# *Speels Collectief* - a collective claiming crip

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Introduction

This essay focusses on the notions of ableism and disablism, and the binary thinking that occurs when it comes to these notions. I argue that the arts can be an appropriate means to challenge binary thinking, in this case binary thinking when it comes to dis/ableism. To substantiate my argument I come up with a case study, concerning the theater collective that me and my colleague Sanne Arbouw founded five years ago. Our collective, Speels Collectief, consists of people regarded as able-bodied and people regarded as disable-bodied. As a collective we make theaterperformances which we are all part of. The question I will investigate is: How can the performances of Speels Collectief offer resistance to binary thinking when it comes to dis/ableism?

In answering this question, I will start by setting the theoretical framework on which I build my argument. Firstly, I will elaborate on different theorizations of disability. In doing so, I briefly focus on the rise of critical disability studies, and then highlight different models to conceptualize disability. I argue that instead of natural and essential, disability should be understood as relational and political. The framing of disability as political is related to the possibility of consciously chosen identification with disability. In the second place I will elaborate on this, and highlight concepts related to identification with disability. In the third place, I will elaborate on the concept of affect. I will explore how this concept came into being and explain what affect entails today. Finally, I will zoom in on my case study. In order to specify, I will start by describing a particular moment within one of our performances. Then, I will link the theories I have elaborated on to my argument that Speels Collectief challenges binary thinking.

Critical disability studies and different models of disability

In *What's so 'critical' about critical disability studies?* Helen Meekosha and Russell Shuttleworth (2009) elaborate on the emergence of critical disability studies (CDS). They argue that the diversity of disabled people, the variety and degrees of their impairments and their intersection with other relevant social categories of experience, demands a broad and contextual interrogation of their restrictions. 'CDS has accompanied a social, political and intellectual re-evaluation of explanatory

paradigms used to understand the lived experience of disabled people and potential ways forward for social, political and economic change' (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009, p.49).[1] In the current conceptualization of CDS it is important to incorporate four principles. Firstly, the irreducibility of social life to objective facts. 'Undergoing continual historical and sociocultural transformation, society cannot be described adequately without reference to changing social relations and cultural meanings' (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009, p.52). Secondly, Meekosha and Shuttleworth argue that in the struggle for an autonomous and participatory society, linking theory with praxis is required. The third principle they mention, is the necessity that the field of study is aware of its own historicity and critically reflects on its own theories and praxis. In the fourth place, they highlight the need to engage in an explicit dialogue with other cultures on the issues and concepts of current significance. 'This is crucial for CDS when the global majority of disabled people are excluded from the dominant disability discourse' (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009, p.54).[2]

Meekosha and Shuttleworth make clear, that although regularly the meaning of disability is presumed to be self-evident, multiple understandings of disability exist. In *Introduction: Imagined Futures* Alison Kafer (2013) elaborates on different models of disability. The framework for dominant understandings of disability and disabled people is formed by the very closely aligned individual model and medical model of disability. Within these models atypical bodies and minds are framed as deviant, pathological, and defective. What characterizes the medical model is the positioning of disability as an exclusively medical problem and the conceptualization of such positioning as an objective fact. In both the individual and the medical model 'disability is cast as a problematic characteristic inherent in particular bodies and minds. Solving the problem of disability, then, means correcting, normalizing, or eliminating the pathological individual' (Kafer, 2013, p.5). The appropriate approach to disability within this framework is therefore medical treatment of the person and their condition.

Instead of casting disability as a natural, self-evident sign of pathology, disability can be seen as a product of social relations. The social model of disability argues for a conceptual distinction between "impairment" and "disability". Impairment refers to 'any physical or mental limitation, while disability signals the social exclusions based on, and social meanings attributed to, that impairment' (Kafer, 2013, p.7). Within the social model, next to medical interventions, an

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[1] Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) mention a number of factors that have influenced the re-evaluation that has led to the development of CDS. See *What's so 'critical' about critical disability studies?* for an elaboration on this.

[2] See again *What's so 'critical' about critical disability studies?* (2009) for a more detailed elaboration on the principles that are considered important in the current conceptualization of CDS.

appropriate approach to disability is to rearrange social processes and policies that constrict disabled people's lives.

The distinction between impairment and disability on which the social model relies, has undergone a number of critiques. According to Kafer both impairment and disability are social. She (2013, p.7) argues that 'people with impairments are disabled by their environments; or, to put it differently, impairments aren't disabling, social and architectural barriers are.' In the political/ relational model of disability the problem of disability (or impairment) 'no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being' (Kafer, 2013, p.6). Disability does not occur is isolation, it is experienced in and through relationships. Disability can thus only exist in relation to able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, such that "disabled" and "abled" form a constitutive binary. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, this hierarchical division of bodies and minds is used to 'legitimat[e] an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment' (quoted in Kafer, 2013, p.6). Kafer juxtaposes the medical model with the political one. In doing so, she is not suggesting that the medical model is not political. On the contrary, she argues for increased recognition of the political nature of a medical framing of disability. In *Genealogies* Margrit Shildrick (2009, p.42) argues in line with the political/relational framing of disability, that '[a]gainst the dominant standard the construction of physical difference as a failing, incomplete and inferior, marks disabled embodiment as deeply devalued, not so much for what it is, but for what it fails to be. Its status, value, and meaning are from the start relational, rather than having autonomous standing.' Donna Haraway (1991) in *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* even further problematizes the dichotomous relationship between ability/disability and normal/abnormal by arguing that the boundaries between organism and machine are blurred. 'There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic' (Haraway, 1991, p.178). The possibility to reconstitute our bodies, means that we could 'embrace new techno-logies with positive identities rather than feeling victims of inadequate functioning' (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009, p.60). Haraway's arguments are in line with the political/relational model of disability.


Collective affinities and claiming crip

The disability theory and politics that the scholars mentioned above develop, does not rely on a fixed definition of "disability" and "disabled person" but recognizes the parameters of both terms as

always open to debate. Kafer introduces the term "collective affinity" and the possibility of "claiming crip". She argues that if we move away from a medical/individual model of disability, identification with disability cannot be solely linked to a certain diagnosis. Disability can be seen less as a diagnostic category, and more as a collective affinity, in which "we" can play 'on identifications that have been attributed to individuals by their societies, and that have served to exclude them or subordinate them' (quoted in Kafer, 2013, p.11). In this sense, one could imagine a "we" that includes folks who identify as or with disabled people but do not have a disability themselves. Even people lacking not only diagnosis, but any symptoms of impairment, could identify with disability. As a non-disabled person, Kafer (2013, p.13) argues, one can claim crip as 'a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities, and wrestling with the political meanings and histories of such shifts.' Attention to questions about the histories and effects of disability claims and the different availability and viability of disability identification, distinguishes this kind of non-disabled claim to crip from the, what Kafer (2013, p.13) calls, 'well-intentioned but deeply ableist declaration that "we are *all* disabled".' This declaration obscures specificities of the lived experience of disabled bodies, conflating all experiences of physical, mental, or sensory limitation without regard to structural inequality or patterns of exclusion and discrimination. To claim crip critically, Kafer states, is to recognize the ethical, epistemic, and political responsibilities behind such a claim.


The affective turn[3]

As mentioned in the introduction of this essay, I consider the arts as an appropriate means to resist a binary way of thinking. An important reason for this argument, is the affective response the arts can bring about. After having elaborated on the concept of affect and it's wider, historical context, I will make the link to Speels Collectief and argue why the affective response related to the arts can be used as a strategy to overcome binary thinking.

In *The arena of affect: Marina Abramović and the Politics of Emotion* Louis van den Hengel (2018) states that the dualism between body and mind is central to the history of western thought. The concept of dualism was originated by René Descartes at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Descartes considers the mind as fundamentally separated from the body. According to Descartes the existence of the mind is more certain than the existence of material things, and therefore he attributes the greatest value to the mind. The appreciation of the mind over the body is

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[3] Part of this elaboration on affect I have worked out earlier in my essay *Tous Les Mêmes - Thinking through the body* (2019).

coded as a masculine principle. 'The philosophical dichotomy between mind and matter, between reason and passion, between culture and nature, therefore is in and of itself part of a larger social hierarchy of gender' (Van den Hengel, 2018, p.126). In the theory and practice of art criticism, the dualism between body and mind and the high appreciation for the latter has led to attempts 'to arrive at an objective, disembodied and 'correct' judgement of the value and meaning of works of art' (Van den Hengel, 2018, p.126). This approach served to conceal particular bodies, mostly the bodies of white, male art historians and critics, whose artistic preferences and aversions were all but neutral or objective. Since the eighties of the last century feminist thinkers came up with criticism of this semblance of objectivity and the dualism between body and mind. They argued for an epistemological revaluation of the affective or emotional tension of embodied experiences, and regarded thinking as an embodied practice in which reason and emotion come together in a non-hierarchical relationship. In doing so, these feminist thinkers paved the way for the 'affective turn'. The focus on affect that can be noticed within feminist theory today, can be viewed within this context.

Affect concerns an experience prior to or outside of consciousness, an experience that cannot be fully captured by the conventions of language. Van den Hengel (2018) states that affect is a pre-personal or impersonal passage of intensity, but, he argues, this does not mean that affect stands outside the social order. Affectivity relates precisely to the capacity of bodies to enter into new connections with other bodies and forces. It relates to the ability of bodies to affect and to be affected. In line with Van den Hengel, I would argue that the arts can make a unique contribution to our understanding of a complex theoretical concept such as affect. Art, like affect, could be regarded as embodying a specific mode of thinking. This mode of thinking is not based on concepts, but rather resonates with the physicality of the body.


Intermezzo

The doors open, the audience comes in.

Rumbling, stumbling, soft whispers.

Everyone finds a seat, sits down, is quiet now.

The lights in the room fade out. Darkness.

A voice-over:

*We are waiting.*

*To make time pass, we discover time.*

*We slide into a second. We fall into a crack. We step into a space. We jump into an opening.*

*We are waiting.*

Music fades in, slowly. Theater light comes on, suddenly.

Two actresses come up and move to the center of the stage.

One of them is Joanna, wearing a silver suit. The other one is me, wearing, although two sizes larger, the exact same suit. Joanna sits in her wheelchair, I stand on my two feet. Joanna starts moving. I copy her movements, as if there is an invisible mirror between us. She moves forward and backward, turns around with her chair, waves her arms. I, on my two feet, try to mirror the fluency of her turning. We all know Joanna's muscles sometimes uncontrollably contract, especially when she is tense. On stage, at this specific moment, her spasms create a beautiful contrast with her flowing movements. To me, at this specific moment, her spasms mean I have to work even harder to perfectly mirror Joanna.

Speels Collectief as a resistance to binary thinking

The arts have the ability to create affective resonances. As a collective, our aim is to create these resonances in the bodies of the audience and in the bodies of the performers themselves. Van den Hengel (2018, p.134) speaks about art as 'an embodiment of sensation that brings into being the possibility for genuine thought: a mode of thinking that remains open to the other and which welcomes the otherness of the other.' The otherness of disability is seen as disordering and therefore undesirable, because, as Shildrick (2009, p.58) puts it, 'disorder, ambiguity, and uncertainty have always been productive of anxiety in western culture.' Normativities and the binary system on which they rest are never fixed nor stable. However, because of the anxiety for disorder, in western culture much is being done to maintain the apparent stability of normative categories and to separate supposedly oppositional groups. I do believe Speels Collectief contributes to a challenge of normativities and the binary system related to these normativities, because every individual of the collective and every performance we make consciously welcomes the otherness of the other.

In *Feeling, Emotion, Affect* Eric Shouse (2005) explains that an affect is an experience of intensity, a moment of unformed and unstructured potential. Such a state, he argues, can be considered as an encounter between the affected body and the second, affecting body. Shouse (2005, p.3) argues that the importance of affect 'rests upon the fact that in many cases the message

consciously received may be of less import to the receiver of that message than his or her non-conscious affective resonance with the source of the message.' The ideological goal of Speels Collectief is to overcome binary thinking when it comes to dis/ableism. However, above I argued that the main aim of our collective is to create affective resonance. In our performances we do not attempt to address the cognition in which binary thinking takes place, we strive for an experience prior to or outside of consciousness. Therefore, I think the power of Speels Collectief lies not so much in the literal, ideological effects, but in our ability to create affective resonances independent of content or meaning.

Van den Hengel explores Gilles Deleuze's statement that thinking is an encounter. 'Real thought is not born from the individual intellect, nor does it derive from the accepted conventions of language. Rather, there is something in the world that forces us to think. This is […] an encounter with the unknown and the unfamiliar – with difference or otherness – which calls for an openness to the unpredictable and the new' (Van den Hengel, 2018, p.134). Deleuze makes a distinction between "objects of recognition" which reconfirm what we already know or think we know, and "objects of encounter" which cannot be understood through cognition and thus give rise to real thought. An object of encounter presents itself as a material rupture in our habitual ways of knowing, being and acting.  According to Van den Hengel (2018, p.134) an encounter is simply 'that which happens to us when someone or something touches us in unexpected ways, it is what happens when our soul is set in motion. An object of encounter, then, occurs first and foremost at the embodied level of affect: it is felt rather than recognised, and it is precisely the *sensation* of the unfamiliar that forces us to think.' The force of Speels Collectief resides in its functioning as an object of encounter. On stage, the mishmash of bodies and their variety of capabilities defy the boundaries of sameness and difference. As a collective, we spread impurity within the normative categories that still maintain within the arts.

The political/relational framework to theorize disability discussed earlier, recognizes the difficulty in determining who is included in the term "disabled". The model refuses any assumption that it refers to a discrete group of particular people with certain similar essential qualities. Speels Collectief positions "disability" as a set of practices and associations that can be criticized, contested, and transformed. We argue that disablism is implicated in relations of power and that those relations, their assumptions, and their effects are contestable and open to debate. As a collective, we identify as or with disabled people by acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities. I would argue that we, consciously and critically, could claim crip.

<u>Conclusion</u>

How societies divide "normal" and "abnormal" bodies is central to the production of what it means to be human in society. It determines who has the right to be part of society and to what extent. Speels Collectief critically questions who should have the right to be part of an artistic process and product, and who should not have that right. We argue that the dis/ableism binary that is presumed to be self-evident, should not be of any significance in answering this question. By creating affective resonance with our performances, we challenge essentializing and reductive assumptions about disability. In doing so, I believe we can contribute to an expansion of the understanding of disabled people's place in the world.

According to Shildrick (2009, p.58), disability reminds the majority of people of their own fragility. 'It is as though each one knows, but cannot acknowledge, that the disabled other is a difference within, rather than external to, the self.' Speels Collectief argues for the embrace of difference. We are all different, and we are all fragile. Maybe that should be regarded as our strength.

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