

## Art, Medicine, and Disability

*Katherine Sherwood*

I first became acquainted with the field of disability studies in 2000, when I was invited to join the board of the Disability Studies Program at the University of California–Berkeley. While working to develop a new disability studies minor for undergraduate students, I was struck by the links between disability studies and other disciplines in the humanities. In the fall of 2001, I audited the course “Literature and Disability,” taught by Susan Schweik, the cochair of Disability Studies at Berkeley, and I realized that such a model could be applied to visual art. Soon after, I began to design a course examining how visual artists have responded to illness and disability. Throughout the course, we examine visual representations of disability and healing, as well as the expressive work of visual artists practicing from within the personal experience of disability. This class explores, in a unique way, disability as both a subject and a source of artistic creation.

In the class we examine the forms in which art and medicine intersect. The structure of the course reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the subject. It strives to accommodate and take advantage of the students’ broad variety of academic backgrounds, including anthropology, art history, molecular and cellular biology, political science, psychology, and social welfare. Throughout the course, students have the opportunity to explore the subject matter from their own individual perspectives. Through various means of pedagogy, the students are given a range of ways to access and absorb the material, and they thus become more receptive to pushing their own boundaries and sharing their own experiences. The aim of the course is to broaden the students’ perspective in such a way that they begin to see

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disability as a continuum, and that the art related to disability reflects the different ways people come to inhabit their bodies.

The semester begins with a discussion of my own disability and artwork. I describe the ways in which the cerebral hemorrhage that I experienced in 1997 transformed both my artistic process and the content and style of the work itself. Next, we examine non-Western art about medicine, including Egyptian Fayum paintings, the tradition of Ethiopian medical scrolls, and Tibetan medical paintings. We then move to an investigation of traditional Western art historical subjects, viewed through the lens of disability. We look at how the black plague of the fourteenth century affected Italian painting; we examine the way in which Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's dwarfism, as well as his alcoholism, shaped his paintings; and we consider how syphilis impacted the late work of Édouard Manet. We also study the cases of Frida Kahlo and Chuck Close, the two most well-known disabled artists of the twentieth century. We consider how disability informed not only the way in which they worked but also the way their disabilities pushed the conceptual direction of their paintings.

An essential part of the course comes when we look at the work of contemporary disabled artists such as deaf artists Joseph Grigley and Aaron Williamson, and a wide range of performance artists, including Bob Flanagan and Mary Duffy. We study how the French artist Orlan uses plastic surgery as a way to reconceptualize her body. We examine the contemporary phenomenon of bio-art through such artists as Eduardo Kac and the Critical Art Ensemble. We observe the movement of Art Brut—the works of artists with mental illness like Adolph Woffli and Martin Ramirez. The final section of the course looks at art about AIDS and cancer. We see how artists such as Felix Gonzales-Torres, David Wojnarowicz, and Jerome Caja approach AIDS in dramatically different ways. We discuss the work of the photographer Hannah Wilke, the ceramicist Robert Arneson, and the painter Hollis Siegler to understand how they expressed their own experiences with cancer.

Students communicate their own particular interest in the material by choosing an in-depth research project, a creative project, or a semester-long internship. Students choosing the research project use their time to deepen their knowledge of a specific topic, presenting their findings to the class during the final weeks of the course. I meet with these students routinely through the course of the semester to guide their research. Students who make creative projects express their understanding of disability or illness through art. As an artist, I am accustomed to the method of studio critique, and so I work closely with these students. They meet with me throughout the semester, so that I can assist them in the development of works, which they present in a mid-semester critique, an exhibition, and a final critique. Students choosing to complete a semester-long internship do so at one of the San Francisco Bay Area's three disabled art centers: the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, the National Institute of Art and Disabilities in Richmond, or Creativity

Explored in San Francisco. These centers offer classes to variously disabled adult artists in a variety of media: drawing, painting, sculpture, textiles, printmaking, and digital media. Internships in centers such as these are especially valuable because they allow students to learn outside the university setting. By working with disabled artists, students shift their perspective on disability in a profound manner. Often, they find themselves in situations that push their personal boundaries and blur the distinction between able-bodied and disabled. Inevitably, this causes them to reevaluate their conception of the normative.

The class time is divided between my own lectures and student-led discussions, with the occasional guest lecturer. At the beginning of the semester, the class divides itself into smaller discussion groups that meet regularly. The personal relationships that develop within these groups allow students to engage in a candid and provocative dialogue about the subject matter. In the spring of 2005, my teaching of the course coincided with an exhibition that I cocurated at the Berkeley Art Museum titled *Blind at the Museum*. The show featured the work of visually impaired artists, as well as of sighted artists who use blindness as a metaphor, such as Sophie Calle and Robert Morris. It was accompanied by a two-day conference that examined museum access to the visually impaired in terms of computer science, museum studies, optometry, and philosophy. Both the exhibit and the conference proved to be excellent forums, enabling the students to further synthesize the material of the class.

## SYLLABUS

### Readings

- Ann Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997).
- Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
- Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
- Carrie Sandhl and Phillip Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
- David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives* (New York: Vintage, 1991).
- Course Reader (CR)

### Assignments

#### Week 1

*How a Cerebral Hemorrhage Altered My Art*

Films by students in Disability Studies

Peter Waldman, "Master Stroke," *Wall Street Journal*, May 12, 2000 (CR)

*Week 2*

*Life and Death: The Egyptian Mummy Portraits, Ghanaian Coffin Tradition, Ethiopian Medicine Scrolls, and Tibetan Medical Paintings*

Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*

*The Black Plague and Other Maladies in Western Art*

Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), 92–125 (CP)

Hilliard T. Goldfarb, “The Decameron,” in *Art’s Lament: Creativity in the Face of Death*, ed. Goldfarb (Boston: Trustees of the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum, 1994), 5–9 (CP)

*Week 3*

*Toulouse-Lautrec and How Manet and Monet Grew Old*

Julia Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life* (London: Phoenix, 1994), 373–81 (CR)

*Frida Kahlo and Chuck Close*

Hayden Herrera, “Frida Kahlo: The Palette, the Pain, and the Painter” *Artforum*, March 1983, 60–67 (CR)

Joan Kesten, ed., *The Portraits Speak: Chuck Close in Conversation with Twenty-seven of His Subjects* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1997) (CR)

*Week 4*

*Plastic Surgery as Art*

Julian Zugazagoitia, “Orlan: The Embodiment of Totality,” and Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Orlan Interviewed,” in *Orlan: Carnal Art*, ed. Deke Dusinberre (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 215–21, 187–202 (CR)

David Yuan, “The Celebrity Freak,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosmarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 368–84 (CR)

*Bio-Art: Eduardo Kac and Critical Art Ensemble*

Guest speaker: Dr. Joseph Rosen

Lauren Slater, “Dr. Daedalus,” *Harper’s*, July 2001, 57–67 (CR)

Ronald Bailey, “Pink Mice and Petri Dishes: Artists Contemplate Biotechnology,” *Reason*, no. 32, December 2000, 58–59 (CR)

Eduardo Kac, “Transgenic Art,” *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 6, no. 11 (December 1998), [www.ekac.org/transgenic.html](http://www.ekac.org/transgenic.html) (CR)

*Week 5*

*Sick*

Bob Flanagan, “Why,” *Art Journal*, Winter 1997, 58–9 (CR)

Bob Flanagan, *Pain Journal* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/Smart Art Press, 2000) (CR)

Screening of *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (dir. Kirby Dick, U.S., 1997)

*Bodies in Commotion: Performance art by Mary Duffy, Carrie Sandhl, and Cheryl Marie Wade*

Carrie Sandhl and Phillip Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005)

*Week 6**Crip Shots*

Guest speaker: John Killacky

Screening of *Crip Shots* (dir. John Killacky, U.S., 2001), featuring performative portraits of six artists with disabilities including Terry Galloway, Bill Shannon, Chris Hewitt, Judy Smith, Greg Walloch, and John Killacky

*Deaf Visual Culture*

Works by James Castle, Joseph Grigely, and Aaron Williamson

Joseph Grigley, "Postcards to Sophie Calle," in *Points of Contact: Disability, Art, and Culture*, ed. Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 31–58 (CR)

Visit to Berkeley Art Museum visit to see works by Castle

*Week 7**Blind at the Museum*

Works by John Dugdale, Alice Wingwall, Michael LeVell, Kurt Weston, Michael Richards, and Pedro Hidalgo

Kleege, *Sight Unseen*

Raymond Carver, "Cathedral," in *Cathedral* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 209–28 (CR)

Psychiatric Illness Displayed: Art Brut

*Week 8**Jill Scott and the Developmental Disabilities Art Movement*

Simi Linton, excerpts from *Claiming Disability*

Midterm critique and exhibition for studio projects

*Week 9**Spring Break**Week 10**People with AIDS*

Works by David Wojnarowicz, Jerome Caja, and Felix Gonzales-Torres

Wojnarowicz, excerpts from *Close to the Knives*

*Art from African AIDS*

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Duke University Press/Journals

*Week 11*

Screening of *Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O'Brien* (dir. Jessica Yu, U.S., 1996), and *The Realms of the Unreal* (dir. Jessica Yu, U.S., 2004)

*Circle Stories, Self-Medication, and Broken*

Works by Riva Lehrer, Fred Tommaselli, and Barbara Bloom

*Week 12**Fighting Cancer*

Works by Hannah Wilke, Hollis Siegler, and Robert Arneson

Catherine Lord, *The Summer of Her Baldness: A Cancer Improvisation* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 127–49 (CR)

*Week 13*

*Facing Death*

Works by Francisco Goya, Mark Rothko, and Wendy Sussman

Richard Whittaker, "Interview with Wendy Sussman," *Works + Conversations*, Aug. 1995,

17–24

James Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993)

Robert Hughes, *Goya* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 367–402 (CR)

*Week 14*

*Final presentations of the interns*

Final presentations of the research projects

*Week 15*

*Final critiques of the studio projects*