to disability. Despite their different positions, they reach common ground on the following: the necessity for feminist perspectives within disability studies; the requirement to engage analytically with impairment; the dangers of dualistic thinking; the importance of language, discourse and culture; and the continued dominance of capitalism in the twenty-first century. Although both scholars acknowledged how modernism and postmodernism can contribute to disability theory via the lenses of feminisms, they still struggle with one another's opposing views. For example, the materialist view expressed by Thomas, that the distinction between impairment and disability helps clarify these concepts, is far from the poststructuralist view expressed by Corker, that the boundaries constituting impairment and disability should break down so that the

space between the two is addressed. Nonetheless, their meaningful dialogue demonstrates how ideas falling within the feminist approach to disability can be influenced by both the materialist and the postmodern/post-structural approach in constructive ways.

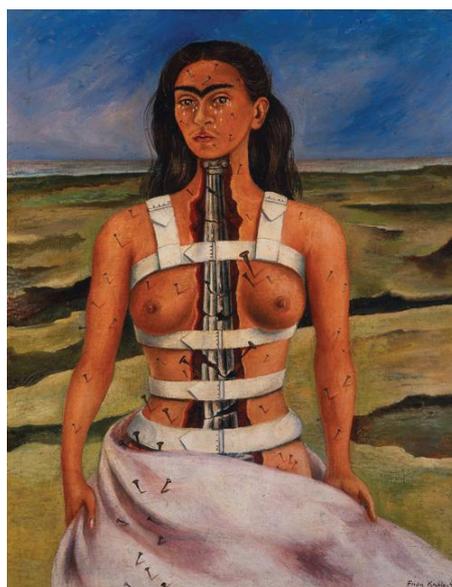
Having set the context for the feminist approach to disability, it is important to seek answers to two fundamental questions: Why is it important to look into the personal experience of disability? How does the personal experience of disability become political?

Personal stories against disability stereotypes

In my view, a meaningful way of employing the feminist approach is by unraveling stories of people whose personal experience of disability and political activity proves disability stereotypes wrong. In what follows, I present the profiles of three well-known disabled women, alongside with examples of their paintings, to illuminate this argument from different angles.

'I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality'

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was a Mexican painter. At the age of six, an attack of polio left her with impairment in her right leg. However, it was not until the age of eighteen, when she suffered a bus accident which caused her multiple fractures of the spine and foot, that her health condition was seriously affected. As her mobility was substantially restricted after the accident, she began painting in order to earn her living. Her paintings, which are mostly self-portraits, reflect her symbolic conceptualizations of body, communism, death, dualism, birth, blood etc. (Barson, 2005). Kahlo's life was turbulent in many ways: a problematic marriage with the Mexican artist Diego Rivera, an unsteady sexual life, miscarriages, progress of health problems and increased pain. Her art was appreciated many years after her death and it is now celebrated by Mexicans, feminists and disabled people. Importantly, Kahlo is now known for capturing the feminist maxim 'the personal is political' decades before the rise of the feminist movement (Dexter, 2005).



The Broken Column (1944)

With regard to body representations, Barson (2005) notes that through the presentation of her body, Kahlo explored aspects of her autobiography, the construction of identity, female experience, gender boundaries and subverted stereotypical representations of women and their bodies in art. Kahlo's self-portraits are quite telling about the experience of the medical model, the psycho-emotional effects of an acquired impairment and life with pain. With a focus on the portrayal of pain and the intrusion of medicine in the body, it is worth commenting on *The Broken Column* (1944). This self-portrait shows Frida Kahlo exposed, with a broken column bounded with a metallic stick and nails in her body. Her facial expression is rigid, reflecting feelings of pain and courage at the same time. Lomas and Howell (1989: 1585) comment:

Kahlo's work registers the enduring consequences of her accident and reflects the mental work needed to overcome this. Her body was broken, its boundaries ruptured and grossly violated by the steel rod that pierced her pelvis and emerged from her vagina. "I lost my virginity," she plaintively remarked. The resulting scars were deeply etched. The Broken Column, 1944 relives that first trauma. It portrays Kahlo isolated in a barren fissured landscape that mirrors her own doleful condition. By using a technique gleaned from medical illustrations her body is shown open to display, her shattered spine, a crumbling classical column. The body as a temple has been desecrated and laid to ruin.

Although both the emotional stress experienced right after the bus accident and the persistence of bodily pain in Kahlo's life are reflected in her art work, these are not the only aspects of her life and work. Frida experienced life with different attributes: woman, daughter, sister, wife, mistress, political activist, disabled person. Her life trajectory was marked by a series of events (Burrus, 2005). For example, the bus accident was a turning point in her life in the sense that it prevented her from studying medicine, which was her initial plan, and turned into painting instead. Painting became a means for expression of feelings and political statements that Kahlo would possibly not be able to express as a non-disabled woman. The 'impairment effects' (Thomas, 1999) such as pain and inability to move/walk at several stages of her life, also functioned as turning points that made her see life through different lenses. Furthermore, her acquaintance with Diego Rivera and the fact that she could not experience motherhood functioned as event of personal significance, which are also reflected in her paintings. Last but not least, Kahlo was interested in politics and she was involved in the Mexican Communist Part. However, she addressed politics in a only few of her later paintings.

'When bone and blood show an unfamiliar shape, the judgments freeze into a first, rigid wall between you and I'

Riva Lehrer (1958-) is an American painter, writer and art professor, born with spina bifida. She is well-known for her art work and her contribution in disability activism by promoting the disability culture and independent living. According to information retrieved from her personal website (www.rivalehrer.com), Lehrer's work was presented in solo and group exhibitions in galleries and museums in Chicago, where she is based, and in other parts of the USA. Her art work, which began in 1992, is now highly appreciated. Lehrer received important awards throughout her

career as an artist. Recognition of her work is also reflected in the award winning documentary ‘Self Preservation: The Art of Riva Lehrer’ prepared in 2004 by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder. Riva Lehrer is currently curator for cultural programs at Access Living of Chicago. She is also adjunct professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

‘Circle Stories’ is one of Lehrer’s most important projects (1997-2004), comprising of portraits of well known disability activists, performers and scholars. What is unique about these paintings is the fact that disabled persons are presented as persons with the authority of self-possession that is atypical in the representation of disability in the visual arts (Ware, 2008). Although all the portraits of the project are worth commenting, the portrait of *Susan Nussbaum* (1998) is presented here. In this portrait, Susan Nussbaum, an actor, director and playwright is located in front of a dynamic background of floating objects (a car steering wheel, a red high-heeled shoe, a paper, a pencil and a compact mirror). Nussbaum’s facial expression, her posture and her outfit reflect a vibrant and energetic person who lives, functions and contributes in the real world. Nussbaum is by no means presented as a passive and pitiful disabled person.



Circle Story: Susan Nussbaum (1998)

Ware (2008) in her paper describes in detail a number of Lehrer’s portraits and concludes that:

Viewers are drawn into these portraits, foremost by Lehrer’s obvious skill and the influence of the Flemish painters Holbein, Durer, Van Eyck on her work. Lehrer notes that this group of painters ‘pull off something really amazing ... [in that] they completely, physically conjure the worlds that they are painting, but the personality of the sitter is always central’ (Self Preservation). Lehrer also succeeds in capturing both the strength of character and the rich personalities of her subjects. More importantly, when viewers pause to look more closely, they find disability is not depicted as a life sentence, nor is it conveyed as an unending tragedy reduced to a label inscribed upon a body. In Lehrer’s images, as in our

own lives, much turns on the details, on the nuances, and away from the normative. (Ware, 2008: 570-571)

The nature of Lehrer's art, which is both personal (self-portraits) and political (themes that promote the disability culture), was much influenced by an important turning point:

The direction of my career changed radically in 1997, when I met a community of performers, writers, visual artists and academic theorists, based in Chicago, where I live. All were disabled, and each one was engaged in creating a new, radical framework in which to view the body and impairment. I had never encountered such a self-assured, adult population of disabled people. I responded on all levels: aesthetically, intellectually, politically, and emotionally (Lehrer, 2006)

Despite the restrictions posed by her congenital impairment and the operations she had to undertake over the years, Lehrer found her way in self-expression and political activism through this kind of art, which turned out to be extremely influential for disabled people and disability studies scholars.

'My biggest desire is that people could just see me the way I really feel inside'
Simona Atzori (1974-) is an Italian dancer and painter born without arms. She uses her feet to perform many activities which normally require the use of hands. As a child, Atzori revealed her talents in painting and dancing. Her parents' instigations to undertake lessons in these areas marked the development of her personality and career. Her degree in Visual Arts enabled her to professionalize her talent in painting and dance performance. According to her personal website (www.simonarte.com), in Italy she is well-known for her contribution in Pescara Dance Festival, where she performed choreographies from Paolo Londi. She is a member of the International Association of Mouth and Foot Painters. From 2000 to date, she has received important awards both in dancing and painting. Since 2008, her paintings are displayed in permanent art exhibitions in London, Ontario and Canada. Atzori is well-known in other European countries where she performs or exhibits her work. She is often invited in radio and t.v. shows to talk about her life, art and dance performance. She is often invited to give 'motivational speeches', emphasizing that all people can reach their highest potential if only they believe in themselves.

In her personal website (www.simonarte.com), Atzori classifies her paintings in the following categories: women, legs, nudes, dance, portraits and mix. In the 'dance' section the paintings are self-portraits of her dancing. In the 'legs' section, the paintings demonstrate both legs and hands co-operating in harmony. In the 'women' section some paintings deal with the embodiment of the physically impaired woman, which could be her. For example, in the painting 'Legs of freedom' (n.d.) Atzori presents a woman without arms but with many legs moving, perhaps dancing. Although the woman's face is not clear, it can be inferred that the woman is Atzori. The message of the painting, also recorded in the title, is that what she can do with her legs gives her a sense of freedom. Other paintings seem to contradict this message. For example, the paintings 'My own fairytale' (1997) and 'My own fairytale 2' (1998) present the female figure as a tree. The legs are stuck in the ground (log) and the numerous branches are long and they move freely reaching the sea. Although the

woman's face has no characteristics, it could represent Atzori thinking of her legs functioning as arms. This explanation fits with the rationale behind the 'legs' section of paintings, where arms and legs are used for the same actions. An alternative explanation could be that Atzori painted these paintings at a state of her life when she imagined herself with arms. The title 'my own fairytale' contributes to this explanation. It could also be that the painting represents a woman who cannot use her legs and she only uses her hands.



Legs of Freedom (n.d.)



My own fairytale (1997)

Generally speaking, Atzori's art conveys positive conceptualizations of the physically impaired body. In addition, her overall activity (dancing and delivering motivating speeches around the world) reflects a powerful commitment to the value of believing in oneself in order to experience the positive side of life. It can be argued that Atzori's life was marked by several factors: type of impairment, response of her family, opportunity to develop her talents. One important factor is the fact that she started using her feet for everyday activities while she was still an infant (Aggastiniotou, 2009). Thus, being born and growing up with a physical impairment was quite a unique experience, in the sense that Atzori never felt that she could not cope with everyday activities. Another equally important factor is her family's response to her upbringing. In a recent interview to Aggastiniotou (2009), Atzori referred to her family repeatedly, explaining that her parents treated her at equal terms with her sister, they were never afraid to let her undertake new responsibilities and they were supportive throughout her life. For example, she stated: 'I was not born with a deficiency. I had to be here in that way. I think that this is how I always felt, without realizing it. It was the way my parents treated me. They never made me feel different'. Importantly, her parents refused to place her in a special school, because they wanted her to comply with the obligations of non-disabled children. Last but not least, Atzori was a talented child who was given the opportunity to develop her skills in art and dance. Through this path, Atzori found the means to communicate her beliefs and feelings while at the same time she has built a successful career based on art work, dance performances and her ability for public speaking.

Discussion

In the light of the stories presented here, it is important to revisit the five stereotypes mentioned at the beginning of this paper with reference to politicized art work. The discussion in this section provides answers to the questions raised at the beginning of the paper regarding the importance of looking into the personal experience of disability and the way it becomes political.

Stereotype 1: 'Disability is a source of continuous sadness'

Arguably, disability is not a source of continuous sadness as non-disabled people tend to think. Disabled people are people who live everyday lives, trying to meet all the aspects to personhood (Ingstad and Whyte, 1995; Symeonidou, 2009b). Apparently, people with acquired impairments experience phases of distress. For example, Frida Kahlo's experience after the accident was marked by long lasting pain and psycho-emotional effects. Nevertheless, there were many other events in her life that caused her distress, apart from her impairment. Disabled people in general may experience phases of distress for several reasons. They may also experience phases of happiness and fulfillment. After all, experiences of both happiness and distress have their place in all people's lives.

Stereotype 2: 'Disabled people are better educated in special schools'

Unlike what non-disabled people tend to believe, education in the mainstream school contributes in the development of a balanced personality characterized by fundamental knowledge and skills, alongside with a valuable socialization process resulting from everyday interaction between disabled and non-disabled peers. Kahlo, and Atzori were educated in the mainstream school, whereas Lehrer attended a special school for five years. Atzori's statements reported above reveal that being educated in a mainstream school contributed in never viewing herself as a person who does not fit the norm. Apart from that, the literature records numerous arguments why special schooling can act as a barrier to a person's life (Rose, 2010).

Stereotype 3: 'Disabled people cannot achieve much'

Disabled people can achieve as much as non-disabled people, as long as they have equal opportunities in education, relationships, employment and all aspects of social life. Disabled people can succeed or fail in the same way as non-disabled people can succeed or fail in all the aforementioned areas. However, oppressive attitudes towards disabled people can make their life experiences more difficult (Symeonidou, 2009b). In the case of disabled women, additional challenges can be prevalent due to their gender and disability (double oppression). The findings of a recent study of disabled women with physical impairments indicate that the participants' projects and ambitions were the same as those of non-disabled women (López González, 2009). According to the same data, even though disabled women knew that they were undervalued due to their disability, they struggled to respond to all their social roles, often with additional effort and involving a permanent struggle to overcome barriers, but this further strengthened their identity and self-esteem. In the case of the three disabled women painters analyzed in this paper, it can be argued that despite their differences, they all represent success stories, each one in a different respect.

Stereotype 4: 'The disabled body is not beautiful'

The disabled body is unique and beautiful because it is part of the person's identity. Lehrer's portraits of physically disabled people in action and Atzori's powerful and dynamic representation of the female disabled body celebrate embodiment. Koppers (2008), in her analysis of 'scar poems' written by disabled people, concludes that although scars do not become places of celebration, they are not signs of negativity and loss. Similarly, Lehrer, with her realistic images of disabled people and Atzori, with disability images that convey positive ideas towards life, contradict the

assumption that the impaired body constantly reminds disabled people of a dreadful experience that ruined the rest of their lives.

Stereotype 5: 'Disabled people are in need of charity (except for some of them who managed to succeed'

Disabled people need not be considered as people in need of charity, but as people who can earn their own living. This applies to the majority of the group and not only to 'exceptional' cases. Morris (1991: 101) notes that 'overcoming stories have the important role of lessening the fear that disability holds for non-disabled people'. The stories presented in this paper are, without a doubt, 'overcoming' stories. Thus, a further point needs to be made here: Disabled people need not engage in the 'game' of trying to succeed in order to 'respond' to non-disabled people's disbelief. Besides, the disability culture celebrates difference and challenges the non-disabled representation of disability (Morris, 1991). Last but not least, although disabled people struggle to meet their obligations (in the family, workplace, social life etc.) without considering their selves 'heroes', non-disabled people admire them for coping (i.e. see for example research on disabled women, Tighe, 2001).

Concluding remarks

This paper has examined how disability culture art can be a valuable tool for confronting the stereotypes regarding disability. The argument has been advanced that art work by Frida Kahlo, Riva Lehrer and Simona Atzori illuminate different angles of disabled people's lives which are generally unfamiliar to non-disabled people.

The discussion about distinguished disabled performers who are committed in conveying political messages through their work cannot be complete without considering an important point, addressed overtly by Petra Kuppers in her dialogic paper with Neil Marcus:

Petra: Many disabled people, if their differences are visible or not, have to perform their disability, perform their stories, are asked to explain 'what happened to you', deal with the discomfort other people feel in our presence [...] Sometimes, we choreograph these encounters with others by downplaying our difference - and sometimes, we perform as the freak, scream our pain, give expression to frustration and anger. Sometimes, we confound non-disabled understanding by celebrating our differences, by affirming to ourselves the pleasures of disabled lives, different sensoria, our ways of being in the world.

How do I appear in public?

How do I display myself?

How can I show my story without becoming an overcoming hero defined by my disability?

How do I keep my privacy, give myself space?

How do I reach out?

These are questions all disability performers have to address. Our appearance carries weight - the weight of stereotypes, of expectations, of a sense of tragedy, loss, rupture. In the play excerpts we are

discussing and displaying in these pages these weights appear. They are weights on individuals. They are also pressures on disability culture as we continue our work to be a group. (Kuppers and Marcus, 2009: 143)

It is evident that the performers presented in this paper have dealt with the questions raised above in order to promote alternative conceptualizations of disabled people in general and disabled women in particular. Their differing approaches can contribute in challenging disability stereotypes, albeit it is important to keep in mind that this type of art work is political and it needs to be treated as such.

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