

Body Vandalism: Lady Gaga, Disability, and Popular Culture
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Abstract: This essay investigates the employment of disability by the pop star Lady Gaga. Working through different illustrations of disability in her videos it is argued that Lady Gaga ushers in a new aesthetic and political platform on which disability can be redefined. In particular, the author argues that Lady Gaga unconsciously performs within the space of what Siebers has named a disability aesthetic in which the different bodies reformulate the expectations and desires of the art object. The context of popular culture is explained as a necessary component of this reframing.

Keywords: disability, Lady Gaga, aesthetics

“To what concept, other than the idea of disability, might be referred modern art’s love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies, stunning variety of human forms, intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation, and unyielding preoccupation with wounds and tormented flesh?” –Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*

Introduction

The body of Lady Gaga has been tortured, bruised, beaten, bloodied, hung by the neck, and killed. It has limped using crutches, been propelled by haute couture wheelchairs, and disemboweled by a lover. All in public. All in performance, as a product to be bought and sold in the pop culture marketplace. The corpse has been painted with the brush of sexuality, glamorized, objectified, and graphically presented as the consumable flesh of female celebrity. Indeed, the body-imperfect, the transitional body, is fixed to Gaga’s aesthetic story. This painful creation in her videos, photo shoots, and films hasn’t always been original, but the residue of its parts smacks of a novel aesthetic blend of the controversial, beautiful, and ugly. Her performative essence, in other words, has consistently been the changing, unstable, disabled body.

Popular discourse surrounding Lady Gaga, fueled by legacy media platforms like TV and print news, as well as a Gaga-promoted social networking site (littlemonsters.com), an extensive network of bloggers, academic/pop psychology websites (i.e., *Gaga Stigmata*), and various new media platforms of criticism, have created a rich fabric of explanations, interpretations, and predictions about the star’s popular meanings. Through rumors that she was a hermaphrodite and wild speculations about her drug use, Lady Gaga has been extremely successful in keeping us talking, keeping us buying, keeping us firmly planted in our spectator positions. The spectacle of Lady Gaga actually thrives on a shifting set of meanings, a pseudo-flexible textuality that some find fascinating while others find it absolutely ridiculous. Camille Paglia (2010), for example, snorted the following in her often quoted *Sunday Times* discussion of the Queen of spectacle: “Gaga is in way over her head with her avant-garde pretensions... She wants to have it both ways – to be hip and avant-garde and yet popular and universal, a practitioner of gung-ho show biz.” Trained in art theory and musical performance at the Tisch School of the Arts, Gaga admittedly had a unique bag of experiences, concepts, and vocabularies to pull from when she

emerged on the music scene in 2008 with her first CD, *The Fame*. Paglia concludes however that this education was merely cursory, the detriment of which has been a thinly drawn line of artistic development in otherwise clichéd pop sensibilities.

Attempting to gauge whether her art is either popular or avant-garde (and not both?) seems an insufficient approach to the work being produced by Lady Gaga and her team (referred to as the Haus of Gaga). This approach, however, does point out that Paglia and other critics of Gaga are misguided in looking at Lady Gaga through well-worn, ideologically specific, and firmly institutionalized systems of meanings. Feminism works well to illustrate the ways in which transgressive artists like Gaga can confuse traditional glossaries of political, cultural, and aesthetic movements. Several pieces have been written about the potential feminism in Lady Gaga in the past couple of years, all of which argue that the star offers, at best, a confused understanding of female empowerment (Bauer, 2010; Williams, 2010; Quinlan and Fogel, 2011). These articles and blog posts too easily conflate social and cultural performance with that of marketplace, consumer driven performance: critics seem unable to distinguish between political realities and artistic vision. This is not to say that pop artifacts carry no political significance, but rather that they play with them to create an aesthetic experience. Lady Gaga performs a sort of feminism, but does not easily fit into the historical trajectories that even second or third wave feminism presents. J. Jack Halberstam (2012) has it right in her book *Gaga Feminism* when she argues that the form of feminism embedded in the work of Lady Gaga, “Is a scavenger feminism that borrows promiscuously, steals from everywhere, and inhabits the ground of stereotypes and clichés all at the same time” (p. 5). In an interview with *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Halberstam (2012) discusses Lady Gaga’s use of feminism as a fluid act. Discussing the polysemic nature of Gaga’s music video for “Telephone,” she says:

“This lack of resolution or moral outcome feels right for contemporary feminism, as does Lady Gaga herself as a contradictory figure who offers much as a symbol of contemporary feminism. It is this figuration that interests me much more than Lady Gaga’s own politics, which can veer toward a gender essentialism that is problematic for feminism and for queer politics.”

Here, Halberstam not only identifies the discomfort some feminists feel in interpreting Lady Gaga, but celebrates it as a potentially important sign of contemporary feminist inquiry and its own distaste for easy answers.

So the relationship between Lady Gaga and feminism is one based on a clash between preconceived politics and contemporary cultural experience, between political ideals and popular culture. That relationship is mirrored in the connections between Lady Gaga and the disabled body. As discussed below, Gaga’s relationship with disability has been met with rancor and contempt, as well as pride and celebration: people with disabilities have been both naysayers and advocates for the ways Gaga has appropriated the experience of disability into her products. What’s most interesting about these reactions are the ways they illuminate different approaches to defining disability in popular culture. Accordingly, just like her stretching of the accepted meanings of feminism, it’s argued here that Lady Gaga presents a potential re-approaching to the way we understand disability within the landscape of consumer culture. This new understanding of pop disability is seen in a discussion of Lady Gaga’s poaching and redistribution of disability

as style as well as her destruction/disabling and reforming of the perfect, sexualized, consumable female body.

Lady Gaga's Disability Images

Recently, there has been an online circulation of a paper Lady Gaga supposedly wrote under her real name, Stefani Germanotta, while attending the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University in 2004. Although she was attending Tisch as a musical performance student she reportedly was able to take credit hours in art criticism, history, and theory. This paper, in which she analyzes some of the aesthetic philosophies of Spencer Tunick, one of her first major art influences, shows an early, somewhat naïve, interest in the ways bodies make sense:

“The terms of the human body, some might say, are determined through a theoretical dissection of both the private environments and public atmospheres in which we live. By terms, the rules and evaluations of bodily condition, I mean to establish a division of perception... However, it is in the freeing of both natural and artificial bodies that art is created. Some artists depend on the predisposition of their subjects to provide the work with its primary message and meaning, other artists rely on a temporal and physical freedom, an ability to use objects while also freeing them of their social significance and thus endowing them with endless possibilities of form.¹”

The fact that the source of this quote cannot be fully authenticated means very little for the current discussion of Lady Gaga and disability. In fact it adds to the play between authenticity and fakery that looms beneath the discussion below. That she wrote a thesis on Tunick, was exposed to the curriculum at Tisch, and found community in this arts scene delivers as much significance as we choose to afford it. The quote pinpoints the centrality of perception in our understanding of human bodies, as well as the ways our expectations of said bodies permeate our subsequent consumption of them. As such, this paper and other potential assumptions made about her art education at the very least provide an attenuated context for her employment of disability.

The earliest presentation of disability in the work of Lady Gaga seems to be located in her 2009 video for “Paparazzi.” Gaga finds herself temporarily disabled after being thrown from a balcony by a lover who performs the violent act to feed the voyeuristic groveling of photographers; returning from some sort of celebrity rehab, lifted by an African-American limousine driver out of the backseat, Lady Gaga is transferred into a bedazzled wheelchair designed by B. Akerlund. In an interview about the design of the “Paparazzi” props and outfits, Akerlund describes her process of transforming the wheelchair into a Gaga-artifact:

“Gaga called me and said she wanted to be in a wheelchair. She wanted me to design it and not the prop department. I took it upon myself to drive to East L.A. and exchange the wheels for some low rider ones. I ordered some Gucci fabric and handed it over to my genius friend/designer Michael Schmidt so he could embellish it with Swarovski crystals. Originally, we made a metal logo that read ‘Gaga’ on the wheels, but she disliked the font and we ended up exchanging it for the Chanel logo.²”

Completing the tableau of disability are a bejeweled neck brace, polished aluminum crutches, and a designer, corrective corset created by the French designer Thierry Mugler (Figure 1). Beyond these props of disability, or alternately “disabled things,” Lady Gaga performs disability through her own body, convulsing in the wheelchair, walking with the crutches, exhibiting a crooked stance and severe limp, an emotionless face throughout. The video also portrays other women who are either disabled or dead, all of which pieced together secure the aesthetic theme of body decay.

Disabled or transitional bodies continued to be a repeating theme in the music videos and photo shoots of Lady Gaga, especially after the release of her second CD *The Fame Monster* in late 2009. Even a cursory glance at her videos from 2009 forward shows a repeated presence of Kristeva’s (1982) “abject body”—the body trapped between objectivity and subjectivity, the ever-changing, never static, traumatized being. She (always gendered as female, except the “male” performance by Gaga in her video for “You and I” in 2011) is there as the hatchling, twitching being, the large-eyed curiosity in the bathtub, the thin and emaciated body with the spinal prosthesis in the video for “Bad Romance” from 2009. In 2010’s “Telephone,” the unstable body shows itself as the imprisoned, chained, and grotesque inmate of an all-female jail; in that same year for the video “Alejandro,” the transformative body is covered with some sort of protoplasm, a grotesque goo being caressed by her dancers. All the videos from 2011, including the title track from her *Born This Way* CD, “Judas,” “You and I,” and “Marry the Night” include some sort of different, transforming, mutated, and/or grotesque performance of embodiment.³

Besides the presence of the wheelchair and crutches in the video for “Paparazzi,” it should be pointed out that the different bodies present in these visual products are not immediately coded as “disabled” in popular culture. Indeed, the prosthetics, lighting techniques, costumes, and performances in these videos are more linked to a code of horror, one that viewers would no doubt recognize and link to an aesthetic of cinematic technique. Nonetheless, in an investigation of the ways Lady Gaga has employed the disabled body, it must be argued that all of these performances fall under the category of body difference, consequently placing them within the larger cultural spectrum of disability. But because these performances are primarily consumable products (i.e., they are to be downloaded/purchased, experienced as media and shared in the context of consumerism) they become intertwined with popular conceptions of disability itself.

Disability Chic

It’s not until Lady Gaga performs as a person with a disability on stage that the moniker “disabled” really gets injected into popular conversation. During a 2011 concert performance in Sydney, Gaga brought out a new character for only the second time, a wheelchair using mermaid, a bizarre creature she calls Yuyi (who would later play a significant role in the video for “You and I”) (Figure 2). Poaching Bette Midler’s 1980s performance of a mermaid in a wheelchair, Lady Gaga’s employment of the mermaid prosthetic and the manual wheelchair is meant to play on ironies of limitations, abilities, and confusion. Alexander Cavaluzzo (2011), writing for quasi-academic blog *Gaga Stigmata* describes Yuyi the following way:

“She [the mermaid] perfectly summates Lady Gaga’s project thus far, combining the spectacle of *The Fame*, the demonic metaphor of *The Fame Monster*, and the dichotomy of living halfway between reality and fantasy of *Born This Way*. She’s not a sultry siren floating through the crystal clear waters of a blue lagoon; she’s a grotesque aberration, a welding of woman and fish, inelegantly lying on a slab, carting herself around stage in a wheelchair, or writhing in a filthy bathtub.”

Here, under the lens of Gaga-criticism, the disabled mermaid is contextualized in a larger project of body play, self-actualization, and artistry. Evaluation from a lens of disability rights, however, was quite different.

Mainstream online sources like *E!* and *the Huffington Post* reported that disability activists in Sydney met Gaga after her performance with vocal demonstrations and egg throwing, protesting what they saw as being trivializing and mocking behavior (Grossberg 2011; *Huffington Post*, 2011). Several of her fans with disabilities tweeted their disapproval immediately after the performance. One wrote “Dear@ladygaga how about using your celebrity status 2 try 2 get us out of wheelchairs. Instead of cruising one. Cool!?!” *E!* also quoted Jesse Billauer, disabled founder of the advocacy group Life Roles On as saying, “Since this isn’t the first time she has used a wheelchair in her performances, I invite her to learn more about the 5.6 million Americans who live with paralysis. They, like me, unfortunately, don’t use a wheelchair for shock value.”

Josie Byzek (2011) writing for *New Mobility* pointed out that many performers with disabilities saw right through this act, offering harsh criticism. The celebrated poet and activist Leroy Moore, who has cerebral palsy, referred to artists who pretend to be disabled as “black face” equivalents, marking a striking connection between race and disability discrimination in popular culture. Moore went on to say:

“It doesn’t go deeper, it’s surface stuff...If you’re going to do that, contact real people with disabilities and get to the real issues, but don’t pimp it. For me it’s sloppy and very lazy music. And also it takes away from real artists who have disabilities. I wouldn’t care if there were enough images in music and TV that have real people with disabilities, but there are not.”

Such a reaction, while warranted, trivializes popular culture as “surface stuff,” while at the same time demonizes it as culturally transgressive. This confusion happens often in criticisms of popular culture: popular products are deemed superfluous and damaging all at the same time, a confusing and somewhat dangerous proclamation. Scholars of popular culture have been less likely to make that sort of argument since the early 1980s when leaders like Stuart Hall (1981) argued that our critiques of “the popular” be made within a vibrant consideration of production, consumption, and social experience. To limit our understandings of popular culture to variances of mass production, like Adorno and Horkheimer (1944, 2002) had, or to see the actions of consumption as completely empowering, like John Fiske (1989) would, ignores the geographical and historical specificities of popular culture and its potential as a source of political action.

Moore is absolutely correct when he implies that the wheelchair using mermaid is a shtick meant to create shock and attention. However, it can also be said that Yuyi is an extremely powerful product because it brings issues of disability into the mass cultural experience by way of the same shock and spectacle. *Bitch Magazine* (2013) refers to Lady Gaga's performances of body difference as *disability chic*, a process of using the different a disabled body as an element of style and message. In a post on the "Paparazzi" video, the *Bitch Magazine* writer argues that because Lady Gaga's disability portrayal is temporary, the artist is playing loose with authentic experiences of individuals with disabilities. Working through Susan Wendell's (1989) work on feminist theory and disability, the author points out that the disabled body performed by Lady Gaga is paradoxically both public and private, all at once visible and invisible, rendering the political message of this work insignificant:

"Disability can be "cool," but only if it is temporary, not shown to the public, and that your eventual recovery from it can be portrayed through the timeless medium of dance! Oh, and be sure to have people of color around to assist you with your wheelchair and with your 'recovery'-cum-dance routine."

Although facetious, the criticism is quite clear. Lady Gaga performs a shameful presentation of disability, one tainted by impermanence and insincerity.⁴

Rather than lean heavily on what we might call a post-medical model of disability in which definitions of disability get tied up in rigid political structures, opening up our understandings of body difference to a more fluid conception of disability may allow us to reread Gaga's performance in "Paparazzi" and elsewhere. Indeed, the term *disability chic* might be repurposed to highlight the positive ways in which Gaga is able to bring disability into pop culture conversations. Other disabled activists have been quite positive regarding the star's employment of disability iconography. For example, media critic Terri O'Hare, quite soon after reports came out about the protests against Yuyi, blogged, "Are we going to snuff out all popular culture that has anything to do with disability if the performers are not disabled" (Byzek, 2013)? Continuing this enthusiasm for what Gaga is doing, Bethany Stevens, a sexologist with a disability was quoted as saying, "I want to figure out how to connect what Gaga's doing to transability, the fluidity of embodiment and moving away from this binary of 'ability' and 'disability' and allowing for people to play with these things, these attributes" (Byzek, 2013). Other fans with disabilities have shared positive reviews of Gaga's *disability chic* through twitter and Facebook, blogs and websites, including the aptly titled *gagability* website.

What these and other examples of positive disability response show is that there is a growing understanding of the service Gaga's employment of *disability chic* offers; by including the topic of disability in her work, Gaga helps disability be consumed alongside other popular aesthetic and political ideas. Although it would be a mistake to say that she is slipping disability into her work, clandestinely for example, it is fair to claim that because disability is not the central element, Lady Gaga's popular art forms a space in which difference is exposed, disability is visible, and human difference is accepted without the normal pomp and circumstance of disability rights. Admittedly, hers is not a well articulated mission of activism for women or people with disabilities, a fact that many have bemoaned. However, by intertwining politics and entertainment in such a transparent fashion, Lady Gaga is able to usher in a sort of political

consciousness without alerting her fans that such an act is occurring. Certainly, her mantra of “be yourself, you were born this way” hits a particular teenage angst right between the eyes: the little monsters get spoken to directly. However, her delivery of this anthem is accompanied by an invisible politics, introducing the rhetoric of rights for women, the LGBTQ community, and people with physical and cognitive disabilities.

Vandalism and Disability Aesthetics

Her success in being able to perform this type of political delivery comes from a unique artistic vision, one that is almost completely centered on the body. The origins of this centralization of physicality can be traced to a larger, Christian tradition in which bodies are theologically attached to the concept of incarnation, in which the resurrected body of Jesus carries with it novel understandings/representations of liberation, freedom, and suffering. Consequently, having been brought up Catholic, Lady Gaga (along with many other contemporary artists) has digested particular theological and ideological messages about the importance of flesh. According to Eleanor Heartney (2004), author of *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, Catholicism after Thomas Aquinas clearly advocated the Incarnation as a central truth of Christianity, out of which comes the centrality of the body in what she calls, the Catholic Imagination. Anchored by a belief in the lived experience of Jesus, the incarnation finds its importance in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the elevation of the Virgin Mary, and, most importantly, the Eucharist, which, according to Heartney:

“...Solidified the role played by the body in the Mass, the central ritual of the Catholic faith. The mass is a reenactment of Christ’s Last Supper with his Apostles before his crucifixion (which itself was a celebration of the Jewish Passover). At the pivotal moment of the Mass, the priest, who assumes Christ’s role in the ritual, takes bread and wine, which symbolize the meal shared with the apostles, and turns them into the actual body and blood of Christ. The bread and wine retain their natural forms, but when consumed by the members of the congregation, replay Christ’s sacrifice and seal their commitment to Christ through a physical union with his divine substance” (p. 10).

Thus, those who are accustomed to this incarnational heritage, according to the author, remain fixated on or confused by the body throughout their work.

Although she does not speak directly about Lady Gaga, Heartney would no doubt place her into a category of “Catholics in conflict.” She points out, “Their conflict stems in part from mixed messages about sexuality and the body within Catholicism itself, many of which originate in a schism between the Catholic Church’s official doctrine, and individual Catholic’s imaginative sensibilities (p.22). Alongside discussions of work by Madonna, Robert Mapplethorpe, Felix Gonzales-Torres, and Andres Serrano, Heartney devotes an entire chapter to Lady Gaga’s artistic hero, Andy Warhol.⁵ The author points out that Catholicism could be seen in Warhol’s “obsessions with physical death and physical love, his transformation of ordinary objects into icons with multiple residences, his interest in the body and its processes and most of all, the conflict manifested in his work between the church’s official teachings and Catholicism’s subliminal messages” (p. 38).

This reaction to and obsession with the Catholic sense of physicality is evident in Lady Gaga's employment of, not only her body, but the bodies of others in her work. A key to understanding the ways in which this "incarnational thinking" makes its way into Lady Gaga's work is the flagellation of Jesus before his crucifixion. Biblical accounts of his torture point to the ways in which Christ's body was transformed by physical abuse, scraping of the skin, and wearing a crown of thorns.⁶ Portrayals of the crucified Christ in Catholic churches are often realistic, highlighting the illuminati, the bloodied brow, and the pierced side of Christ as a way of indicating the importance of suffering before sanctification. Gaga's body is often reformulated, sometimes quite violently. During her Monster Ball concert tour, for example, she ritually bloodied her torso during a performance of her song "Monster," a stark juxtaposition with the otherwise sexualized body being performed throughout the concert. Indeed, her juxtaposition of the pop female body (think Britney Spears) with the grotesque, bloodied, as discussed above, disabled body, grants a striking visualization of the Catholic imagination described above (Figure 3).

Gaga's employment of "incarnational thinking" is consequently linked to a process of disablement to gain power or redemption; in order to be redeemed of its cultural contamination, the female pop body must suffer in order to be transformed. And yet religious narrative only tells half of the story behind this work. The other half stems directly from what Tobin Siebers (2010) refers to as disability aesthetics. In a book of the same name, Siebers unearths a sophisticated disabled sensibility in the history of modern art. Through a grand study of painting, sculpture, and performance, Siebers demonstrates that the presence of bodies in art, specifically those bodies that reject the classical aesthetic tradition of beauty and perfection, create in art the undeniable acceptance and sometimes adoration of disability itself. He points out that:

"Disability aesthetics refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body—and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty—as the sole determination of the aesthetic. Rather, disability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result. Note that it is not a matter of representing the exclusion of disability from aesthetic history, since no such exclusion has taken place, but of making the influence of disability obvious....disability aesthetics prizes physical and mental difference as a significant value in itself...Disability is not, therefore, one subject of art among others.... It is not only a personal or autobiographical response embedded in the artwork. It is not solely a political act. It is all of these things, but it is more. It is more because *disability is properly speaking an aesthetic value*, which is to say, it participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about the way that some bodies make other bodies feel" (p. 3, 19-20, italics added).

Using this definition, it is clear that Gaga is operating within the spirit of such a disability aesthetic. Whether this participation is consciously done doesn't matter because the essence of aesthetics need not be one of artistic intention but rather found in this way that "some bodies make other bodies feel."

Siebers' argument winds its way through the history of modern art, from early painting and sculpture, all the way through to contemporary artists. Though his project is one of

modernity, the terms and concepts he applies to modern art practices undoubtedly assist contemporary studies of artists like Lady Gaga. Perhaps most useful is his discussion of art vandalism. In a fascinating chapter, Siebers uses the act of art vandalism to explore the ways in which art objects both reflect and deflect realism, as well as the ways our aesthetic expectations get formed by the act of looking.⁷ Although he spends a good amount of time talking about the ways mental illness play a significant role in this history of art due to the cognitive abilities of the Vandals themselves, it is his more philosophical dissection of the practice of *vandalism* itself that connects to the work of Lady Gaga.

As stated above, one can easily see a visual (if not directly ideological) connection to the flagellation of Christ in many of Gaga's performances. It is suggested that this act of destruction is mirrored in Gaga's own distraction of the normalized, praised pop female body type. A more sophisticated approach to this act can be related to vandalism, specifically the tearing down of already accepted art objects. On the level of perception, Siebers points out that:

“Vandalized images often evoke the same feelings of suffering, repulsion, and pity aroused by people with injuries or disabilities, but they do it with an important difference. They divert the beholder's attention from the content to the form of the artwork. More conventional representations of disability may also generate emotional reactions in beholders, but they seem to erect a partition separating the real world from the work of art, as if its aesthetic status acted like a barrier against the fact of disability. This separation produces a “beautification” of disability...” (p. 91).

Above, several critics were quoted being quite critical of Lady Gaga's impersonation of disability, finding disrespect in her portrayal of people with disabilities. As Siebers describes here, these critics are expecting a sort of “conventional” relationship between art and life, one in which there is an immediate parallel between experience and representation itself. This is not what we see in the work of Lady Gaga. Rather, through the act of vandalism, Gaga rejects an interpretation of the body based on “real” content and instead draws attention to the form of the body itself, making disability a performative and artistic element in and of itself.

Siebers continues by arguing that, “Art vandals breach aesthetic form, violating the analogy between art object and subjectivity, and yet they do not render this analogy ineffective. They transform it, replacing the original referent with a different idea of subjectivity—the subject with a disability” (p. 92). As a vandal, then, Gaga can reformulate the aesthetic driving the perception of disabled bodies by the nature of her destructive act: thus, by using disability to transform the ideal, pop female body (read, the work of art), she creates a new “style” of disability to be consumed in the realm of popular culture. By doing so, she opens up an aesthetic conversation (which then becomes the conversation of bloggers, writers, and responders) in which body difference can alter the very act of representation itself.

Consequently, the act of vandalism becomes an act of creation:

“...When an act of art vandalism does occur, something more revelatory than a thought experiment is unleashed—the occasion, disturbing and shocking, for an awakening. In the spectacle of the beholder of art turned passionate vandal arises the vision of a different

kind of aesthetics, one in which people react powerfully to works of art that in turn affect the emotions, sensibilities, and perceptions of others. The works themselves are subject to an accelerated deterioration more akin to the human life cycle than into the glacial existence of museum pieces, and they evoke as a result the forms of truth and beauty, both shabby and sterling, found everywhere in the world of human beings (p. 99).”

The “everywhere” referred to here is no doubt perfectly encapsulated by the twenty-first century marketplace in which Lady Gaga has become a chief proprietor. In her work, the pop female body becomes disabled, and consequently, in Siebers’ vision of things, more beautiful and more true.

Conclusion

The real power of Gaga’s vandalism, her body project, comes from the fact that it all occurs on the plane of popular culture. As such, disability finds its way into a lexicon of celebrity worship, star construction, mass marketing, social networking, and, perhaps most importantly, consumerism. As such, disability gains a position it has rarely had in the past—happenstance. This is not to say that it loses any of its political potential, nor its distinctiveness as a cultural marker. Indeed, it could be said that through the body reformulating in the hands of Gaga documented here, disability actually gains power. But it does so as a byproduct of popular consumption rather than as the centered subjectivity of representation that so plagues visions of disability in popular film and television, for example.

By employing the things of disability (wheelchairs, crutches, neck braces, etc.) and performing the tradition of disability aesthetics in her images, Lady Gaga brings to the public table the disabled body in a way it has never been delivered before. Although many would say that such grand conclusions can only come from a deep and far-reaching, critical interpretation of what some see as superfluous, spectacted grandstanding, it has been argued here that there is at least a potential of true transgression when it comes to our definitions of physical and mental differences thanks to the work of Lady Gaga. Her bag of tricks and experiences includes all the right pieces: art theory, Catholicism, performance training, contemporary art inspirations, and an unflinching belief in individuality. When all of this is combined with good advertising and marketing strategies, it’s no wonder her work leads to new conceptions of disability and art.

Figures/Images

Figure 1: Lady Gaga, “Paparazzi” Video

(photo from <http://crabbygolightly.com/wordpress/guaranteed-to-sexually-satisfy-lady-gaga-at-the-vmas/8341258/>)



Figure 2: Lady Gaga as Yuyi

(photo from <http://w4walls.com/lady-gaga-wheelchair/>)



Figure 3: Lady Gaga, Monster Ball
(photo from http://starcasm.net/archives/54801/fp_5324049_lady_gaga_cwny_070210)



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Endnotes

¹ At this point is impossible to substantiate whether this essay was actually written by Lady Gaga, by one of her staff at the Haus of Gaga, or by a fan posing as the artist. The author contacted the website that originally published the paper (brutishandshort.com) to substantiate its authenticity and is waiting for a reply from the original editor. The full text of the paper can be seen at <http://brutishandshort.com/a-paper-lady-gaga-wrote-in-u-grad/>.

² For more on the design elements of the "Paparazzi" video please see <http://jezebel.com/5285868/questions-about-the-high-fashion--domestic-violence-in-lady-gagas-video>.

³ The only exception in the videos from 2011 is the rather tame "Edge of Glory" in which Lady Gaga performs an homage to 1980s music videos, dancing around in a nondescript city, hanging out with 1980s icon Clarence Clemons while he plays saxophone on the track.

⁴ It should be pointed out that there are several illustrations that refute claims of disinterest in disability from Lady Gaga. Recently criticized for her purchase of a Ken Borochoy designed, \$2500 luxury wheelchair for her convalescence after hip surgery, the star continues to raise eyebrows when it comes to rehab technology. However, after she became aware of a fan who was suffering from a similar hip injury, Gaga not only gifted the wheelchair to the woman but also flew her to New York and promised to take care of all of her medical expenses. For more on this story see <http://www.cinemablend.com/pop/Lady-Gaga-Gifts-Gold-Wheelchair-Fan-Pays-Her-Have-Surgery-54615.html> and http://www.newmobility.com/browse_thread.cfm?id=475&blogID=19. Lady Gaga has also recently reached out to her fans with mental disabilities, including one person with cognitive impairments from France whom she asked onstage during a performance of her song "Princess Die." Far from exhibitionist, the performance points to an understanding of the complicated lives being lived by her fans. For more see <http://ladyxgaga.com/post/32274224214/a-video-of-gaga-inviting-marcel-a-disabled-fan>. It should also be noted that people with disabilities are among those being targeted and served by Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation whose hope is to "... foster a more accepting society, where differences are embraced and individuality is celebrated. The foundation is dedicated to creating a safe community that helps connect young people with the skills and opportunities they need to build a kinder, braver world." For more see <http://bornthiswayfoundation.org/pages/our-mission>.

⁵It is well documented that Lady Gaga consistently points to Andy Warhol as her artistic mentor. Her conglomeration of artists, scholars, and performers known as the Haus of Gaga mirrors Warhol's Factory system. She has been quoted saying "Warhol said art should be meaningful in the most shallow way. He was able to make commercial art that was taken seriously as fine art, to use something simple and shallow and take it to another

planet. That's what I'm doing too." For more see <http://www.metrolyrics.com/2009-lady-gaga-inspired-by-andy-warhol-david-bowie-and-grace-jones-news.html>.

⁶ For specific passages see Matthew 27:28-31; Mark 15:16-21. Both sections are from the New International Version of the Bible.

⁷ Art vandalism can best be described as the conscious destruction of a work of art. Among the examples Siebers discusses are Hans-Joachim Bohlmann, a German with a disability who famously defaced a Rubens portrait of Archduke Albrecht, and other famous paintings; Robert Cambridge, who in 1988 shot Leonardo da Vinci's "The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and John the Baptist" with a sawed off shotgun; and Dennis Heiner who, in 1999, passed as a person with mental illness in order to place white latex paint of Chris Ofili's "The Holy Virgin Mary," a controversial painting of the Madonna adorned with pornographic cutouts and elephant dung (p. 87).