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Disability aesthetics in Belgian arts and disability practices: a qualitative study from the perspective of the non-disabled, facilitating performing artists

- ACCEPTED FOR PUBLICATION

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KEYWORDS: disability; disability aesthetics; arts and disability; non-disabled artists; performance.

ABSTRACT: The presence of non-disabled artists challenges the possibility of disability aesthetics in arts and disability projects. This study therefore examines the meaning of disability for the aesthetics of their collaborations and artistic practice through in-depth interviews with twelve Belgian non-disabled performing artists. The findings show that the collaborations often confirm their artistic practice in which the ‘able-bodied’ notion is no longer of their interest. Yet beliefs are also observed that can reinforce ableist ideas and the aesthetic appropriation of disability. Disability aesthetics in arts and disability can only develop fully when structural barriers to disabled performers in the mainstream are removed.

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Introduction

Performers with disabilities are increasingly visible within art practices, but often in collaboration with and led by non-disabled artists. The presence of performers with cognitive disabilities is, for instance, popular in European theatre and dance collaborations (Schmidt 2017, 446). This form of collaboration, originally called ‘arts and disability’ by Giles Perring, aims to include people with disabilities in the ‘mainstream’ arts (Perring 2005, 176), while creating work that is assessed on its own terms (Hargrave 2015, 35). A characteristic of these practices is that they are traditionally led by non-disabled artists (Perring 2005), whose central role is often criticised by the disability-led disability arts movement (see, for example, Conroy [2009]; Hadley [2020]; Perring [2005]). Disability artists criticise how the wider non-disabled ‘mainstream’ performing arts, in which ‘arts and disability’ is situated, can potentially logistically abuse these collaborations (e.g., receiving grants) and often reflect an ableist idea of the body (Hadley 2020, 179; Perring 2005, 177).

Disability artists would in turn generate a disability aesthetics, an influential concept by Tobin Siebers (2010), referring to an account of aesthetics that is based on a broader consideration of what bodies can be. A major concern for disability artists, therefore, is the aesthetic dimension of arts and disability collaborations (Hadley 2017, 2020; Perring, 2005). More specifically, the stories and bodies of performers with disabilities may be appropriated by the non-disabled artists to increase their own status (Hadley 2020, 180; Perring 2005). This critique compromises the intended inclusiveness of arts and disability collaborations.

Recently, however, several companies with disabled and non-disabled performers have put forward new working models that enable the creative authorship of disabled performers (Schmidt 2017, 446), whose contributions could generate a more comprehensive aesthetics (Ames 2018, 235). These shifting relationships do not imply that non-disabled facilitators no longer have an influence on the aesthetic outcome (Schmidt 2017, 456),

especially when they take a central role in these collaborations. Therefore, the perspective of facilitating non-disabled artists needs to be critically examined (Hadley et al. 2022, 2).

Despite this concern, the concept of disability aesthetics seems to assert that disability as an aesthetic value is already present within the ‘mainstream’ arts (Siebers 2010), which thus seems to contradict disability artists’ criticism of the mainstream’s attitude towards disability, and hence the meaning of disability for arts and disability. Accordingly, the often seen opposition ‘disability arts versus mainstream arts requires a reconsideration of the underlying aesthetic and social or political concepts’ (Schmidt 2018, 217). This study aims to explore how mainstream, non-disabled artists aesthetically interact with the performers’ disability, specifically to gain insights into the inclusive nature of arts and disability and the broader Belgian mainstream sector, and the aesthetic potential of these collaborations. This study therefore examines the presence of disability aesthetics from the perspective of twelve Belgian non-disabled artists.

Disability Aesthetics

Tobin Siebers introduced the concept of disability aesthetics as follows:

Disability aesthetics seeks to emphasize [*sic*] the presence of different bodies and minds in the tradition of aesthetic representation [. . .]. It refuses to recognize [*sic*] the representation of the healthy body and this body’s definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty as the sole determination of the aesthetic. (2005, 542)

Disability aesthetics wants to establish disability as an important aesthetic value, not only to assess underlying assumptions of existing traditions, but also to develop further in the arts (Siebers 2010, 3). Siebers argues that disability is a defining concept of modern art because it ‘embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken’ (2010, 3). Disability aesthetics expands ideas about the body and human variation, creating, as Siebers states, ‘a space for the development of disabled artists and subjects’ (2010, 3). In this light, the modern

and postmodern shift within the performing arts can be perceived as a developing disability aesthetics, turning away from the traditionally 'perfect' body. Dance studies, for example, describe how postmodern dance since the 1970s has advocated bodily diversity within the climate of identity politics (Banes 1994). Theatre has also paid attention to minority identities since the late 1980s (Carlson 2017), in the same way that the until then underrepresented themes of illness, sexuality, physical difference and race have been staged since 1960 (Lehmann and Jürs-Munby 2006).

At the same time, emerging from the broader political struggles of people with disabilities, disability artists criticise the prevailing way disability is represented in the non-disabled mainstream arts (Austin and Brophy 2015; Conroy 2009; Hargrave 2015; Johnston 2016; Solvang 2017; Swain and French 2000). Disability artists contest the underlying dominant societal view of disability within the performing arts (Austin and Brophy 2015; Hadley 2017; O'Reilly 2009; Sandahl and Auslander 2005; Swain and French, 2000). This view is often described as the medical model, which considers disability to be the result of impairment (Llewellyn and Hogan 2000) and an individual problem (Hargrave 2015). Disability scholars describe how this view of disability determines the aesthetics of the performing arts. Albright (2001), for example, discusses the ableist aesthetics of mainstream dance forms, which uses a very narrow definition of who can be a dancer and where the emphasis is on controlling the body. Other authors argue that in dance and theatre, techniques and narratives are based on 'perfectly' functioning bodies (see, e.g., Smith [2005] and Sandahl [2002]).

Disability artists on the contrary perceive disability as a normative construct that society attributes to physiological differences. They thus present a disability aesthetics through a more complex idea of the body and disability (Davidson 2015), such as the social model, which views disability not as the result of some biological impairment, but of social

oppression (Hargrave 2015; Llewellyn and Hogan 2000; Oliver, in Heyman 2018; Swain and French 2000). The following section will expand on the aesthetic outcomes of disability aesthetics as a framework to examine arts and disability projects.

The Aesthetics of Arts and Disability

Several companies with disabled performers have recently proposed new working models that enable the creative authorship of their disabled members (Schmidt 2017). The roles of the non-disabled facilitators become more diverse, ranging from ‘organiser’ of the workspace to ‘coach’ rather than the usual ‘filter’ of dramaturgy alone, with the final decision about the performance still being made by the non-disabled artists (Schmidt 2017, 450). To describe the different models of collaborations between disabled and non-disabled artists, terms are used that vary according to how disability-led these practices are. One example is the more general ‘inclusive arts’, which refers to all creative practices involving disabled and non-disabled artists (Hadley and McDonald 2019, 6) that strive for accessibility to the arts (Austin and Brophy 2015). Another indication is ‘disability culture’, which assumes a disability-led paradigm and ‘an ethical engagement with what it means to be disabled, precarious, vulnerable or dismissible in a particular society’ (Kuppers 2019, 10). The current study adopts the term ‘arts and disability’, a British-specific but historical delineation by Perring (2005), because it focuses on collaborations initiated and led by non-disabled artists, where the question of aesthetics remains strongly apparent.

Hadley recently argued that in arts and disability practices, ‘tensions around non-disabled artists’ appropriation of disabled artists’ bodies, stories, or theatrical styles arise’ (2020, 179). Perring (2005) also warns that non-disabled artists may embrace arts and disability for the sake of an alternative aesthetics and perceive working with disabled performers merely as an artistic challenge. He refers to the historical fascination of Western artists with ‘the other’ and states that the aims of non-disabled artists should be approached

critically. After all, the result of the collaboration could be a mere reflection of this non-disabled, ableist perspective (Perring, 2005). Perring already hints at how non-disabled artists deal with the performers' disability on an aesthetic level. Based on interviews he conducted in 1999 with non-disabled artists in the UK, he identified three aesthetic strategies. A first strategy is normalisation, where artists include disabled performers in the mainstream and continue to apply mainstream aesthetic criteria. A second strategy is post-therapeutic, emphasising self-expression and exploring the emotions of disabled participants. The third is a countercultural strategy, challenging mainstream aesthetics and cultural ideas about the disabled body. This strategy values the creative qualities of people with disabilities and assumes that these deviate from normative standards. However, Perring (2005) does not provide a detailed account of what he calls mainstream or countercultural aesthetic criteria.

In the current discussion of arts and disability practices, scholars explore how aesthetics can be both creatively enabling and disabling for performers with a disability. Drawing on the work of arts and disability companies such as the Australian Back to Back Theatre, Ames describes the performance of people with a learning disability as a 'prescribed activity that remains un-integrated into mainstream performance aesthetics' (2018, 235), and therefore argues for a more expansive aesthetic that draws on non-standard bodies, similar to how we understand the concept of 'disability aesthetics'. However, this does not imply that mainstream forms should be abandoned, as Perring's countercultural strategy suggests, nor that they should constitute the main discourse, as his normalisation strategy dictates (Perring 2005). To overcome the historic associations of learning-disabled performances with therapy or social work (see Perring's second strategy), Ames writes, it is important to root this work in the aesthetic origins of theatre and dance, while deploying new or 'different embodied grammars' (Ames 2018, 248). Yet some aesthetic origins seem to anchor these new grammars more easily than others. For example, Calvert (2010) discusses how the punk

aesthetic of an applied theatre performance enables the creative authorship of learning-disabled performers because punk and its historical associations are themselves countercultural.

Similarly, the post-dramatic aesthetic is an example of an aesthetic origin that is often mentioned in the discussion of work with and by disabled performers (Reason, 2019; Schmidt, 2018). The ‘post-dramatic’ describes a contemporary theatre aesthetic in which the foundational role of text and linear dramaturgy is removed (Lehmann 1997). Here, the following commonalities with arts and disability performances are listed: the decentralisation of text and drama, the staging of nonprofessional performers, the affinity with the precarious body, the use of nonlinear narratives and polyphonic voices, and the adoption of different temporalities (Schmidt 2018). Referring to Siebers’ argument about the presence of disability aesthetics in the mainstream, Schmidt rightly asks what role ‘disability as form and content can play in the post-dramatic’, or to what extent the post-dramatic already enables the work of disabled performers (Schmidt 2018, 208).

With the shifting working models within arts and disability practices, more companies are paying attention to the aesthetic contributions of disabled artists (more specifically, those with a learning disability). The work by Theater HORA (Switzerland), Back to Back Theatre (Australia), and Mind The Gap Theatre (UK), for example, consider ‘the aesthetic possibilities that emerge when following the lead of colleagues with learning disabilities’ (Ames 2019, 293), reflecting the model of disability arts. To understand more concretely how disability affects mainstream arts, we focus on disability aesthetics in terms of both content and form, derived from the literature on disability-led disability arts.

In general, disability aesthetics in disability arts mainly manifests itself in terms of narrative, in which disability artists do not present their disability as a fixed medical condition, but rather perform it as a construct (Kuppers 2000, 126). For some authors,

challenging oppressive narratives alone is insufficient; formal aspects also need to be revised. Sandahl (2002) argues that the traditional forms in which these artists work still confirm a negative perception of people with disabilities. In order to change the form, she refers to the phenomenological experiences of the disabled body, which she believes already have a transformative role in disability dance. According to Sandahl (2002), disability is phenomenological, given that it is a perspective, a way of being in the world. However, the traditional idea of aesthetics is ‘founded upon the assumption that we all experience the world through the senses [. . .] in broadly the same way’ (Conroy 2008, 11). Consequently, to understand the presence of disability aesthetics within the arts, one must also take formal aspects into account.

Content

Disability scholars describe the long tradition of stereotypical ways in which disability is generally understood and visually portrayed in the arts. Disability is often used as a metaphor for the other, and the unknown (Davidson 2008). Ever since the emergence of early narrative forms in the Western tradition, disability is used to signify a difference, often in need of correction (Snyder and Mitchell 2015). These representations are deeply embedded in how audiences read the bodies of performers with disabilities (Sandahl and Auslander 2005). In the past thirty years, disabled artists have spoken back to those stereotypes, developing their own distinct aesthetics (Hadley 2020) and ‘alternative dramaturgies’ based on their lived experiences (O’Reilly 2009; Sandahl and Auslander 2005). Some of the concepts that describe these contested representations are discussed here.

A first example is the concept of ‘enfreakment’. This refers to how extraordinary bodies were presented as freaks for entertainment in the 19th and 20th centuries. Ideas about the normal body from a medical model of disability were thereby reinforced, augmenting the

status of disabled people as social outcasts (Millett-Gallant 2010). Freak shows no longer exist, but they have a lasting influence on how bodies with disabilities are being read on stage today (Garland Thomson, in Austin and Brophy 2015; in Johnston 2016). They serve as an archive for the performance of disability, in this case, for disability as a freakish spectacle (Millett-Gallant 2010). Other dominant narratives of disability in the performing arts are either the tragic ‘cripple’, or the heroic, inspirational character who manages to transcend their own disability (Davidson 2008; Longmore, in Snyder and Mitchell 2015; Shildrick and Price, in Koppers, 2001). Again, these stereotypes function as a normalisation of the non-disabled characters.

A second main practice is ‘cripping up’ (Sandahl, in Johnston 2016), also known as ‘disability drag’ (Austin and Brophy 2015; Hargrave 2015). This involves a non-disabled performer playing a disabled character. Reverse drag, where a disabled performer portrays a non-disabled character, is a much less common phenomenon, due to the symbolic meaning that is instantly ascribed to the disabled body (Sandahl 2005). Disability is automatically connected to the interpretation of the performance by the audience, due to its visual legacy (Koppers 2001).

Form

To explore the possible formal aesthetics emerging from the corporeal experiences of performers with disabilities, Davidson (2008) discusses an example. He describes a piano piece that Ravel composed for a one-armed pianist and states that the specific physicality of the pianist posed formal demands on the composition, which Ravel otherwise could not have imagined. A similar idea is formulated by O’Reilly (2009) through the concept of ‘crip aesthetic’, wherein the disabled body affects the work in an implicit way. Sandahl (2002) describes more concretely how the disabled body can influence the theatrical space, for example, how people with mainly physical disabilities can suggest ‘new movement

vocabularies' through wheelchairs and other devices (Sandahl 2002, 28). With asymmetrically moving bodies they challenge the historic aesthetic quality of symmetry, and through different tempos they present time as contingent (Sandahl 2002).

Disability scholars (e.g. Bunch, Chan, and Lee [2022]; Johnston [2016], [2019]) also discuss how the pragmatic question of 'access' can generate formal possibilities in the performing arts and constitute an access aesthetics. This anticipates the accessibility of the creative process and product for artists with a disability, and by extension for a disabled audience (Bunch, Chan, and Lee 2022, 12). By working with so-called access devices, disability artists can create alternative dramaturgies (O'Reilly 2009). Instruments such as audio description not only provide access for blind and visually impaired people but can be inventively embedded into the overall performance, for example as extra character. In this way, inclusion does not become a layer to be added afterwards but affects the entire aesthetics instead, explains Jenny Sealey, who is artistic director of the UK-based disability company, the Graeae Theatre Company (Sealey, in Johnston 2019, 32). Sandahl (2002, 26) similarly emphasises a changing communication aesthetic, as language is mediated through various channels, and the boundary between performers and audience often blurs. In addition, accessibility to other physical and sensory possibilities can create a multisensory aesthetic, in which not only the visual is central, but also senses such as touch can convey meaning (Nash 2005).

In sum, these insights into content and form offer a more concrete understanding of the concept of disability aesthetics. It serves as a framework to explore the ways in which non-disabled facilitators of Belgian arts and disability projects interact with disability aesthetics.

The general aim of this study is to examine the presence of disability aesthetics in arts and disability projects. The following research questions were addressed from the perspective of the non-disabled performing artists:

- (1) What does the presence of disability mean for the aesthetics of their arts and disability collaborations?
- (2) What does disability mean for the further development of their artistic practice?

Research Methodology

A qualitative research design for this study was adopted; more specifically, individual in-depth interviews were employed to conduct the research. Twelve Belgian non-disabled artists within the mainstream performing arts participated in the interviews, who had worked at least once with one or more performers with a disability.

Research Setting

The research was conducted in the Belgian performing arts sector, with all respondents active in the Dutch-speaking part of the country, including Brussels. To date, there is no distinct disability arts scene in Flanders, making disability culture largely dependent on non-disabled artists. Some initiatives are artistically oriented, while others fall under post-therapy or community work. For 2023 to 2027, only two arts and disability organisations received operating grants by the Flemish Arts Decree (Department of Culture, Youth & Media, n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c), of a total of 225 arts organisations, and two other arts and disability organisations received a project grant. This study selected professional non-disabled artists working individually or in dance and theatre companies for artists with a disability. Two of these companies, Un-Label and Platform-K, enjoy renown through Disability Arts International, a digital platform that promotes the work of disability artists, disability-led companies and inclusive arts organisations. Yet these organisations are the only two that

make up the Belgian country profile on the platform (Disability Arts International n.d.). In general, the companies of the artists involved receive media attention through reviews of their performances in the mainstream press but, as Kuppers (2014, 49) notes, very often the names of the disabled actors are missing. Recently, *rekto:verso*, a leading national, popular magazine on art critique, devoted an entire issue entitled ‘Crip’ to the representation and reconceptualisation of disability in the Belgian art scene. The disabled guest editors state that they are no longer ‘satisfied with sporadic projects, but want to be an integral part of the arts sector’ (Van Goidsenhoven et al. 2021).

Respondents

Selection criteria for the non-disabled, facilitating performing artists were derived from characteristics of arts and disability discussed by Hargrave (2015) and Perring (2005). First, the performances of professional non-disabled artists with people with disabilities had to be programmed in government-subsidised arts institutions. In this way, the idea of the ‘mainstream’ professional circuit was understood. Second, all respondents had to fulfil a facilitating role in the collaborations. Third, respondents were sought within multiple disciplines of the performing arts. Since the research is focused on art forms where the body is explicitly visible, it was less important whether this was for example about dance, or theatre. Fourth, no selection was made based on the degree of professionalism of the performers with a disability, since most performers were solely able to access arts education offered in informal settings. Last, although arts and disability originally refers to collaborations with learning-disabled performers, the research did not select on the type of impairment of the performers in the projects. This was motivated by shifting away from the medical approach and adhering to a social model of disability instead.

Some of the respondents who met these criteria were recruited via a snowballing method, based on the network of previous respondents. As a result, five respondents had a

background in dance, six in theatre and one in contemporary music. All respondents (co-)led the collaboration, fulfilling mainly the roles of (guest) director or choreographer. Some of them worked ad hoc, meaning that they collaborated at least once; independently or temporarily connected to a company. The majority worked structurally: they collaborated on a regular basis, often associated with a particular company, and fulfilling other roles such as director of the company or facilitator of educational processes with disabled performers. Moreover, only two respondents, Max Greyson and Ine Vanoeveren, worked with professional disability artists. The others worked with performers who were receiving training or who had no previous experience. Table 1 provides an overview of all respondents.

Table 1. Overview of the respondents.

Respondent	Role in the collaboration	Structural/ad hoc	Company
Benjamin Vandewalle	Choreographer, dancer	Ad hoc	Platform-K
Michiel Vandevelde	Choreographer, dancer	Ad hoc	Platform-K
Koen De Preter	Choreographer	Ad hoc	Theater Stap
Marc Bryssinck	Director, musician	Structural	Theater Stap
Nienke Reehorst	Choreographer	Structural	Theater Stap, a.o.
Bart Van Ghyseghem	Director	Structural	Theater Stap, a.o.
Goele Van Dijck	Choreographer	Structural	Nat Gras, a.o.
Frank Dierens	Director	Structural	Het Scheldeoffensief
Caroline Rottier	Director, actor	Structural	<i>Independent</i>
Max Greyson	Playwright, actor	Structural	Un-Label
Ine Vanoeveren	Musician	Ad hoc	Un-Label
Stijn Van Opstal	Director, actor	Ad hoc	Theater Stap

Data Collection

An in-depth method was adopted to gather rich accounts of data, in view of the exploratory and interpretive nature of the study. The interviews consisted of open-ended, conversational

questions and were composed semi-structurally (Guion, Diehl, and McDonald 2011). They took 1h52min on average: the shortest interview lasted 1h30min, the longest 2h49min. Due to Belgian COVID-19 measures, only one interview took place face-to-face. Others were conducted via online communication tools (i.e., Skype, Microsoft Teams and Zoom), which are deemed equally valid alternatives (Lo Iacono, Symonds, and Brown 2016; Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman 2022).

The interview scheme was composed of three main subject areas: (1) the meaning of performers' disability for the artistic process, in terms of both form and narrative, and whether aesthetic ideas within their discipline were challenged by their collaborations; (2) the use of disability as an aesthetic and political strategy; and (3) the significance of the collaborations for the further development of their artistic practice.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed ad verbatim and analysed with the data analysis software MAXQDA. The data was analysed according to the principles of thematic analysis. The data was hence categorised into themes relevant to answering the research questions, to 'provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 78). In a first step, the data was coded deductively with codes derived from the interview topics, and thus theoretically driven (e.g., 'meaning for artistic practice'). Data segments that did not directly fit under such codes were given a separate, preliminary theme. The coded segments were in turn open coded, with new codes being created inductively (e.g., the topic 'meaning for artistic practice' was given codes such as 'working visually' or 'development of artistic language'). The final themes encompassed the relationships between the obtained codes, which were then structured hierarchically (e.g., 'working visually' and 'development of artistic language' were assigned to the theme 'artistic possibilities').

Through an informed consent, all respondents could opt for anonymity and reliability in the analysis and dissemination of the data. All respondents consented to the use of their data and their names, meaning that they gave explicit permission to share their data with third parties without anonymity.

Findings

Meaning of ‘Disability’ for the Process

A number of respondents discussed how the meaning of disability ascribed by society does not apply to an artistic context. They acknowledged the concrete existence of the impairments but did not see any implications for the creative abilities of the performers, while suggesting that in society, impairments are often perceived as limiting. They argued that within an artistic context, every performer has disabilities or abilities, albeit in terms of creativity such as difficulty in memorising text or group dynamics.

Several respondents further indicated that they were critical towards a medical approach to disability. They found the medical information about the impairments of the performers irrelevant to the artistic process. Although many respondents considered the caregivers who accompanied the performers to be a necessary aid, the following comment from Nienke Reehorst illustrates the tension this created:

In my workshops with people with disabilities from care homes, I always asked not to know pathologies. People would show me the residents’ files. And then I was like, “No, what’s more important for me is that you assess for me: this person needs a break now, or this person we’re going to [leave] for a while [. . .].” [. . .] It’s just to say that within an art setting [with] people with and without disabilities; as long as you respect the to do’s, but also set aside the don’ts, you can see if there are other things behind it that nobody thought were there. You can tune in on potential rather than disability.

In addition, many respondents questioned the societal designation of disability by considering themselves to be disabled in a way too. Moreover, a minority of the respondents argued that they perceived the performers as more than disabled. Marc Bryssinck illustrated this view: ‘I don’t work with their disability; I work with their biography.’ Secondly, some respondents addressed the role of society in the production of disability. As an example, Max Greyson mentioned the social model of disability. He explained: ‘People have different impairments, but they are actually disabled by our society through structural, economic, cultural or behavioural barriers.’

Finally, disability appeared in terms of the ‘other’, meaning that some respondents assumed the performers had different talents or imaginations. Benjamin Vandewalle, for example, called it an ‘other way of being’. Bart Van Ghyseghem also argued about the company he worked with: ‘The unique thing about Theater Stap is not that it consists of players with a disability, the unique thing about Theater Stap is that it tells a story with a different kind of fantasy.’

Meaning of ‘Disability’ for the Artistic Form

Only a few respondents distinguished a significant meaning of disability for the form of the collaboration. In sum, they discerned the use of interdisciplinarity, non-textuality and non-linearity.

First, Ine Vanoeveren and Max Greyson stressed the importance of inclusion tools to make the artistic processes of the disabled performers accessible – and by extension inclusive to the audience. For one performance, Greyson developed an audio description that served as the script and spoken text of the performance. He further explained that the performance Gravity featured both a hearing and a Deaf dancer, who incorporated sign language into his movements. Vanoeveren experimented with how tactile electronics can enable d/Deaf performers to experience music or how compositions can be transformed into tangible

textures. These inclusion tools gave the work an interdisciplinary character, as the tools are translations between disciplines. This expanded the range of expression of performers within an arts and disability project, as Vanoeveren noted:

It is really an artistic method, but since there is an awareness of accessibility, of inclusion, the elements involved [in the creation process] expand. So, in that sense you could say that if you've never worked with artists with a disability, you are much more limited yourself, in terms of your box of knowledge and tools. [. . .] There are more ideas, just because you know there are other ways to express something.

The principle of interdisciplinarity was also raised by some other respondents, but rather to look for alternatives to the use of text than to create inclusion tools. For example, director Marc Bryssinck stated that text was replaced using video, music or movement. Some respondents of the study, who are active in theatre, indicated that they explored other, more visual forms of textuality to better respond to the abilities of some performers, who had difficulty putting narratives into words. Frank Dierens explained about the performances he created with the performers:

It is told with fewer words; it becomes more visual. [. . .] Much more, since I'm doing this work, I'm into painting, sculpture, and plastic art, and I get fascinated by it. [. . .]. I also really enjoy going to an exhibition with them [performers with disabilities].

Third, a minority of the respondents did not make long, linear performances, due to the concentration span of the performers or their motoric skills. Caroline Rottier illustrated this non-linear character:

I like to work with short things that alternate, and then suddenly a moment of stillness for example, or then something surprising comes [. . .] and then another small piece of text [. . .]. I never make very long scenes because that doesn't fit. Neither for the audience, which is mixed, nor for the performers, to keep up a single scene for very long.

Meaning of 'Disability' for the Content

The majority of the respondents stated that they decided on the theme or the concrete material of the collaboration. Most respondents expressed the meaning of disability for this content in different ways. A second and smaller group however consciously avoided the influence of disability.

The first group of respondents generated content related to the performers with disabilities. To start, some of them based the content on the singularity of the performers or their assumed position in society. Koen de Preter explained, for example, that one of his collaborations focuses on the question of whether the performers are allowed to be part of society. De Preter described a scene in which two players in underwear moved close to each other, but did not touch:

Not being allowed to touch each other but wanting to: that comes from their world, or from how we look at them, how we impose certain things that are allowed or not allowed. And that we may also have difficulty seeing this, the fact that everyone needs some form of intimacy.

A second way was to generate the theme and the accompanying content through the interaction between the performers with and without disabilities. Benjamin Vandewalle, for instance, elaborated on the concept behind his performance with two disabled dancers:

I wanted the content to come from the exchange [. . .]. That precisely making a performance with them became the content, and [more specifically], making a performance with them where you forget that they are people with a disability, that was very important.

This quote also touches on a third significance, namely the concern for a positive representation of disability on stage. Like Vandewalle, other respondents emphasised working with the abilities of the performers rather than their disabilities. Michiel Vandevelde mentioned avoiding stereotypes to achieve this. In a collaboration with a dancer with a

disability, he avoided a dramatic way of performing: ‘The dramatic aspect worked in a way, but it represents what is typically expected from someone with Down syndrome.’

Fourth, for half of the respondents a political meaning underpinned their collaboration, more specifically messages about equality and exclusion mechanisms. For example, to Michiel Vandeveld, a political meaning permeated the entire concept of his collaboration. He described how he translated the dance material of Steve Paxton – choreographer and founder of contact improvisation – into three different bodies: his own, that of a black contemporary dancer, and that of the dancer with a disability. Vandeveld explained: ‘You see very different bodies [on stage] and that’s a reflection of a certain inclusion in our society, which is coming under increasing pressure nowadays.’

In contrast, a second group of respondents did not allow for a thematic influence of disability, so that the audience would look beyond the disability of the performers. Some preferred more universal themes to ensure artistic quality, or stories that had no direct connection to the performers. Goele Van Dijck explained that the audience’s perception is inevitably influenced by the disabilities of the performers on stage. According to her, the quality of the performance is no longer considered in that case. She therefore argued the following:

After a while you should be able to make the audience look beyond the disabilities and create something universal. I often think about how I can take away the lens through which viewers see, the one that goes: “Look at how brilliant those handicapped people are!”

Performative qualities of the performers

Some general performative qualities of the performers with a disability emerged during the interviews, that affect both form and content. First of all, a number of respondents found the physical qualities of the performers with disabilities interesting on stage. These artists

explained to highlight some of the physical characteristics of the performers to generate meaning. Benjamin Vandewalle exemplified this with a scene in which he danced along two dancers with a disability:

The end [of the performance] was just really exploiting the theatricality that they spontaneously possess, to the point of the monstrous, so to speak. Where we end up very close to the camera and that is projected and [. . .] crazy faces are pulled and where I also lose myself in their grimaces [. . .]. And that we even lick each other and really get absorbed in that alienation.

Secondly, several performative qualities among the performers with disabilities were mentioned by the respondents. They were less likely to find these qualities among performers without disabilities. Many of them experienced intrinsic authenticity, uniqueness, honesty, and spontaneity. Marc Bryssinck illustrated this:

There is something intrinsic about them that makes them beautiful or fascinating to look at. There is something about them that, in their relationship with the stage, with a character, with a role, with how they deal with time and dare to do things on stage at ease, and how they do not feel gazed at and rushed to do things [. . .] but take the time to do things in all their simplicity... That ritual. There are things that belong to them and that make it beautiful to work with them. And that is not so much to do with the narrative [. . .]. It has more to do with their soul.

For many respondents, these qualities were of great strength in the collaborations, although some simultaneously pointed out not willing to deploy this authenticity all too easily. Vandewalle, for example, found it important not to highlight the weaknesses of his performers in the performance, so that it did not become mere entertainment.

Meaning of Disability for the Further Development of the Artistic Practice

A few respondents described how collaborating with performers with disabilities had given them several artistic means that they used to further develop their artistic practice. A second main theme emerging from the interviews concerned the artistic style of the respondents.

The first theme involved the acquirement of new artistic means. Some respondents mentioned the inclusion tools they developed to make the artistic process of the collaboration accessible. These had become part of the way they work, regardless of the performers' abilities with whom they work. For example, as a playwright, Max Greyson noted that as result of his collaboration with blind performers, the language in all his writings has become more descriptive. He articulated this as follows:

I use more and more, even [. . .] when I'm not in projects, [. . .] descriptive language [. . .]. It's starting to take over my whole body of work as a writer. It's also a way for me to become clearer, which is still difficult as a writer I think, to be both clear and ambiguous, a kind of paradoxical situation that you do want to achieve [. . .]. So that's the biggest effect for me then, I think.

Another minority of the respondents discussed the influence of the non-textual approach to their collaborations on the evolution of their artistic practice. For Bart Van Ghyseghem, this meant that interdisciplinarity had become the key to his artistic language as a director, with his search for alternative ways of storytelling becoming a reflex. He explained:

I notice in my own practice that I have dared to let go of more concrete texts or visual language, in order to substitute it more abstractly and strangely. For instance, I needed [the performers with disabilities] to believe in my own kind of thinking patterns that don't always have to be clear to the audience. In the beginning, I really wanted to make very unambiguous performances [. . .]. And I believed very strongly in dialogue as the best way to achieve that.

The second main theme concerned the artistic style of the respondents. Overall, half of the respondents reported that the collaborations did not substantially influence their style. A number of them explained that working with non-technical bodies or non-skilled actors were already features of their artistic style. Moreover, some respondents reasoned that the broader art form in which they operated was open enough to engage with performers with a disability, hence they did not note any innovation they brought to that discipline. Benjamin Vandewalle pointed this out:

I just think that within performance we are already so used to it, that it's difficult anyway [. . .] to do genuinely groundbreaking work, in the sense of incorporating "unknown" bodies; that has been the norm within contemporary dance for a long time.

In addition, most respondents answered that, within their general artistic practice, they are pursuing a quality that is not necessarily related to bodily perfection or great technical ability. The qualities they appeared to value within their art form existed of bodily diversity, strong physical awareness, abstraction, ambiguity, and uniqueness. As Goele Van Dijck put it:

I am not so much a choreographer looking for an aesthetic beauty of a body, in the sense of [. . .] beauty as "beautiful", but as "aesthetic expression". What expressiveness does a body possess: that is what interests me [. . .]. The power of expression can also be very ugly or shocking. And then all kinds of bodies can narrate that, I think. Of course, if you have an entirely different body, then you can tell very different things.

Consequently, several of the interviewees experienced the collaboration as merely affirming what they were already practicing. As an example, Van Dijck further clarified:

My training focused on getting everyone to dance at their own level and according to their own potential, in an interesting way. In that sense, I was already schooled in the fact that it's not about [. . .] the perfect dance movement, but it's about immersion and what you can tell with your dance. And that actually remained the same. And it matched perfectly with what I do now, with the inclusion. Even though we never talked about dancers with disabilities in my training.

The remaining respondents did not report an affirming effect, but rather a reinforcement of their style. Some choreographers touched upon the spontaneity, playfulness, uniqueness, and freedom they discerned in the movements of the performers with a disability. These qualities were already valued in their artistic practice, but they were given more room to develop. For Bart Van Ghysseghem, this reinforcement lay in the surreal fantasy and particular corporeality of the performers with a disability: “I notice that the language I already possessed might work better with them.”

Conclusion and discussion

The first objective of the study was to examine what meaning non-disabled performing artists attach to the presence of disability for the aesthetics of their arts and disability collaborations. In this context, four themes are relevant: (1) the general understanding of disability, (2) the form and (3) content of the collaboration, and (4) the performative qualities of the performers with a disability.

The first theme contains three types of meaning that the respondents attribute to disability. First, the research findings show that most respondents attribute a different meaning to disability in an artistic context than in an everyday, societal context. Within an artistic context, most reject a medical approach to disability and instead emphasise the presence of creative abilities and disabilities that every artist possesses. Outside the artistic context, however, the corporeal, medical reality of having an impairment often remains relevant to them. This view is consistent with a cultural model of disability that understands disability as both a bodily phenomenon and as the meanings assigned to it (Davidson 2008; Johnston 2016; Snyder and Mitchell, 2006). In addition, some respondents hold society responsible for the construction of disability or hold the more holistic view that disabled performers are more than their impairment alone. This second finding corresponds to the social model of disability (Hargrave 2015; Llewellyn and Hogan, 2000; Oliver, in Heyman

2018; Swain and French 2000) that views disability purely as a social construct, created by social barriers. Thus, in general, most artists in this study do not express medical views of disability, which contradicts several authors' views of the non-disabled perspective of mainstream artists (Austin and Brophy 2015; Hadley, 2017; O'Reilly 2009; Sandahl and Auslander, 2005; Swain and French, 2000). Moreover, this understanding of disability is more consistent with the conception of disability that underpins disability aesthetics (2005, 2010). However, the third and least prevalent finding, disability as 'a different way of being', can point to a dominant mainstream perception. This expression corresponds to the historical fascination of non-disabled Western artists with the 'other' as described by Perring (2005).

A second theme concerns the form that performances of arts and disability projects take, with the majority of the respondents not mentioning a meaningful influence of disability. This may indicate a normalisation strategy (Perring 2005). However, another possible explanation is that the artistic style of the respondents resonates with the bodily diversity that has emerged since the 1970s and 1980s in both postmodern theatre and dance (Banes 1994; Carlson 2017). Thus, considering Siebers' (2010) theory of disability aesthetics, it can be argued that the form of the collaborations contains elements of a disability aesthetics that should not be interpreted as a result of the performers' disabilities. In addition, some artists report having difficulty identifying the meaning of disability for the form. The concept 'crip aesthetic' (O'Reilly 2009) may offer an explanation, as it describes how the phenomenological experience of the impaired body affects the whole work, albeit automatically and implicitly. Only a minority of the respondents – more specifically the artists active within (musical) theatre – can discern some formal elements. These respondents mention an interdisciplinary form, resulting from the adoption of inclusion tools in the artistic process, such as audio description. This finding can be read as an example of access aesthetics (Johnston 2016, 2019). Together with two other findings, i.e., the use of a non-

textual and non-linear approach in creating with people with disabilities, these aesthetic forms fit the post-dramatic nature of contemporary theatre from 1980 onwards. In post-dramatic theatre, text is no longer dominant, the visual is emphasised, and logical structures are no longer adopted (Lehmann 1997). These examples demonstrate in what ways creating with people with disabilities can generate a post-dramatic aesthetic (Schmidt 2018).

The third theme is the meaning of disability for the content of the collaborations. First, some respondents base their content on the singularity of the performers with a disability or their assumed position in society, sometimes understood as that of societal outsiders. Such interests align with the non-disabled fascination for the disabled other (Perring 2005) and the perception of disabled bodies as a metaphor for the other (Davidson 2008; Hadley 2020). These beliefs hence do not subscribe to a disability aesthetics (Siebers 2005, 2010). Second, some respondents rely on the interaction between performers with and without disabilities to generate the content of the performance or to produce additional meaning. By searching for a common ground between all performers' abilities, some respondents seem to create what O'Reilly (2009) has called an alternative dramaturgy and present disability as a construct or form of diversity rather than a fixed characteristic (Kuppers 2000; Siebers 2010). Third, and in similar vein, some respondents avoid stereotypical representations of disability. This finding can indicate the awareness of oppressive roles for persons with disabilities embedded in the Western, visual tradition (Sandahl and Auslander 2005; Snyder and Mitchell 2006). Fourth, a minority of the artists put a political meaning into the performance or conceive disability as a political strategy to question ideas of disability and ability (Austin and Brophy 2015). In contrast to the first result, these three approaches are more consistent with a disability aesthetics. Finally, the remaining minority of respondents do not allow for any thematic influence, as this might constrain the artistic value of the performance. Instead, they opt for a universal narrative. A

possible explanation for this is the normalisation strategy as discussed by Perring (2005), where non-disabled artists apply regular aesthetic criteria in their arts and disability collaborations. Another explanation however can be the anticipation of how spectators readily interpret an impaired body as a depiction of a disability narrative (Kupppers 2001), which, according to some respondents, implied stereotypes such as an inspirational narrative. Whether disability aesthetics applies in this case is therefore less clear.

A fourth and final theme concerned the performative qualities of the disabled performers. A number of artists found their physical qualities interesting to work with and some even deployed them quite explicitly. This refers to Perring's (2005) countercultural strategy whereby non-disabled artists in arts and disability projects emphasise an aesthetic that challenges the mainstream performing arts. For most, the interest also stems from the fact that the particular performative qualities of performers with a disability are less present among non-disabled performers. These include qualities such as greater authenticity, spontaneity, and expressiveness. This interest can correspond to a fascination for 'the other', with the non-disabled artists risking the aesthetic appropriation of the disabled performers (Hadley 2020; Perring 2005). However, most disabled performers received no professional training. Since amateurism is generally associated with authenticity (Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson 2017), it may be that these 'amateur aesthetics' additionally explain the authenticity of the performers.

The second objective of this study was to explore what disability means for the further development of the artistic practice of the non-disabled artists. First, some respondents report newly developed artistic means for their broader practice, often mirroring the formal elements they adopt in the collaborations. Examples include inclusion tools as additional means of expression, and interdisciplinary and non-textual tools. As this was only integrated into their mainstream artistic practice after the arts and disability project, this may formally

demonstrate how disability aesthetics can be developed in mainstream arts, as Siebers (2010) suggests.

However, secondly, in most cases the collaboration reinforces or affirms the artistic style of the non-disabled artists, who express to be already familiar with non-technical bodies. Again, a normalisation strategy may explain this limited influence (Perring 2005). In general, it appears that almost all respondents value a diversity of bodies and a strong bodily awareness, as well as abstraction, ambiguity, uniqueness, and spontaneity. These qualities can be seen separately from a 'perfectly' functioning body, which endorses aesthetic criteria such as perfection, intelligence, and virtuosity (Siebers 2010). This suggests an already present disability aesthetics in the arts practices of the respondents and nuances the assumption that the mainstream arts, and hence arts and disability, subscribe to an ableist aesthetic (see, e.g., Conroy [2009], Hadley [2017], Johnston [2016] and Sandahl [2002]). This finding supports Siebers' (2010) theory that disability aesthetics is present in the Belgian, mainstream performing arts.

Limitations of the Study

Some shortcomings should be mentioned when interpreting the research results of the present study. A first limitation of this study relates to the second phase of recruitment. As a result of the snowballing method, some respondents are affiliated with the same arts and disability company. Respondents can consequently share similar views, creating a potential bias in the research results (Magnusson and Marecek 2015), specifically in how disability is approached in the artistic process. For example, both Max Greyson and Ine Vanoveren collaborated within Un-Label, and both reported an access aesthetics.

Second, the level of professionalism of the disabled performers involved in the respondents' collaborations was not considered when selecting the respondents. However,

collaborating with amateurs or professionals can have implications for the respondents' aesthetic choices. For example, amateurism is linked to authenticity (Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson 2017), which is also a quality that respondents often attributed to the performers. Moreover, this could affect the degree of participation that performers have in arts and disability projects, hence influencing the aesthetics.

Implications for Future Research

This study shows that for most of the non-disabled artists, their arts and disability projects reinforce or confirm their artistic style, in which they have already moved away from physical and technical perfection. This outcome nuances the distinction disability scholars make between disability aesthetics of disability artists on the one hand, and the assumed ableist aesthetics of the non-disabled mainstream on the other. Existing examples that emerged of this study are contact improvisation within dance or interdisciplinarity and post-dramatic theatre. Further research in mainstream arts can therefore analyse in what art practices disability aesthetics is already present, to closer assess the possibilities of inclusion of disabled performers in the mainstream performing arts. However, as noted, in some countries the dichotomy between mainstream arts and disability arts is already disappearing. More specifically, in so-called disability culture practices, the question of inclusion is less binary in nature, and an overall 'expanded aesthetics' is present (e.g. Ames [2018]). Research into how this shift has affected the mainstream performing arts sector and, more specifically, how it tackles the pitfalls identified in this study is recommended.

Second, this study intends to encourage other researchers to investigate relevant themes in the field of disability aesthetics. After all, this study found that, despite that an 'able-bodied' notion is no longer of their interest, pitfalls of appropriation remain possible, for example when non-disabled artists disavow disability as a social construct when they link

authenticity to the disabled performers. Such implications are not apparent in Tobin Siebers' theory of disability aesthetics in the mainstream (2010) and correspond to the criticism from the disability arts (see Hadley [2020, 179]; Perring [2005, 177]). To expand this understanding of disability aesthetics in the mainstream, the recent body of research on alternative working models within arts and disability practices and the contributions of (learning-) disabled artists therein is very useful. However, future research should not only reflect on the performances of companies such as Mind The Gap or Back To Back Theatre (see, for example, the work of Ames [2021]; Calvert [2015]; McCaffrey [2018]; Schmidt [2018]), but should also include the perspectives of the performers and directors with disabilities themselves (e.g. through interviews). Similarly, the discussion of the presence of a disability aesthetic should be analysed from the perspective of spectators with a disability, as an 'aesthetics of identification' (Reason 2019, 169), in which a disabled audience can relate to the performance and become involved in the discussion of disability aesthetics, can serve as an actual indicator of an inclusive disability aesthetics.

Future research may also explore how audiences with disabilities can contribute to the further development of disability aesthetics in arts and disability projects and the wider mainstream performing arts. For example, respondents Max Greyson and Ine Vanoeveren create work that is accessible to both performers with disabilities and audiences with disabilities. They found that their inclusive tools have an aesthetic meaning for the form of their performance, as a disabled audience challenges the ways in which the performance can be experienced. More specifically, research on audiences with disabilities can address how an access aesthetics can develop in the mainstream (see Johnston [2016]).

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Although disability aesthetics are already flourishing within Belgian arts and disability projects according to this study, some pitfalls remain in these collaborations, such as the danger of othering, and the assumption of authenticity. At first glance, therefore, sensitising non-disabled artists is implied, although the present study shows that part of the perceived authenticity of disability can be attributed to the absence of professional training of the performers. This research thus suggests that the professionalisation of artists with disabilities is key. Good practices already exist in countries where a disability culture is more flourishing. Some companies are already offering professional training for both disabled artists and non-disabled artists, such as Stopgap Dance Company (UK), Access All Areas (UK), Teatr 21 (Poland), etc.

Moreover, audiences, who are often considered non-disabled, do not appear to be familiar with an aesthetic based on actual disabilities. To this end, we recommend concentrating on larger structural barriers in the mainstream arts sector, including access to formal arts education, and cultural mediation that is aware of the stereotypes and social construct of disability. In general, if performers with disabilities remain absent from the broader sector, the danger of appropriation by non-disabled performing artists will continue to prevail. In this matter, the recognition of disability by art critics and programmers in a more comprehensive aesthetic framework, can be a useful tool. In art curricula, for example, the presence of disability as an aesthetic value in the arts could be a starting point for questioning rigid admission criteria and ableist structures.

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<https://www.theaterstap.be/en> (Theater Stap), <https://hetscheldeoffensief.be/> (Het Scheldeoffensief), <https://platform-k.be/en> (Platform-K) and <https://un-label.eu/en/> (Un-Label).

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