A person sitting at a table in front of a window

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Disability and…Aesthetics: Claire Cunningham and Joe Turnbull

Joe: Hello and welcome to the Disability And... Podcast by Graeae and Disability Arts Online. My name is Joe Turnbull, assistant editor of Disability Arts Online, and for this episode I'll be talking to Claire Cunningham about disability and aesthetics.

Joe: Claire is an internationally acclaimed Scottish performer and choreographer who is currently a factory artist with Tanzhaus NRW in Düsseldorf and associate artist at The Place, London. Claire's work embraces lived experiences of disability and the exploration of specific physicalities, including the use/misuse of her crutches. As such, she consciously rejects the traditional aesthetics and techniques of contemporary dance. I spoke to Claire shortly before the premiere of her new work, Thank You Very Much, at Manchester International Festival in July 2019.

Joe: Aesthetics is a word that I think if you work in the visual arts or in dance, you're probably quite familiar with, but I think to other people outside of those worlds, it can almost be one of those sort of art-wanky terms a little bit. I don't know if you feel that way?

Claire: Yeah, I was like, "Oh God, are you going to ask me what the word means?" Because I'm like, "Don't really know what the word means." But it is one of these words that we bandy about an awful lot in dance, in the arts, in culture, I think particularly. Maybe it's one of these words that we forget that we all probably mean very different things by, but we never take the time to even think, "What do you mean when you say aesthetics?" Like disabled, it's one of these words that we make a presumption that we're all talking about the same thing.

Joe: Absolutely.

Claire: It doesn't mean that I have a great answer for what I think it is, but yeah.

Joe: It's something to do with ... For me, it feels there is a relationship to something through a visual language generally.

Claire: I guess, yeah. It becomes manifested in visual and ...

Joe: Of course, you can have an auditory aesthetic.

Claire: Yeah. I think for me, I think quite often aesthetics become rooted in values and what are the things that we place value in. The things that people place value in define what they regard as aesthetically repellent or aesthetically ... What's the opposite? Desirable. Because I think quite often I ... Every time, every so often I return to this idea of actually ... I think what I'm trying in my own weird way to do is redefine what we place value in, that the vertical body is not the most valued. And the things that we haven't noticed that society has dictated, you know, women with long hair are more aesthetically ... or are more women than women with short hair. Very cheesy example, but there. This, that they're rooted in the things that we think are valuable.

Joe: I think you've hit it on the head there actually, it's about values, and I think there's a bit of a fallacy that that this ... a scientific element to aesthetics like the golden ratio and all these sorts of things. I think it's an absolute nonsense.

Claire: I think that-

Joe: It reflects values, you're right. What the society values.

Claire: I think then it becomes easily backed up by notions of science, by there being more people like this thing. It becomes about data, but then that just becomes ... Well, it's a self-perpetuating argument, you know?

Joe: Absolutely.

Claire: Because if this is what people like, if you tell people that that's what people like, then people think they like it, and it just ... More people then say that they like it, but they don't question what is it that you like about this. It's just that you've kind of been told or conditioned that this is what you should like; this is how things should be. Yeah, scope.

Joe: Do you think there's such a thing as a disability aesthetic? But does a disability aesthetic just mean [crosstalk 00:04:38].

Claire: I guess there are ways in which you could ... Yeah, I guess it's more about ... Is it more that it's about ... rather than it being something that's quantifiable, it's more about the pushback or the rejection of other ... of more normative bodied aesthetically valued things.

Joe: Yeah, [crosstalk 00:05:03] an essential nature of it.

Claire: I don't think there's one thing.

Joe: No.

Claire: Yeah, but I think, I think there are aesthetics that come from the lived experience of disability, but it's very ... but they are myriad. I think there can be, but I don't think it would ever be one thing or an easily quantifiable thing. But yeah, I guess I would say if you look at something like dance, then it's about ... Then a disability, if you qualify it, if you use the term like disability aesthetic, might be something that's questioning a ... this idea of line that I mentioned before. This idea with dance and bodies, that a conventional idea of line meaning straight lines, meaning straight limbs, quite often coming from these shows at Bali ... and verticality being the ... Yeah, maybe disability aesthetics challenges those ideas of that being the beautiful aesthetic or what's considered beautiful, that maybe that gets boring after a while.

Claire: And there's also like ... That has been also dramatically questioned by lots of non-disabled choreographers as well, but I think then there's still within ... retrospectively still within, we realized still quite a narrow boundary, or a narrow window of bodies, I guess, of ... that you might have choreographers come along and not make things that only use straight legs and straight, you know. But they're still using bodies that fall within a very specific, narrow demographic. Usually they are super thin, super young, probably still only 20 year olds. Often historically, if we're talking contemporary dance, mostly white. All of those things, so it's still ... Yeah, there's lots of that gradually getting challenged.

Joe: I mean as well as ... The aesthetics of access is a term that's often used. And I think there is a difference between a disability aesthetic and aesthetics of access. But that's quite interesting, this idea of the creative output being influenced actually by making something accessible generally to disabled audiences.

Claire: Yeah.

Joe: I suppose that difference is whether it's about audiences or whether it's about the artists, and although of course, if you're talking about an aesthetic to access, it's kind of feeding into the creative process. But the end point, I guess, is you're thinking more about the audiences when it's an aesthetics of access.

Claire: Yeah, I think so. Unless it's an access that's about how the performers themselves, you know, something that is embedded, because of the access needs of the performers themselves.

Joe: Is that something you've worked with previously and worked kind of integrating access elements as a way of influencing the work itself?

Claire: So far, it's probably from that side of it in terms of ... I think it mostly will manifest through aspects like time and energy and things like that. Like, the timing or the commitment of energy within a piece might be affected by the access needs of myself or a performer, from that point of view rather than ... As a performer who myself, I don't have access needs that require captioning, or [PSL 00:09:31] or ... I don't specifically need level access myself, but I would always ... but yeah, I would now ...

Claire: For many years, I was ensured that that was essential in terms of the making the work and access to the work, which leads lots of curators and programmers and things to presume that I need level access myself, and I tend not to argue with it because it's easier just to be like, "Yeah, okay." Then you're more likely to make sure the audience has it. If you're working with me having it, then [inaudible 00:10:06].

Joe: It's interesting. And you've worked quite a lot ... well, you've worked loads internationally. I'm just wondering do you get a sense, when you do work internationally, that the approach to aesthetics generally is wildly different in different countries. But also a response to putting a disability aesthetics, say, on stages varies massively, would you say?

Claire: Yeah. I mean there's still a lot of places that they've never seen a disabled artist on stage really, within certain institutions for sure. Or certain countries, I guess, where people are not really ... may not even have experienced disabled people except in very, very cliched sort of environments, whether in a hospital or begging or these sorts of things.

Claire: There's still places that I would perform that it's very much something that people have never encountered before. And then having to work at how to engage from that place and understand what the situation as well you can, when you're running maybe there for three or four days. Like, how to like to come into that and be as useful as you can relatively speaking, and I'm quite often having to ... Yeah, I think understand that the best I can do is do the best thing that I can, which is do the show, perform. Perform the work, rather than suddenly think that I can go out and work out how to solve somewhere that being disabled is still completely and utterly ... It's all very well for me to be like ...

Claire: Disability is part of my identity. It's part of my culture. It's a positive experience, but that doesn't really mean shit if you go somewhere where actually being disabled is horrendously difficult and is very hard to find a positive experience in it. So yeah, there's a whole sense of trying to also check all that privilege as much as you can when you go to these places and go, "Okay, where can I be useful where they're at right now," and not suddenly be like, "Oh yeah, any disabled person you can find can just make work like this," that it also kinds of go, "This isn't ..."

Claire: It's not some sort of talent sport thing, but whether you can sometimes just be a catalyst to shake people out of a very, very easy lazy argument that they've made of like, "Disabled people would never be capable of making the kind of work that we put on our main stage." And it's like, "Actually, let's just ..." You might not like this piece, but you cannot dispute that it's a well executed and professionally crafted piece of work whether you aesthetically like it or not. And sort of be hopefully part of clearing a bunch of that crap off the table for people and to go, "Okay, this takes decades."

Claire: You have to start now and you have to start at grass roots, and you have to give people access to some arts activities as a start, might be one thing. Or where the people in the room that are interested, who the people are interested in trying to do something here in this country or in this environment, and can you just make a space where they can come together three times a year? Yeah, it's that. Yeah, it's that start.

Joe: In every country, [inaudible 00:14:22] disability are a bit different. I think in France it's a bit different to the UK, but also they're bringing it back to aesthetics a little bit. I think their approach to aesthetics is also different. And I think there's a sense that I have heard, or a sort of anecdotal thing that I've heard, that some for some disabled artists who go to somewhere like France where they're very interested in an aesthetic sensibility ...

Claire: Absolutely.

Joe: ... or something that's different aesthetically. Then they kind of engage with it on a different level, and they got their ... The sort of French [inaudible 00:14:55] seems to be, "I don't care if it's disability-led art. I just care that it's art," and I think that it's something that's kind of pushing the boundary in some way.

Claire: Again, this thing of like ... when I'm touring in different places, trying to just be aware of what the context I'm going into is and being like ... In some place like ... In certain places and in certain countries in Europe, yes, that sort of perspective of like ... The road in to the programmers, to the curators, to the people who are heads of the cultural funding, et cetera, is by talking about the art, is by saying, "Is this thing a [inaudible 00:15:45]." Like, if you think you're cutting edge, if you think you're really a contemporary institution, then you should be challenging aesthetics. And actually, this is the new work that's challenging conventions of bodies and challenging conventions of capitalist relationships to how our bodies should function in the world. And you can go in in that way to them.

Claire: Quite often, I think there's things of like ... You get these interesting works in certain places coming out of some of those countries, some of those other countries in Europe where they do ... They simply engage with disability from a "this offers something different" aesthetic. This is questioning aesthetics. But they don't often engage politically, which is really ... It can be really difficult from another level.

Joe: Absolutely.

Claire: Like, they don't take responsibility for learning the politics, or it's like, "Oh, we've brought in this famous choreographer. They're going to make a piece with some disabled people and they're really brilliant, conceptual." And they make really brilliant conceptual work sometimes with disabled people, but the ... What I sometimes find really problematic is there's no engagement with the politics of life for these people.

Claire: I think, sometimes, maybe the problem is we are so much in the other direction in this country at times that we're so engaged with the politics, that maybe sometimes the art has not been pushed as far or has ... Yeah, actually yeah, but I'm not sure there's always been as much ambition or pushing out, really, to get away from ... Particularly if you look at dance, like getting away from the idea of the right to dance and the right to explore dance and the right to train, that it's also then perpetuating an aesthetic in dance that is completely and utterly informed from a non-disabled body.

Claire: All those training techniques, all your Cunningham technique, all your Limon, all your ... all Martha Graham. Yeah, they have useful things to teach, but they're all coming from a non-disabled body and an aesthetic, and a lot of the contemporary dance aesthetic much as it was kind of ... I'm not pretending to be very savvy about history of modern dance, but it was a rejection against [inaudible 00:18:42] aesthetics. But at the same time, it's kind of also then become the thing. It was-

Joe: Yeah, it stagnated [crosstalk 00:18:48].

Claire: It was pushing to question, it's become ... I jokingly always call it traditional contemporary dance because it's become traditional to me. For me it's traditional, "Oh, you mean traditional contemporary dance," you know, that absolutely, it's all pathways and ways of moving that are so informed by a non-disabled body: two legs, two arms, straight lines. Very conventional, if we're going to talk as well about values shaping aesthetics. Very conventional notions of relationship to athleticism and fitness and what that looks like and what that is, and every dance poster being somebody jumping. If it's not somebody getting a leg as high as they can go, at somebody leaping and jumping ... you know. And yeah, the artists that I'm more excited by are the ones that are challenging those conventional aesthetics of what dance should be than leaping and jumping and ... what's fast and what's line and ...

Joe: Do you think we've got a long way to go in pushing that, a different aesthetic? Do you think we're just starting? How far do you think we've [crosstalk 00:20:06].

Claire: I think in dance, yeah, I think there's more ... I think it's getting better, but I think the more that independent artists can be supported, I think to kind of keep pushing into that. I think then yeah, I would like to see more people being supported to kind of ... pushing to that better, you know?

Joe: Yeah, absolutely.

Claire: That's partly about, you know, also in a way that you said earlier, it's like ... [inaudible 00:20:38], you know. Much as I love, I'm not going to complain about being commissioned and supported, but it isn't just all funneled towards one or two people, that people then start to like, "Oh yeah, they're doing it." It's like actually we need to be spreading that opportunity around a lot more.

Joe: I can sense, but do you feel like a call of way of responsibility from the fact that you are often the name that's ... You're one of the few people who we would consider has an established career as a disabled artist in that scene. Certainly as a solo artist.

Claire: Yeah, absolutely.

Joe: [crosstalk 00:21:17] it's quite difficult as well though.

Claire: Yeah. I do feel a huge amount of responsibility, and I take the responsibility very seriously. That's also, I think, the thing that isn't always talked about, I think, beyond in sort of maybe disability community, is that responsibility and the weight of that and the work of that responsibility, that to different degrees, many of us are experiencing of ... that it's my job to make ...

Claire: My work is my job to make it the best I can so that it doesn't reflect badly on others, on other disabled makers or the ... But also that if I go places, then I'm expected to speak from that perspective, particularly if I go places where the opportunities for disabled artists are still developing. I'm expected to teach and teach workshops if I go ... and I'm not complaining about it, I take that responsibility, and I think I choose also to ... I choose to take it as well, but I think there's something maybe unacknowledged in the wider arts community about how much extra work that is for people, like I don't ... Yeah, and the responsibility of like, "Yeah, I do. I think ..."

Claire: Everything that I put on stage or every word that I say end up like ... I'm trying to make sure that I don't do anything that perpetuates the stereotypes and all the stuff that we've been trying to undo and unpick. Everything that I'm ... every moment on a stage, I'm trying to work out, "Is there any way that this ... Does this ... Is there any way this could be misread?" And I'm constantly having to ... Yeah, I take it really seriously and you can't always get it right, but I think ...

Claire: There was a really simple, simple moment, an example. I remember when Jess and I made the duet, which was about three years ago, Jess Curtis and I, and we were looking at the photos. We had published the photos done. There were some where I was jumping, because it was one of the moves that I ... It is part of my vocabulary, in the crutches, where these sorts of suspension leaps that I do with the crutches, and there was a few photos where I'm doing that, and then somewhere when I'm just sitting on Jesse's shoulder at one part. We were just sitting down on the ground.

Claire: We ended up choosing different images for different countries based on where the debate, or where it felt that the progress was at the time. So when we were premiering in the UK, and I remember getting really stressed and really upset, because actually I get very serious about images. Anything that goes out publicly, I get really quite anal about. I'm a bit of a control freak that way. I remember Jess was just like, "These are all great images. I would have ... Any of these are great." And I was really stressed and got quite ... I actually started crying because I got very upset looking at them going, "I don't want these bloody leaping photos. I don't want to ... I don't want to ..." because we were coming to Unlimited.

Claire: Actually, we were premiering at Unlimited, and I felt the responsibility of not putting out the supercrip image, of not the jumper, even though I had been the supercrip image of Unlimited. Two years before, it was me jumping [crosstalk 00:25:24]. But just also that things change, and I keep changing, and I keep going, "Oh I don't ..." I wouldn't say that now, or I wouldn't do that now, and I was then in a place where I was like ... But also, I was looking at the images ... Every image I had to look at, it was like, "What does this say about a disabled person? What does this say about women?" I had to look at every image and think about it from that perspective of like, "Okay, does Jess look more dominant than me in that image? Or am I more dominant? How does that read?"

Claire: And immediately Jess came back to me the next day and he was like, "It really never struck me, the amount that you're having ..." because he couldn't understand at the time quite why I was so upset by it and so stressed at that, but afterwards ... That's why I love working with Jess. He doesn't just ... it doesn't ... he thinks that he ... He takes it in and he processes it and he tries to understand what's going on, and to support it. But really, he was like, "Wow, yeah, I never realized that you're having to really do all that work."

Claire: Even just when a photograph goes out, or Twitter feed goes out, or an Instagram goes out, it's not flippant to me. I worry about those things, and partly I worry myself into then not doing it. But just that, I remember it stayed in my head. It's quite a vivid example of like ...

Joe: It's interesting because there's not that much of that jumping movement in that show either, really.

Claire: No. There's one scene.

Joe: It's not a huge part of it that you use it in that show.

Claire: It's one scene.

Joe: But I can see why all the promoters would want that image.

Claire: It's a dance piece.

Joe: Yeah.

Claire: They want that, and that's what they think dance is. It's jumping. It looks athletic. And so yeah, those things, like how do you not perpetuate ... And then when that image, the jumping, we used that image in Germany because it felt like ... Again, like where things were at, that was an image that would get more people in; it would encourage more people to come. And where they were at in the debate, we still needed that as their image to kind of just provoke a little bit more ... even though Berlin ... Actually, Berlin quite likes it. It's very sort of ... Or maybe we didn't use it. No, we used that ... Sorry, that's not true. We used the simple just sitting there photos for Berlin because they liked that. It was for America. We also had it in America because Jess is American and he had funding from there. The jumping image was for America.

Joe: Right, okay, that's really interesting [crosstalk 00:28:05] I can see the spectacle, if there ever there was one.

Claire: Yeah, well yeah, the modern dance aesthetic.

Joe: It's a bit of a double whammy for someone like you because you've got this 'responsibility' to be political as a disabled artist because it's like that's the expectation. And then there's also the responsibility of you being an established disabled artist, and it's like, "Okay, I've got to push the [inaudible 00:28:35] down," or whatever as well. So, it's really difficult. You can't just be an artist.

Claire: I have nothing to complain about in the sense that ... you know. I'm an artist that gets support to make ... I've been very fortunate to be able to pretty much always make what I wanted to make, and that's sadly a very privileged situation. Very few of the ... Pretty much all the artists I know, very few of them are in that position. I don't entirely know what it is that makes people keep taking a risk on me, but yeah. But then that comes with-

Joe: Is it just the responsibility [crosstalk 00:29:17].

Claire: People literally put money in the pot, then that's a big ... that become ... For me, when it's public money as well, that's a huge responsibility, I think. And I don't take it lightly. But I also am not going to sit here and complain about it because I know that I'm in an incredibly fortunate position where I have people.

Claire: I have a producer, and that's also a sort of self-perpetuating situation in that I have a producer, and I have a brilliant producer in Nadja Dias, and that because I'm fortunate to have her, she generates support for me. She cultivates ... like actually, "I want this person to know about your work." I think they are ... And so, not only do I have Luke, being able to have these sorts of dramaturgical, sort of long term, but I have Nadja that works from that perspective in terms of going, "Actually, I think you should have some sort of residency thing here and I'm going to find them. I'm going to make sure that these people become aware of you." I'm not having to do it all myself, which most of my colleagues, I'm very aware, are. So, there's also that, and she ... Her savvy and her support and her care of the work that I make also makes it possible to keep making work.

Joe: Do you think people have that sense of is there something ... not quintessential, but is there something that you could say is always there in a Claire Cunningham show that kind of runs through.

Claire: I'd like to think that I try to bring quite a level of honesty into a room, and I think quite often, with the exception of Give Me A Reason to Live, all the work I make usually has a thread of humor running through it. There's always usually some sort of humor in it, and quite dark humor. I think quite often that's often a bit about sort of puncturing moments and sort of being ... I think being willing to sort of acknowledge the emotion or the sentiment and puncture it, but not destroy it, I think, is something that I try to do. And so, I think hopefully those things are quite often things that cross.

Joe: In my opinion, you work across art forms for [inaudible 00:31:58] in a way that a lot of people in contemporary dance don't, so there's usually quite a strong narrative in your work where there often isn't [crosstalk 00:32:07] dance work. You seem to work with the music. You work often with the composer, [crosstalk 00:32:15] them to exist in music, for example. There's often, I would almost say, some relationship to live art in an element to some of your performances, and that's just from an outside perspective.

Claire: Yeah, I think certainly my relationship with time, I think, and it's somewhere in which maybe that relationship with live art cultivated, of like when I began to go and watch work that kind of falls under live art, beginning to really appreciate that challenging of conventional ways of working in time as well, and then beginning to understand ... Well, actually also meeting Carrie Sandahl and being introduced to the concept of crip time, and really embracing that and then going, "Oh yeah, actually ... Yeah, there's lived experience."

Claire: Disability changes our relationship to time, and again, how that comes back to values, like how do you ... how do you bring ... Like, I'm interested in how you bring that into a room. And I think that's something I'm interested in, particularly in disabled artists, how we bring our worlds on stage. That it's this thing of like we bring our relationship to time, to space, and to other people and objects we bring ... That's what we bring on stage. It doesn't stop at the wings. We don't get to the wings and then suddenly we can ... We don't look where we're going, or we can see where we didn't see. It's like that's the thing that I'm ...

Claire: That's what I think is really interesting to embrace in the work, and that's why I'm interested in working with disabled artists. It's like, how does those lived experiences of relationship to energy, and that we're not going to make something that's super fast and pumping for 50 minutes. It's like, "Pfft." I'm lucky if I can go for two and a half minutes in a thing remotely [inaudible 00:34:35]. But I don't have stamina like that, so I'm not going to make a work like that, but how do I bring an audience into something that might not move quickly but can still hold people.

Claire: And those things, I think that's where I get interested in how the lived experience of disability comes on stage, of bringing people who may be normative bodied people used to working in or seeing or processing the world at particular speeds, how those things changed or how the layout of a space might be different because of access. Or that I would create spaces where I navigate things on the ground because that's something that's very specific to my physicality and the way that I look at the world. So I shape the room because of that, and how ...

Claire: That's what excites me about disabled artists like ... and particularly coming into something like dance, like how that gets shaken up more, but it's not simply about how the body moves. It's about the time and the space around that body and how it engages with other bodies. That's where the choreography for me is, and the aesthetics that come from those lived experiences.

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