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/ KALEKOWANIE SZTUK PERFORMATYWNYCH

Claire Cunningham’s Care-ful Disability Aesthetic

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Claire Cunningham’s Care-ful Disability Aesthetic

The article explores selected works of Scottish disabled artist Claire Cunningham. It takes recourse to disability studies and new materialism in order to investigate major aspects of her idiosyncratic disability aesthetic. Cunningham’s works are strongly informed by her close care-ful queer relationship with her crutches, perceived as agential and animate more-than-human partners. These works also challenge the model of virtuosity and ablebodiedness, which has long dominated performing arts. Importantly, Cunningham’s disability aesthetic not only determines the shape of her choreographies but also all aspects of the creative process in which she redefines care in the context of disability, where it has traditionally been associated with patronizing and/or charitable activity. In fact, as Ojrzyńska argues, the notions of care, vulnerability, relationality, (inter)dependence, and connectedness are in many ways central to this aesthetic. Hence, by examining the critical and reformative potential of Cunningham’s works and creative process, the article sheds light on the way in which the artist undertakes a crip-queer world-making project to build much-needed artistic environments ‘where things are happening differently.’

Keywords: disability; theatre; Claire Cunningham; care; disability aesthetics

Introduction

Before I present the main point of this article, let me briefly digress on the play *PH*Reaks*, which opens the collection *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights* edited by Victoria Ann Lewis. It features a scene inspired by the late life of Henri Matisse, who after a surgery for abdominal cancer created his new works from the wheelchair and bed. In the final fourteen years of his life, he developed a new language of expression that was adjusted to the abilities and needs of his body-mind. He 'abandoned his paintbrushes in favour of scissors and embarked upon his artistic "second life"' (Sooke, 2014, p. 8), a period during which he 'often lived with his cut-outs for weeks or months on end, studying their visual rhythms, scrutinizing tiny details and instructing his assistants to move bits around until he was satisfied' (p. 70). The scene in question centres on Matisse and his overdiligent assistant Louis-Miachel. It tackles tensions that emerge in their relationship around the issues of agency and (in)dependence, as well as presenting the artist's new creative process on the stage. Matisse's impairment does not push him towards exploring and capitalizing on the tragic aspects of his illness but rather inspires him to make art that brings peace and comfort 'like a good armchair' (Baizley and Lewis, 2006, p. 100). In the play, he reflects upon his new creative method and speaks about the sensations that he experiences in the process: 'When I cut into a color, it has a certain effect on me. A certain blue enters my soul; a certain red affects my blood pressure and another color wakes me up. I do not cut the oranges and reds the same way I cut the greens and blues' (Baizley and Lewis, 2006, p. 99). Rather than presenting his conceptual work as an idealistic, disembodied, purely intellectual endeavour, he accentuates the materiality of the creative process. He also stresses the role that his

disability plays in finding new pathways towards an aesthetic that is rooted in cripistemology, i.e., his situated knowledge coming from first-hand experience of disability (cf. Johnson and McRuer, 2014), and serves as a source of new affects and sensations for the viewer.

The idea that disability serves as a factor that brings novelty into art and challenges its stagnated formulas and conventions is central to Tobin Siebers's concept of disability aesthetics. In his monograph, Siebers argues that disability has been a source of pioneering innovation in art and traces its groundbreaking influence in modernist artworks. In general, he argues that 'disability has a rich but hidden role in the history of art;' and yet, it 'is rarely recognized as such, even though it often serves as the very factor that establishes works as superior examples of aesthetic beauty' (Siebers, 2013, p. 4). While Siebers's research was largely limited to fine arts, a similar claim can be made about dance and the ways in which artists such as Bill Shannon, Lisa Bufano, Raimund Hoghe, Alice Sheppard, Claire Cunningham, Dergin Tokmak, and Rafał Urbacki, who use alternative kinaesthetic vocabularies, have been forging new paths and aesthetics in dance and performance.

In this article, I will focus on selected works of Scottish artist Claire Cunningham who self-identifies as disabled. Apart from several stage performances, these include a site-specific performance, a series of audio works, a photo series, and a performative lecture. I will explore Cunningham's unique care-ful disability aesthetic which manifest itself in three major aspects of her creative work: the artist's intimate queer/crip relationship with her crutches, the recognition and embracement of vulnerability, which breaks the illusion of flawless virtuosity and ablebodiedness, and the design of the creative process and performance. My

analyses will point to the centrality of the notion of care in her choreographies, as well as visual and aural art. Rather than a form of patronizing and/or charitable activity, care is understood here as a kind of empowering relationality that involves affection and responsibility for well-being. It entails attentiveness and responsiveness to oneself (one's needs and desires), others, and the environment and its more-than-human constituents which are endowed with various forms and degrees of animacy. By investigating different aspects of care in Cunningham's artistic practice, the article sheds light on its critical and creative potential and accentuates those generative elements of her care-ful aesthetic that find application and relevance far beyond disability dance and performance.

A Queer Crip More-Than-Human Partnership

Since the age of fourteen, Cunningham has been using a specific type of grey elbow crutches provided by the National Health Service. Throughout the years, she has not replaced them with new '"cooler" designs and colours now available' (Cunningham, 2019). Their relationship corresponds to what Julia Watts Belser, with whom Cunningham worked on the audio series titled *We Run Like Rivers*, calls 'queer animacy: a practice of living and loving across the human/nonhuman divide' (2016, p. 9), referring to her own and some other wheelers' bonds with their wheelchairs. For Cunningham, the crutches are more than markers of her atypical mobility. They are partners who have literally been shaping her body by affecting the muscle strength of its specific parts. The crutches also played an essential role in creating a whole new kinaesthetic vocabulary that is specific to her non-normative body-mind, its unique abilities, as well as its entanglement with the more-than-human world. Cunningham meticulously developed a set of movements and positions, which she then named and categorized (Cunningham, 2019).

Her aim was not much to create a system of movement that could be taught to others, but rather develop her own craftsmanship.

What helped Cunningham create her unique dance style, which is key to her distinct aesthetic, and more fully recognize the agency of the crutches was contact improvisation with its focus on physical interactions between bodies. It is through care-ful play and experimentation, physical touch, and spending time together that she built a close relationship with her assistive devices – a relationship based on trust, respect, and attachment. Cunningham (2019) mentions, for instance, that she tries to keep her crutches from falling on the ground. She also likes to think that she has had the same pair of crutches over the years even though the unconventional ways in which they are used necessitate frequent replacements.

The grey elbow crutches have been central to who Cunningham is and how she perceives and navigates her environment, and interacts with it. The artist comments on the influence they have had on her by saying: 'the crutches have queered my body over time' (Cunningham, 2019). In a sense, they have also cripped it. In fact, the semantic fields of the two verbs: 'to queer' and 'to crip' can be seen as significantly overlapping. As Carrie Sandahl argues, both terms are 'fluid and ever-changing, claimed by those whom it did not originally define' (2003, p. 27), and they share a 'radical stance toward concepts of normalcy; both argue adamantly against the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds (corporeal, mental, sexual, social, cultural, subcultural, etc.)' (p. 26). Thus, queering/cripping may be seen as generating new insights into the non-binary world of variety and difference, and alternative perspectives thereon.

In Cunningham's oeuvre, these new perspectives are most directly explored in her photo series titled *Ground Studies*. All works in the series focus on

various trodden surfaces which people with non-impaired mobility pay little attention to. Showing the artist's downward perspective, the photographs present her feet in comfortable-looking shoes and the lower section of her crutches against a variety terrain types and textures, such as warm-yellow autumn leaves, a wet sandy beach with dog paw prints, a naturally sculpted rock with tiny water pools, light-brown wooden boards or mottled grey concrete with two holes whose size corresponds to that of the crutch ferrules. Cunningham's non-normative kinetic vocabulary thus serves a source of attentiveness to the ground, which people with no motor impairments often stomp on carelessly, treating the land under their feet as a largely invisible conquered, domesticated, and colonized expanse. The idea of the crutches shaping her perception is also addressed in another series titled *Pinhole Photos*. Taken with an iPhone through a hole in Cunningham's crutch, the photos show small circular images against black background (Cunningham, 2019). The crutches thus serve a function similar to that of a telescope; they help notice things that seem distant or beyond 'normal' human perception.

Cripping and queering involve challenging and rethinking traditional binaries, be it male vs. female, healthy vs. ill, able-bodied vs. disabled, nature vs. culture, dead vs. alive, animate vs. inanimate, human vs. animal, self vs. the other, or subject vs. object, highlighting their arbitrariness. Many of these oppositions are undermined in Cunningham's artistic explorations of her personal relationship with the crutches. As regards the male/female binary, the sole fact of using such assistive devices has often been seen as rendering a human body-mind essentially genderless. Writing about female experiences of physical disability, Susan Lonsdale describes a woman who chose to use a wheelchair rather than crutches, as the former better corresponded with the traditional image of female dependency, helplessness,

and gracefulness, while the latter, combined with callipers, caused a 'distortion' to her body and rendered it 'unattractive' (1990, p. 4). Queer crip American writer Eli Clare extends this argument to both sides of the traditional gender divide. As he posits, 'A woman who walks with crutches does not walk like a "woman"; a man who uses a wheelchair and a ventilator does not move like a "man"' (Clare, 2015, p. 130). Crip body-minds are often relegated to a queer space between the gender binary. I see Cunningham's works as acts of exploring and inhabiting the queer/crip in-betweenness and contesting traditional images of femininity. While in her early work *Evolution* (2007), wearing a black tutu, she plays with an image of a crutched ballerina and pushes the boundaries of classical ballet, her next performance *Mobile* (2008)[1] abandons the gendered convention and transforms her body, accompanied by several crutches, into a series of aerial sculptures inspired by Alexander Calder's kinetic sculptures which Marcel Duchamp called 'mobiles.' In *Guide Gods* (2014), Cunningham finds unconventional ways to play with teacups made of china – fragile items that can be associated with conventional, aristocratic femininity as well as with her own fragile body-mind, which does not fit in such a model of womanhood (and nor does it strive to do so). In the more recent *Thank You Very Much!* (2019), she cross-dresses and, with three other performers, impersonates Elvis Presley.

At times, Cunningham's crutches have been called 'extensions of her body' (e.g., LaVigne, 2016) through which she can feel and explore the ground. This suggests cyborg-like transhuman merging which, when combined with still dominant popular discourses of disability, is all too often moulded into the popular narrative of a supercrip who overcomes their impairment. In her text 'The (Disabled) Artist Is Present,' whose title clearly alludes to Marina Abramović's famous 2010 performance, Cunningham comments on her early career in dance and mentions impressing spectators with her '"tricksy"

moves,' her whole performance being 'a bit like a circus act' (2018, p. 273). In more recent works, she focuses more on the ideas and choreographies coming from her experience of living with a disability, which nevertheless strongly resonate with her non-disabled audiences. One may also note a slight, yet significant change in Cunningham's presentation of her relationship with the crutches. The early, somewhat transhumanist self-image has been replaced with an idea of a 'queer relationship' (e.g. Cunningham, 2019; Cunningham, 2024) between agential subjects. Following Alison Kafer, it can be seen as an instance of 'queer crip kin-making' (2019, p. 7) which recognizes the agency and animacy of the partner/kin that has traditionally been seen as a lifeless and passive tool.

As Mel Y. Chen puts it in her book on animacies,

> The core sense of 'queer' refers, as might be expected, to exceptions to the conventional ordering of sex, reproduction, and intimacy, though it at times also refers to animacy's veering-away from dominant ontologies and the normativities they promulgate. That is, […] queering is immanent to animate transgressions, violating proper intimacies (including between humans and nonhuman things) (2012, p. 11).

Cunningham addressed the queerness of her relationship with the crutches and its affectionate and transgressive character already in the 2012 *Ménage à Trois*, devised together with Gail Sneddon. In the performance, the crutches are the protagonist's close companions that always play a part in her relationships with other humans. *Ménage à Trois* presents a lonely disabled woman (Cunningham) who crafts an ideal (read: non-disabled)

imaginary lover out of two crutches. The figment of her imagination then becomes embodied by a male dance partner (Christopher Owen). As Krista K. Miranda (2016) argues,

> Cunningham's prosthetics are both body and the hinge between bodies in love and sex. In *Ménage à Trois*, Cunningham addresses the paradox of her prosthetics, which both are and are not the body, simultaneously facilitating and impeding the interconnection of being bodies together in the world.

This is most conspicuous in the fragment of the voiceover monologue that opens the performance: 'Sometimes I feel like a machine. I forget I was made to touch skin, to feel heat, breath, to have someone's smile pressed against my neck. I wasn't made to click,' as well as in the scene in which Cunningham enters the stage in a spiked corset made of crutches which keeps the potential significant other at bay. As its title suggests, the performance presents a relationship with a crutch-user as polyamorous, queer, and difficult to navigate largely because of non-crutched humans' negative perceptions of disability and their interpretations of these assistive devices as distancing makers of otherness. For the protagonist, a romance with a perfect man seems to remain in the sphere of dreams and projections. The closest intimate relationship that she establishes is the one with her crutches as they 'are the ground beneath [her] hands, the arms that hold [her] up, that carry [her] softly but can never wrap around [her]' ('Menage a Trois,' 2012). Or, perhaps, the non-disabled ideal simply does not exist, as suggested by the image used in the trailer ('Menage a Trois,' 2012). It clearly alludes to Leonardo da Vinci's divinely proportional *Vitruvian Man*. Yet, the original central perfect male figure has been replaced with a

genderless structure made of crutches.

Yet another binary that Cunningham's entanglement with her crutches destabilizes is the one between the human and the animal. In her lecture with the telling title *4 Legs Good*, she discusses her queer more-than-human relationship and states: 'I feel often I'm actually a quadruped and not a biped. And there are times I really do think that having four legs is far, far better than two' (Cunningham, 2019). This idea also resonates in Cunningham's 2017 *Beyond the Breakwater*, in which she built a sculpture made of used crutches, resembling a skeleton of whale or some other sizeable sea creature. As an example of what I call ecorelational aesthetics (Ojrzyńska, 2023), the site-specific performance comments upon the relegation of disabled bodies from 'nature' and the human pollution of the seas, since the artist pulled out the crutches from fishing nets.[2] It also blurs the difference between organic life and inorganic 'dead' matter and suggests spectrality (gradability) and impermanence of the liveliness of all matter.

Ontologically, Cunningham attributes her crutches with animacy, understood as physical and affective liveliness and agency. Hence, her artistic practice seems to be grounded in the new materialist spectral idea of how animacy manifests itself in the world. It challenges hierarchies shaped by anthropocentrism and ableism, and based on valuations that are essentially (bio)political. In her analysis of the 2016 *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight* (perf. Claire Cunningham, Jess Curtis), Jana Melkumova-Reynolds posits that crutches, as used in the performance, activate 'a relational space; a space where both bodies and things emerge as […] ongoing processes of entanglement with other bodies and things, and must be thought of as constituting, and being constituted by, the webs of relations and intra-actions they are enmeshed in' (2024, p. 54). Thus, she contextualizes the

performance in Karen Barad's agential realism, according to which phenomena, as basic units of reality, come into being through intra-actions. As Barad further argues, 'the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming. The primary ontological units are not "things" but phenomena – dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations' (2003, p. 818).

Cunningham's work is founded upon her more-than-human entanglement with her crutches, which she sees as agents that deserve respect and care. In doing so, she veers away from normative hierarchies and moves towards a more democratic, horizontal vision of the world. This perspectival shift is made possible by the attentiveness that Cunningham owes to her crutches. While this should not be considered a universal virtue of all people with disabilities, the artist argues: 'I think there is often a higher level of attentiveness going on for individuals who are negotiating a different physical and sensory relationship with the world' (Cunningham, 2018, p. 290). As will be shown, this finds a reflection in the way her care-ful aesthetic rejects virtuosity and focuses as much on the creative process as on the final artistic product.

Against Virtuosity: Breaking the Illusion of Ablebodiedness

As Tobin Siebers notes, '[a]esthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies' (2013, p. 1). Consequently, aesthetic beauty has often been associated with pleasure. What has commonly been seen as a source of spectatorial pleasure in watching a dance performance is its virtuosity – 'those movements that extended beyond the capacity of the normal body' (Duffy, Atkinson, and Wood, 2019, p. 253) and are different

'from the quotidian' (p. 254). Following Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds, Duffy, Atkinson, and Wood add 'effortlessness' and 'grace, or flow' (Reason and Reynolds, 2010, p. 59) to the list of features defining virtuosity, only to expose the fakeness of the former: 'This illusion is created when the audience can appreciate the movement without being unduly distracted by the workings or *limitations* of the body' (Duffy, Atkinson, and Wood, 2019, p. 257, emphasis mine). Thus, disability seems essentially at odds with the notion of virtuosity unless it is embellished with the narrative of overcoming since, as Duffy, Atkinson, and Wood further argue, virtuosity tends to be attributed to disabled performers because of 'the very constraints posed by disability' (p. 254).

Even though she does not take recourse to the narrative of overcoming, Claire Cunningham has gained international recognition and in 2023 was given the position of Einstein Professor of 'Choreography, Dance and Disability Arts' at the Inter-University Centre for Dance (HZT) in Berlin. Importantly, her disability aesthetic is not limited to what her body can do, to its idiosyncratic virtuosity. This idea was central to her 2014 *Give Me a Reason to Live*,[3] created as part of the celebration of the five-hundredth anniversary of Hieronymus Bosch's death, in which five emerging choreographers were asked to respond to the Renaissance artist's oeuvre. The performance was envisaged as 'a study in the notion and provocation of empathy' and '[a] live memorial to the disabled victims of the Nazi Aktion T4 euthanasia program […] and the current disabled victims of recent "welfare reform" in the UK' ('*Give Me*…,' 2018). The Work Capability Assessment (WCA) was introduced in the UK in 2011 in order to reassess whether people on Employment and Support Allowance or Incapacity Benefits should still receive this form of support from the state or rather should be deemed capable of work and receive Jobseekers Allowance instead. At the time,

British tabloids repeatedly presented individuals claiming disability benefits as 'cheat[s], scrounger[s] and workshy,' turning them, as Emma Briant, Nick Watson, and Gregory Philo point out, into 'a new folk devil' (2013, p. 887). In August 2015, a report made by Department for Work & Pensions and entitled *Mortality Statistics: Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance* revealed that in the period between December 2011 and February 2014, a worryingly high number of people (2,380) died shortly after being found 'fit for work' by the WCA (2015, p. 8), which raised concerns in and outside the disability community in the UK.[4] One of the ways in which the WCA might have contributed to the untimely demise of so many people was the fact that disabled individuals, who throughout their lives had to prove their worth often by overcompensating for their impairment, were then asked to expose their weakness and frailty ('*Give Me*…,' 2018). Many found this task impossible to accomplish.

Give Me a Reason to Live hints at certain similarities and continuities between the moral/religious model of disability, the medical model, and the neoliberal/capitalist model which sees disability as an identity readily assumed by 'benefit scroungers.' All these models are to some extent linked to the negative perception of individuals with disabilities as a dispensable financial burden to society (as charity cases, those who need expensive medical treatment, and those who do not contribute to the growth of the capitalist market economy).

The moral/religious model is most conspicuous in allusions to Hieronymus Bosch's sketches of disabled beggars who were presented to Cunningham as figures related to sin and symbolizing greed (Cunningham, 2015b). In his article about the depictions of 'cripples' by Bosch (and his imitators), Erwin

Pokorny argues that these representations can be seen as illustrating the '[a]nti-beggar sentiment' which was closely connected with the moral/religious model of disability, i.e., 'the prevailing notion that spiritual qualities left their mark on the physical self, that an ugly body housed an equally unsavory soul' (2003, p. 293). Cunningham finds similar readings of a disabled body-mind as corrupted, greedy, and damaging to the 'healthy' tissue of the society in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries – in the Nazi extermination of psychiatric patients during the Second World War and the more recent capability assessment in the UK.

Give Me a Reason to Live presents a body-mind that is painfully human – weak and fatigued – as if literally burdened with the negative interpretations of its impairments. Many times in the performance, Cunningham bends her head and extends her arms in an ambiguous gesture of subjection and plea, which is suggestive of both penitence and begging for money. In other fragments, when she spreads her arms and crutches to the sides, her body resembles that of the crucified Christ. Similar visual allusions can be found in other fragments, for instance, when she puts one foot onto another, which resembles the positioning of the feet pierced with a single nail on the cross. In an interview, Cunningham admits to having been 'deeply affected by the painting "Christ Mocked" in the National Gallery' and further explains: '[w]e were told by the curator that it shows a shift in art to provoke empathy with Christ and his suffering as a human being, rather than his status as Son of God. The pain becomes more realistically depicted rather than glorified or stylised' (Cunningham, 2015a). The same can be said about the performance. *Give Me a Reason to Live* does not present a 'divine' dancing body that manifests superior physical strength and agility, but rather confronts the spectators with the performer's struggle and pain.

Cunningham's crutches are presented as essential assistive devices that prevent her from falling when she tests the limits of her body and its physical expression. On the one hand, they mark her body as disabled. On the other, they help her maintain the normative, vertical position. However hard she tries, Cunningham cannot keep her body upright for a long time. When seen through the prism of the moral model, this symbolically indicates the inevitability of the moral fall inscribed onto the disabled body.

This idea most strongly resonates in the first part of the performance when Cunningham often stretches her arms out, her wrists held in the grips of their crutches and the crutch ferrules resting on her feet. Cunningham stiffly moves backwards, having assumed a submissive bodily position. Her head is lowered, and her arms are stretched out in a gesture that makes her resemble a marionette, a penitent sinner, or a beggar asking for alms.

Her body gravitates towards the ground; it resists falling until in the middle of the performance the artist slides onto the floor. For a minute she lies motionless and breathes heavily. Another scene of vulnerability comes two minutes later when Cunningham for the first time directly confronts the audience. Having taken off her dark grey pants and top as well as her protective knee pads, she puts her crutches aside and stands still in front of the spectators, fully revealing her slightly atypical legs, the scene, as Cockburn (2015) suggests, 'echoing the frightened, stripped victims of horrific Nazi scientific experimentation.' Cunningham corrects her short off-white slip, at first fighting shy of any open ocular confrontation, but then slowly becoming more and more self-confident, as her eyes no longer avoid the audience's gaze. Standing still and breathing heavily, she faces the spectators for another six minutes until her body starts shaking. Mental discomfort gradually gives way to physical strain. This scene of exhaustion,

humiliation, and judgement reminds me of an image of a person who stands before a medical commission or God on the day of the Last Judgement. Here the viewers are the ones who assess Cunningham's body, which does not fit in the medical or artistic 'norm.' As she explains, 'dance is to me the most body fascist of all arts' and dominated by 'young, super-fit, non-disabled' bodies (Cunningham, 2015a). The performance thus resembles a physical examination in which it is the audience that is supposed to assess Cunningham's appearance and abilities, and decide whether she is worthy of living and entitled to perform on stage.

The above-mentioned scene seems central to the whole performance, as earlier Cunningham mostly moves with her back to the audience. When she finally turns towards them, her eyes are cast down, which communicates shame, embarrassment, and an unequal power relationship with the viewers. As Cicely Binford (2016) points out,

> [s]he is turning away from a connection with her audience, she avoids revealing herself fully. This makes the impact of her forthcoming reveal even more important and raw, almost defiant. Once she does face us, stripping down to pale undergarments, slowly raising her head to look at us eye to eye, she demands our respect and our empathy.

Cunningham reveals her vulnerability to boldly challenge virtuosity in a defiant and powerful act of resistance against society's expectations. She shows the high costs of overcompensation. At the same time, she calls for empathy and respect rather than objectifying pity.

The artist confronts not only the audience, but also her own internalized beliefs of what her body should be able to do. In *Give Me a Reason to Live*, she tests her limits by performing the same movement repeatedly or remaining in each position to the point of exhaustion. As Cunningham explains, the degenerative nature of her hip condition made her asks herself whether she 'has pushed [herself] as far as [she] could when [she] could' (2015b). Thus, the performance also illustrates the artist's own journey of coming to terms with the possibility of failing to realize her full potential, understood in an able-centric way as attaining a degree of virtuosity.

In this context, the final part of *Give me a Reason to Live* seems deeply ambiguous. Cunningham grips the handles of her crutches, raises her body above the ground, and for a few minutes struggles to remain in this position. She leans against the wall, at times perching on one of her assistive devices. As Binford (2016) notes, '[s]he is crucified, mounted like a moth on a pin, white and fluttering, unable to escape, singing its last dying song. She sings Bach's *Den Tod*,' which warns about the inevitability of death. On the one hand, this serves as a potent image of determination and perseverance. On the other, the image is suggestive of a body-mind that strives to remain upright so as not to fall and admit its weakness, a struggle shared by many people who chose to pass as non-disabled rather than revealing their impairments, which the capitalist logic sees as a disqualifying difference. In this way, the performance comments on systemic violence inflicted on non-normative body-minds and highlights their need for (self)care and all that it entails (comfort, acceptance, support, affection, as well as non-conformism and non-docility).

Another Cunningham's performance that deserves at least a brief mention in connection to challenging virtuosity and the illusion of ablebodiedness is

Thank You Very Much, inspired by Elvis tribute artists. Together with Tanja Erhart, Vicky Malin, and Jo Bannon,[5] the artist critically examines the cult of the King of Rock'n'roll – 'a piece of perfection:' a white, able-bodied cis-man. The performance speaks about how we all strive to reach a certain unattainable non-disabled gendered physical ideal. Yet, what people often fail to notice is that this ideal is in fact unreal. Thus, what Cunningham and her stage companions do is find cracks in the normative image of Elvis, which are conspicuous in: queer elements in his early performances, the disturbance that his performances caused in many people, and elements of crip style in the way he positioned and moved his body: 'broken lines of the body' that 'are not always straight' and 'moments of looking like he was limping' ('Elvis', 2018). As Douglas C. Baynton famously stated, 'Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it' (2001, p. 52). On close examination, disability is hardly absent from dance, performance art, and show business, even if, like in fine arts, its presence and role are rarely acknowledged. The non-standard elements are either erased or sublimated and moulded into normative virtuosic binary standards. The care-fully reclaimed components of queer/crip aesthetics are thus parts of queer/crip heritage that help re-envision the place and role of queerness and disability in arts, culture, and society.

The Business of Taking Care

The question of trying to look and move like another person, which is central to *Thank You Very Much*, strongly resonates with experience of many people with disabilities. These include frequently painful medical procedures that aim at normalizing their body-minds and striving to pass as 'normal.' As Siebers notes, people often need to pay 'the psychological and physical

price' (2008, p. 117) for passing as non-disabled since they 'internalize prejudices against disability, seeing their hidden identity as wrong, lacking, or shameful' (p. 118). Furthermore, 'passing often requires overcompensation that exacerbates already existing conditions' (p. 118). In the highly competitive capitalist milieu which values hyperproductive, hyperabled, hyperefficient body-minds, passing has long been closely related to human exploitation, also in performing arts, an issue recently addressed in Polish theatre by Justyna Lipko-Konieczna in her 2022 play *Co się stało z nogą Sarah Bernhardt?* (*What Happened to Sarah Bernhardt's Leg?*), inspired by the memoir of the famous eponymous late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French actress who acquired disability at the peak of her career. The play shows various forms of violence present in theatre and strongly resonates with recent debates around abuse in Polish acting schools and cultural institutions (cf., e.g., Niedurny, 2021, Kwaśniewska, 2022, and news articles about Krystian Lupa's recent unfinished work at La Comédie de Geneve). This shows a pressing need for developing non-violent ways of work oriented towards the needs of the audience and all individuals involved in the creative process without compromising the quality of the final product.

Some such methods have already been developed by artists who come from disability culture and use crip knowledge and expertise to foster care-ful attention to the environment, their own needs, and the needs of others. These methods are never final or complete as people often have conflicting, contradictory needs and desires that must be negotiated and that demand flexibility and creativity. They should rather be conceptualized as a horizon towards which we are invited to journey. This idea strongly informs Cunningham's 'choreographies of care' – a concept she has recently developed together with her collaborators, which marks her departure from

individual work towards collective creation. In *Thank You Very Much*, which was her first ensemble performance, Cunningham declares: 'We are not just taking care of business here but rather our business is about taking care,' underscoring the importance of care in their artistic practice. In March 2022, she posted two quotes on Twitter/X: one from Julia Watts Belser, who defines care as 'the practice of tending need and desire,' and thus reaches beyond safety and basic comfort towards pleasure and self-actualization, and another from performer mayfield brooks, who states:

> Care is listening deeply. Care is compassionate. Care is actively bearing witness. Care is self-care. Care is nurturing. Care is anti-capitalist. Care is rebellion. Care is truth. Care forgives. Care is life-giving and life affirming. Care is gentle. Care is change. Care is love.[6]

The so-understood care accentuates connectedness and (inter)dependence and is deeply rooted in attentiveness to the needs and desires of oneself and others as well as to one's environment and its animacies.

Cunningham's choreographies of care are based on five major pillars: communication as care, design as care, time as care, performance as care, and the complexity of care. These pillars form a mind map of areas which need care-ful attention in and beyond the creative process. As Cunningham has explained on a number of different occasions (2022a, 2023, 2024), the above-mentioned elements are central to her creative process and to building a relationship with the audience. Communication as care means, among other things, providing information, offering space to ask for accommodation, and giving a permission to act in non-standard ways. It is

important in recognizing each other's needs, opening opportunities, and setting boundaries, as well as creating a safe environment for experimentation and aesthetic experience. Design as care largely centres on the accessible design of the set, costumes, and the auditorium. Furthermore, care should have a key role in designing the work schedule in a way that meets the needs of the participants in the project, which is also linked to the question of time. The concept of time as care is indebted to the notion of crip time which, as Alison Kafer explains, 'rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, […] bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds' (2013, p. 27). It is not, however, limited to such considerations. Hence, Cunningham (2022b) asks: 'How can we acknowledge and respect the time our audience invests?.' Choreographies of care put a lot of emphasis on the shape of the creative process. Yet, Cunningham and her team also see the very performance as an opportunity to exercise selfcare and care towards others, including the audience. Finally, the complexity of care looks into potential problems and pitfalls related to care. It acknowledges the inevitable tensions that arise when catering for different people's needs.

The so-defined choreographies of care crip and queer conventions that shape our relationality and are central to our wellbeing. They help reinvent rules that govern audience behaviour so that they can better accommodate individual body-minds. Cunningham opens her performances with a direct address to the spectators in which she invites them to behave in non-normative ways that are adjusted to their needs. They can leave the room and return whenever they wish to, they can change their seat, or lie down, and, if need be, they can make noises. Cunningham produces a queer crip 'relational aesthetic,' to borrow a term from Nicolas Bourriaud, which 'tightens the space of relations' (2002, p. 6). Yet, unlike Bourriaud's concept,

it is not limited to interhuman relations but encompasses care-ful relationality with non-human agents and oneself. This includes attentiveness to our own needs from which we are often estranged when trying to fit in certain stringent roles, models, and norms. The artist thus steps into the role of an assistant, a facilitator who creates '[p]rocesses and spaces where things are happening differently' (Cunningham, 2023, p. 223). The same concerns the creative process. For Cunningham, it always involves stepping out of her comfort zone, yet only one step at a time in a care-ful way, at a crip pace, in a safe space where 'people can take risks and try things' (Cunningham, 2023, p. 226).

Conclusion

Care often evokes negative connotations for people with disabilities, as it has come to be understood as a form of support that reinforces inequality and dependency in relationships in which the person cared for is compelled into obedience and docility. As Cunningham (2024b) herself admits, 'I felt perhaps it was something that presumed a sort of passiveness, was a thing *done to*, or *for* disabled people rather than something that disabled people always had agency or control in. It also summoned up ideas of charitable or patronising relationships.' Historically speaking, this is one of the reasons why early Western disability studies and activism put so much pressure on self-determination, autonomy, and independence. It is only in most recent decades that a shift may be observed towards recognizing the value of various (inter)dependent forms of human and more-than-human relationality based on care. It has been taking place in tandem with the growth of feminist disability studies and, most recently, environmental disability studies. Claire Cunningham's works reflect and respond to this change. They rehabilitate care as a concept and artistic practice.

Cunningham’s care-ful disability aesthetic derives from her crip embodiment and queer bond with the crutches, perceived as more-than-human partners who have their own agency and animacy. Grounded in knowledge that comes from living as a non-standard body-mind, it is attentive to her own and other’s abilities, needs, and desires. It determines the shape of the performances and creative process, in which Cunningham builds environments where relationality can flourish in a queer and crip ways. The care-ful disability aesthetic reimagines dance by revealing the oppressive biopolitical dimension of virtuosity and developing a unique kinetic system of artistic expression. It challenges the dominant image of a vertical, bipedal, hyperabled performing body-mind, opening dance to diversity of forms and experiences. The focus of Cunningham’s care-ful disability aesthetic is as much on the product as on the process which needs to be designed so as to accommodate various body-minds and their differing kinetic potentialities and which fosters relationality instead of promoting individualism and the myth of self-sufficiency. Her aesthetic values connection over alienation, more-than-human partnership and kinship over independence, vulnerability over the pain and strain of passing as ‘normal.’

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Footnotes

1. Later, the two works were performed as a double bill entitled *ME*, which alludes to the formative process in which Cunningham developed her identity as an artist.
2. The sculpture could be considered an example of recycled art which has a sharp ironic edge to it, somewhat similar to Katarzyna Żeglicka's recent performance *Wildgrown* (2022). Żeglicka uses a large number of blister packs which will last longer than the bodies of people, like herself, who use medications sold in plastic unit-dose packaging on a daily basis to alleviate the pain caused by an illness or impairment. Similarly, the large number of crutches used in *Beyond the Breakwater* seems to allude to the fact that Cunningham handles her assistive devices in non-standard ways and thus has to replace them with new ones a few times a year, producing excessive amounts of waste.
3. I am grateful to Claire Cunningham and Sheena Khanna for sharing a recording of the performance and to Claire Cunningham and Vicky Wilson for the photos that illustrate this article.
4. Later, in 2017, the UN Report found 'reliable evidence' of 'grave or systematic violations of the rights of persons with disabilities' in the UK (Committee 2017, VII.E.113), which were exacerbated by the austerity measures introduced by the government over the years.
5. Earlier, one of the roles was played by Dan Daw. In the article, I am referring to the performance featuring Jo Bannon presented at Zamek Cultural Centre in Poznań in October 2023.
6. A wider selections of quotes (or 'provocations') on care selected by Claire Cunningham and her collaborators Bethany Wells und Luke Pell can be found at: https://tanzhaus-nrw.de/en/specials/topic/choreography-of-care/coc-6 [accessed: 27.08.2024].

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