

Penumbra

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF
CRITICAL AND CREATIVE INQUIRY

Issue 3, Spring 2016

Penumbra: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Critical and Creative Inquiry

www.unionpenumbra.org

Issue 3, Spring 2016

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The Art of Interdependence: Autonomy, Heteronomy, and Social Support in Shannon Jackson's Criticism of Contemporary Art Social Practices

Shannon Jackson's critical work in performance studies has led her to a vital connection between the professional "inter-dependence" exhibited by those who make theatrical productions successful and a similar ethic that drives much of the participatory social practice art that is on the rise in the visual artworld. *Post-studio* visual art practices that enlist non-artist participants in performance-oriented statements aimed at social change have emerged in earnest since the de-materialization experiments of the 1960s when visual art's autonomy and commodification, and its tendency to reinforce art's insular history, would be challenged by artists looking for alternatives to modernism. Near the beginning of *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Jackson asks, "[m]uch has been made recently of the 'social turn' in contemporary art...[but] what exactly does it mean? How do we know we are in the presence of 'social practice' in art?" (Jackson 11). As visual art has become increasingly conceptual over the twentieth century, and as much conceptual art is also political in its intent, such questions of art's nature are hardly unusual. However, Jackson's inclination as a critic interested in the social efficacy of participatory visual art practices tilts this question away from art's ontology in the direction of its efficacy in realizing social change.

This paper situates Jackson's interest in participatory art as a backdrop – a theatrical set, of sorts – for a discussion of the ways in which art and theater reveal the inherent

John Giordano holds a B.S. in Studio Art and Art History from Skidmore College, MFA in Painting from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies from the Union Institute & University. He has shown his artwork and community-based projects in galleries and museum across the country, and his projects have been funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Andy Warhol Foundation, among others. Giordano is a professor of practice of Interdisciplinary Arts at Merrimack College and founding co-editor of *Penumbra*.

sociality of human association beyond the context of the arts. The inherent interdependence Jackson sees as fundamental to collective art processes thus reflects the way people more generally rely on each other to form functioning communities. In contrast to arguments centered on whether art in a social vein qualifies as *art*, Jackson prefers to focus on participatory and other collaborative social practices that successfully reveal art to be constituted by active social structures operating behind the scenes of both art and everyday life. Jackson writes, “[b]y selecting sites that use performative structures to provoke reflection on larger systemic assemblages, my hope is to raise the stakes of aesthetic conviviality...[and] place social systems in the foreground of analysis despite the fact that they usually occupy the background of experience” (Jackson 6). Jackson thus understands that a connection between the highly visible convivial spirit that drives certain participatory visual art social practices is enmeshed with a less explicit system of social interdependence that nonetheless shapes those art practices, forms of social interdependence that operate not only in the highly orchestrated spaces of theater or art, but in the acknowledged and unacknowledged social systems that drive everyday life.

Jackson understands performance studies to offer necessary support for a theoretical frame for social practice visual art. This notion is particularly important to consider here because it serves as an embodiment of her broader claim that one entity needs another entity in order to flourish. Just as a theater production cannot be successful without the understanding that one agent extends their perspective in order to fill a gap in other agent’s view, in the context of institutions the field of performance studies offers a necessary extradisciplinary perspective that augments emerging participatory social practice visual art discourse. Epistemological and political problems emerge here because such a way of understanding human interaction is grounded in a claim that all agents are limited in what they can know, which in turn, affects how agents interact with others to form social configurations.

Foregrounding the idea that interdependence drives human association -- as this claim is contextualized in performance-oriented art -- is a compelling way to situate a more fundamental discussion of the relationship between the individual’s autonomy and the inevitable limits to that autonomy in regard to the individual’s dependence on the social group. Just as Jackson sees the individual to need the support of its wider social network, and just as performance studies serves an illuminating supporting mechanism for social practice art, I claim that the strength of Jackson’s claims can be bolstered if her ideas are brought into greater contact with feminist philosophy that functions at the intersection of epistemology and political thought. I contend that Iris Marion Young and Shannon Sullivan’s framing of situatedness in the context of inclusion politics and pragmatist transactional epistemology can further foreground the idea that social limitations are actually generative contingencies that drive social cooperation. In order to contextualize Jackson’s understanding that human limitations are generative, I look to

Young and Sullivan because their works intersect with each other in challenging a primary assumption of feminist standpoint theory that sees marginalization to engender privileged standpoints. Taken together, these two thinkers take a positive view of the notion of limited standpoints. Rather than rehearse an association between marginalization and privilege, all agents are understood to be necessarily dependent because they are limited in what they can fully know. In other words, feminist epistemology is helpful in strengthening Jackson's claim, but only if the notion that an agent's limited point of view is not seen as something that provides greater insight than other points of view. By questioning whether standpoint theory needs to jettison privileged points of view altogether, Jackson shows that the notion of human limitation understood through the critique of disability supports her claim that social systems of interdependence are incontestable across art and life. I make the claim that Iris Marion Young's conception of the value of limited standpoints in the process of developing stronger publics through deliberative democratic processes and Shannon Sullivan's pragmatist feminist epistemology both show how uncertainty and limitations bear out positively in social groups. Young and Sullivan help advance Jackson's interest in reframing disability as a vehicle for social interdependence when Jackson's claim for already existing systemic support is understood in a political-epistemological context. The intersection of disability studies and standpoint theory foreground an ethic of *care* circulating through art and wider social configurations.

THE INHERENT "PROSTHETICS" OF SOCIAL LIFE AND ART

Instead of solely promoting convivial exchange, Jackson insists that social practice art must promote interdependence among participants and situate that interdependence for the purpose of engaging groups of participants in critical actions that either bring attention to inequality or more directly ameliorate a social problem. The desire to develop a more critical form of participatory art that distinguishes rigorous forms of conviviality from projects that do little more than generate a party-like atmosphere among like-minded individuals stems from the propensity of some social practice art to reinforce the values of homogeneous communities rather than challenge social inequities. Jackson's contribution to social practice discourse centers on her insistence that conviviality can operate in effective social practice art projects as long as it accounts for "larger systemic assemblages" of interdependence that embody a necessary ethic of dependence understood as mutual, rather than charitable or celebratory -- lateral rather than top-down. This view rests on the claim that a critical understanding of such practices depends on the recognition that artistic production is only possible when individuals can depend on the support of those whose points of view or skill sets inevitably extend beyond those of the other associated social actors. Mechanisms such as *props*, *stage-hands*, *supporting actors* and *backdrops*, take on new meaning when they are applied beyond

culture of support that runs deep in theater and performance settings. Thus an ethic of interdependence intrinsic to the theatrical culture it draws from emerges for Jackson as the most accurate way to understand the nature of visual art social practices that attempt to address social concerns.

In a vein of thought provoked by a feminist political thinker such as Nancy Fraser, Jackson asks if the rhetoric of liberal self-governance elides the supporting mechanisms affecting even the most seemingly autonomous social actors. Questions of art's autonomy are thus enmeshed with epistemological problems centered on the individual's limitations because there is only so much any one individual can conceivably know about the social milieu in which they find themselves embedded. Some important problems inside the discourse of visual art social practice emerge as a result of Jackson's extradisciplinary (performance studies) view of the visual arts. Jackson asks if the performative turn in visual art demands that art's stubborn autonomy must give way to a more explicitly conceptualized sociality. In this view, theater cannot successfully function if its agents act autonomously. Where art discourse since the rise of modernity has associated artworks and their appreciation with a high degree of autonomy that frees artistic production from other value systems, Jackson emphasizes a contrary sentiment that has been expanding over the past century – art's heteronomous relation to other interwoven value systems upon which it both depends and offers support. Jackson thus takes a strong stand against a view of art that demands the sort of artistic-political autonomy that originated with enlightenment liberalism. Instead of understanding the political actor, or the artwork and its viewer, as atomized agents, Jackson aligns herself with a heteronomous conception of art that recognizes the contingency of interwoven standpoints in both social practice art and in social relations beyond art.

Because she understands such interdependence to stem from the fact that agents can only act as far as their experiential standpoints allow, Jackson borrows from feminist epistemology and the discourse of disability studies to make the claim that art and life are grounded by the notion of social “prosthetics,” meaning that supportive structures surround every individual, whether those individuals are perceived as lacking normative abilities. The precariousness resulting from human limitation serves as a primary impulse leading to social reliance, thus Jackson considers how contingent social practices in art can aim to reform or renew wider social institutions. Unlike performance fields, visual art has been slow to recognize the infrastructure supporting its artists, artists who are often elevated for their fierce independence and singular perspectives; invoking a feminist and disability perspective brings social support out of the shadows and into the primary action of art and life. There are important political and epistemological implications of Jackson's notion of systemic support. Contingency and situatedness are key features of “social assemblages” because she believes that art, like wider social experience, is inherently cooperative; people often want to find agreement even if they cannot claim to

know the world in the same way, and they want to address problems together within the social configurations they comprise.

A relationship between disability and the limitation of individual standpoints affirms for Jackson why the notion of support in art and life should be valued rather than dismissed as a sign of weak ethics or superficial political actions. Questions raised around the primacy of aesthetic autonomy destabilize the way autonomy normatively adheres to criticality in dominant art discourse. In contrast, aesthetic heteronomy is then not so much a deliberate move in art practice toward the melioration of social problems as much as it is an ever-present phenomenon of human social experience inside and outside the confines of art. Such an explication brings this discussion closer to the relevance Jackson's work has to rethinking the epistemological and political ground of more complex and critical social practices and the wider everyday world they refuse to separate themselves from. Jackson sees the relationship between the person perceived as disabled and their environment to further affirm her case for the inextricable heteronomy of art and life. In Jackson's sense, heteronomy is understood as the deep support systems within which individuals cannot avoid being enmeshed regardless of whether they perceive themselves as highly autonomous or not.

Drawing on the work of Vivian Sobchack, Jackson notes that the way the disabled person traverses her environment, "expose[s] the formal and systemic contingencies of environments that take certain embodiments for granted" (Jackson 5). Contingencies, therefore, are not limited to the disabled even if their ability to navigate the world is amplified by their dependence on social and technological "prostheses." In this view, so-called abled people not only take their abilities for granted, they also tend to miss the fact that supporting tools help them navigate the world as well. Jackson goes on to say, "[d]isability comes forward not only as a factor through which identities are 'othered' but more radically as an impulse to reckon with human contingency in 'the systemic whole'....[As] Sobchack reminds us, it can be tricky to expose systemic contingency precisely because enabling systems often go unregistered in the moment that we use them" (Ibid.). Jackson takes this point further by noting, "citizens need reminders that bodily capacity can be stopped short at any time" (Ibid). This is because "normative spatial motion disavows the fragile contingency of bodily ability" (Ibid. 6). Sobchack's own words help elucidate this point further:

As we go about our various projects in the world, in so far as we have learned to use them, we incorporate our prostheses and tools and—unless there's a function problem or they become of interest 'in themselves'—they are experienced as subordinate to our focus on our goals and projects; that is, they are generally the ground of our intentional movement and acts, not the figure. (Sobchack quoted in Jackson 6)

Heteronomy emerges as an intrinsic value of social practices (and perhaps all art) because even the most seemingly normative experiences are propped up by what is perceived to be a neutral environment but is nonetheless a support structure teeming with multiple vantage points that extend beyond the individual's own limitations. She writes,

The social world is in fact a large systemic prosthesis for the normative bodies its structures support. If, however, this social prosthesis is subordinate into our focus and goals, then it requires a break or deviation for us to remember that it is there...when everyday objects are not in reach...we register the contingency of the 'ground' that supports our everyday acts of self-figuration. (Jackson 6)

The experience of those deemed disabled thus helps others *see* the supporting ground that is ordinarily taken for granted. In other words, the limited perspective of the abled person is opened up in such a way that the normative status of the everyday life environment for that person is put into question. As Sobchack stresses, the very act of riding in a car makes life more fully navigable whether one's mobility is limited or not. Recognizing this dependence on supporting mechanisms thus destabilizes commonly held perceptions of "figure" and "ground" when the meaning of this relationship between person and environment shifts away from that of an autonomous individual who takes the supporting environment for granted to that of an always-fragile individual whose abilities are continually supported by surrounding tools. The aggregate of contingent people and the apparatuses that support them in the wider environment thus constitute "systemic assemblages." Perhaps the most important aspect of a social assemblage is the dependent connections one has with other people. Jackson thus claims that, "a necessary sphere is one where interdependence is not imagined in compromised terms or where a recognition of heteronomous personhood comes only after grudging acceptance." Instead, she proposes, "supporting acts that sustain and are sustained by social actors ... avow the relational systems on which a conception of freedom rests. It is to make a self from, not despite, contingency" (Ibid. 36).

A connection emerges here between the dependency any person has regardless of ability on the wider social assemblage it constitutes and is constituted by, and the notion that its contingent relationship to the wider environment perhaps drives an illusory desire for self-governance. Jackson's art criticism takes on political dimensions while raising the point that stubborn Western epistemological assumptions potentially thwart human freedom. The relevance of the move to see the art experience as an assemblage of artist, artwork, environment, and (often participating) art public, on contingent terms, is important here because this particular moment in the development of twentieth century

art emergence with concurrent feminist epistemologies.¹ Mid-century participatory art-forms that held everyday life in high regard may at first glance appear curious as a context that reflects the seismic political and epistemological recalibration that takes place in the twentieth century west, but as Jackson writes,

It is worth remarking that Alan Kaprow and fellow Happenings and Fluxus artists used the language of ‘assemblage’ to describe their unsettling of figure and ground, object and support, art and life. The perpetual pursuit of autonomy continues to animate a theory of democracy as well as a critical concept of aesthetics, the bounded referents for autonomous personhood and autonomous art become less stable and more permeable in contemporary critical imagining. (Ibid. 35)

Thus the move in art away from gallery objects and toward the collaborative and performative signals the unraveling of “bounded referents for autonomous personhood and autonomous art.” If “contemporary critical imagining” means giving up the hope for a rational, and thus, autonomous individual in favor of a socially constituted (interdependent) self, a self that operates not unlike a social artwork, Jackson wants to emphasize that this move also means that such imagining stands against “the discourses [that] raise autonomous personhood as a self-governing idea against the heteronomously contingent disabled citizen, undocumented migrant, or welfare mother” (Ibid 36).

Crucial to a transformed political and epistemological imaginary then is the recognition made by Nancy Fraser and other feminist critics² who, as Jackson explains,

argue that a discourse of dependency simultaneously allows certain citizens to imagine themselves as independent and “self-governing.” The perception of autonomy is once again achieved through a kind of disavowal, a disavowal of the tax breaks, military pensions, public schools, wifely labor, house-keep-

1 A relationship between the emergence of collective artworks and feminist epistemology also has to take into account the emergence of the notion of the socially constructed self in twentieth century philosophy and social thought. Subsequent adjacent thinking in philosophy and psychology follows Emil Durkheim’s understanding that society shapes the individual. See George Herbert Mead’s *Mind, Self and Society: From a Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*; the notion of the social self runs through John Dewey’s entire oeuvre. See especially, *Reconstruction in Philosophy, Democracy and Education*, as well as, *Knowing and the Known* with Arthur Bentley; Mikhail Bakhtin explores the concepts of the “dialogical imagination” and “heteroglossia” in his literary philosophy. See *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*; in developmental psychology, see Lev Vygotsky’s *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

2 For a comprehensive account of texts that cover the politics of unacknowledged support and social marginalization in Nancy Fraser, Linda Gordon, Wendy Brown, Gwendolyn Mink, Mimi Abramovitz and Theda Skocpol, see note 34 in Chapter 1 of Shannon Jackson’s *Social Works*.

ers, off-shoring, and capitalist alienation that allows certain persons to believe themselves to be unfettered and individually responsible for their private success. (Ibid.)

Thus, the disavowal of systemic support allows the seemingly self-governed person to perceive a sense of autonomy only because they push the supporting mechanisms they rely on into the background of life to the point that these mechanisms become imperceptible. Jackson's performance studies lens helps foreground that support in recognition of the "staged management" that allows theatrical productions to succeed. For example, actors may occupy the central point in the theatrical production, but the infrastructure that supports those actors is generally perceptible; few would contend that the actor has achieved success in regard to a performance individually. Yet the public perception of the visual arts has been slow to recognize the infrastructure supporting its artists. Contrary to this, it is not uncommon to perceive the success of the visual artist as individually obtained because the distance between the artist, artwork and audience are so pronounced. In theater, there is general consideration of the importance of dramaturges or stagehands; yet these kinds of vital points of view rarely enter into the common conception of the success of the visual art even when curators and dealers play a clear role in the development of the artist. Jackson urges a wider understanding that even the most prominent features of social (art) assemblages have limited abilities and limited points of view contributing to the success of the configuration. This recognition brings out some vital epistemological and political problems that can be worked through when social art assemblages are understood in the context of emergent epistemologies in the context of democratic processes.

FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY, DISABILITY AND SOCIAL ASSEMBLAGES

I want to now shift the focus of this discussion of contingent points of view and the constitution of social assemblages by connecting Jackson with Iris Marion Young and Shannon Sullivan – two thinkers with whom she shares common ground. All three address the topic of standpoint theory and its relationship to the perception of disability, yet Young and Sullivan proclaim more explicitly than Jackson that feminist epistemology has to renounce its claims for privileging the standpoints of the marginalized. Bringing such a perspective to the foreground advances Jackson's claim that purported disability opens up greater recognition of inherent support systems impacting all people, not because Sobchack's privilege reveals the limits of those who are assigned normative physical or mental status, but because the partiality of one perspective necessarily engages with other standpoints in order to engender a process of mutual social constitution.

Young and Jackson both identify feminist epistemology as a likely source for better understanding social configurations. Young's perspective comes out of political theory

aimed at the inclusion of marginal voices in democratic processes, a view that only partially intersects with Shannon Sullivan's contemporary feminist pragmatism. Both make a similar claim that feminist standpoint theory provides a logical frame for understanding and engendering more equal social configurations. Both focus attention not only on how these configurations come into existence, but also on the ways in which these social assemblages best operate when the distinction between individual standpoints is understood in relation to the interests of other standpoints and the wider environmental conditions that shape them. Importantly, both Sullivan and Jackson see limitations in the primary argument that has arisen from the standpoint theory originally proposed by such figures including Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, Nancy Hartsock and Patricia Hill Collins, limitations that need attention in order for standpoint theory to better articulate the generative potential of limited viewpoints.³

While the possibility of objective knowledge drives the feminist epistemological conversation that brought about an ethos of situated knowledge in western thought in conjunction with second-wave feminism, Young and Sullivan, as should become evident, are less concerned with questions of objectivity than the others. Young provides a good overview of the concerns of standpoint theorists when she notes the tension *and* potential of "situated knowledge" in the work of the primary contributors for feminist standpoint theory:

Writers such as Donna Haraway, Lorraine Code, Sandra Harding and Ismay Barwell have criticized what Haraway calls a 'god's eye' conception of the process of attaining reliable knowledge, which assumes that there is a standpoint transcending the particularities of history and social position from which the truth can be ascertained. They theorize instead what Haraway calls 'situated knowledges', which I interpret as a conception of objectivity as constructed from the partial and situated perspectives of differently positioned social actors. My argument applies to this feminist epistemology to the knowledge and judgment that ideally ought to result from inclusive democratic processes. (Young "Situated" 20-21)

Instead, when they put value on the notion of situated knowledges, they qualify that value on the grounds that political and epistemological concerns should be directed at

3 For more on feminist epistemology see Sandra Harding's *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives and The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* and Donna Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature and When Species Meet*; Nancy Hartsock's "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism"; Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.

the better functioning of social groups, the possibility of which depends on a multiplicity of lateral perspectives put into use in the process of forging equitable social associations.

Each takes a pragmatist approach to testing the limits of certain points of view and the truth claims advanced by such positions. As Young puts it, “[a]long the lines of the Deweyan understanding of democracy, the democratic process ideally should be a formal inquiry and the results a kind of knowledge” (Ibid. 21). Young goes on to explain, “individuals have particular knowledge that arises from experience in their social position, and those social positioning also influence the interests and assumptions they bring to inquiry. All positionings are partial with respect to the inquiry” (Ibid. 25). Sullivan’s own vantage point, one that is even more distinctly pragmatist than Young’s, comes out of a phenomenological and epistemological critique of identity as identity is manifested in the transactional body, a view that leads her to contextualize individual standpoints as part of the many “flourishing transactions between organic bodies in the world” (Sullivan 10). This advances Dewey’s *transactionalism* -- the post-epistemological notion that all entities, people included, of a wider environment are mutually entangled and co-constitutive. Normative epistemology would recognize these features of environment as separate entities, but a transactional epistemology see them to shape and define – that is, to co-constitute – each other. Young in a different but complimentary move attends to the relationship between democratic processes as a crucible for the development of positionality. Where Young focuses on the relationship between positionality and the development of thriving and just democratic processes for the purpose of inculcating a more inclusive social body, Sullivan takes this further to say that “[r]ejecting the notion that humans can attain a ‘God’s eye’ point of view does not mean, however, that one must accept judgmental relativism” (Ibid. 10). Where Harding and others locate feminist epistemology on questions of objectivity, Young and Sullivan are less inclined to believe questions of situated objectivity are particularly salient unless they make situated knowledges directly useful to democratic flourishing. They take the rejection of the “God’s eye” view as an opportunity to consider how situated knowledge impacts the way communities are formed, and how they can be made more just when the hope for objective truth outside the individual’s perspective is dropped.

Sullivan and Young thus contend that a step in this process requires the modification of a central assumption of standpoint theory. Where figures such as Harding, Hartssock and Collins promote the notion that marginal standpoints provide epistemological privilege to those marginalized by dominant groups, Young questions the usefulness of this notion when she writes:

By pointing out how the standpoint of those in less privileged positions can reveal otherwise unnoticed bias and partiality I do not mean to suggest, as have some standpoint theorists, that people in less advantaged social positions are

‘epistemologically privileged.’ They too are liable to bias and self-regard in overstating the nature of situations, misunderstanding their causes, or laying blame in the wrong places. (Young “Situated” 27)

Sullivan concurs on this point when she ponders how Harding can claim that, “there is no Archimedean point of absolute infallibility” (Sullivan 137), yet simultaneously stand by the claim that “[u]nlike men, whose view of the social relations of patriarchal society is distorted by their position as ‘master,’ women have a privileged perspective on reality because they are marginalized...thus their perspective can provide the starting point for accounts of knowledge that are undistorted by gender loyalties” (Ibid. 134). For both Young and Sullivan, all points of view come with limitations, and therefore, distortions are pervasive; nobody in particular is free from the potential of blind spots or bias. Therefore, flourishing as a social assemblage requires the lateralization of value placed on points of view. But rather than dismiss this lateralization as relativism, the ethic of care, that is, the desire to be cooperative, drives agents to recognize the limits of their own perspectives and thus enlist useful perspectives from associated (and co-constituted) others.

Putting situatedness in this way draws out the generative dynamics of collapsing the hierarchy of positionality. From her pragmatist perspective, Sullivan puts it in these terms: “[t]ruth can be achieved only through transaction with one’s physical, cultural, political and other environments because there is no self apart from the world in which it exists. Humans are not set apart from an independent reality as detached spectators, but are always already participants in a world that is in part shaped by them.” She goes on to say, from the point of view of the pragmatist conception of truth, “something becomes true when it encourages flourishing...when it promotes...the enlargement of life’s meaning and the growth of experience through enriched transactions with the world” (Ibid. 143). Yet the process of validating truth claims comes with the qualification that “obligates one to examine and update current truths if they no longer serve the interests and needs” (Ibid 145). Doing so, then, requires the participation of associated others who work across their differences.

Difference can be approached with an ethic of cooperation that values thoughtful communication. Along these lines, the process of examining and updating truth claims leads Young to recognize that

Only [by] pooling the situated knowledge of all social positions can positions produce such social knowledge” because “[s]peaking across difference in a context of public accountability often reduces mutual ignorance about one another’s situations, or misunderstandings of one another’s values, intentions and perceptions and gives everyone the enlarged thought necessary to come to more reasonable and fairer solutions to problems. (Young “Situated” 28)

Such accountability – in the form of sharing and processing situated knowledge – thus

serves as a form of social recalibration as long as those who lack (political) visibility are given the right to speak, and as long as others are committed to listening. Whether this “gives everyone the enlarged thought necessary” is hard to prove beyond the possibility of engendering inclusion if such values are put into practice because “narrative exchanges give reflective voice to situated experiences and help affinity groupings give an account of their own individual identities in relation to their social positioning and their affinities with others” (Young “Inclusion” 73). Narrative exchange emerges for Young as the primary vehicle for “pooling...situated knowledges” for the purpose of bringing justice to difference (Young “Inclusion” 117).

Returning to Jackson’s interest in disability as a position from which to better understand the way inherent systems of support, Sullivan’s transactional account of social groupings sharpens Jackson’s use of Vivian Sobchack’s account of disability. Jackson writes, “If normative spatial motion disavows the fragile contingency of bodily ability, then citizens need reminders that bodily capacity can be stopped short at any time.” This point is easily illustrated by the kind of confrontation to bodily capacity a broken elevator presents to the mobile person. Discourse on disability offers to defamiliarize the normative environment in order to “expose the formal and systemic contingencies of environments that take certain embodiments for granted” (Jackson 5). In turn, as Sullivan points out, the work of Susan Wendell shows:

that disability is ‘socially constructed,’ by which she means that ‘the biological and social are interactive in creating disability.’ According to Wendell, the biological and social are ‘interactive’ with respect to (dis)ability in two important senses. First, social factors ‘interact’ with bodies to create their health, illness, and levels of functioning. And second, social arrangements can make almost any biological condition that was not a disability into one by making that condition relevant to a social situation, and vice versa. (Sullivan 21)

For Jackson, Sobchack’s observations show why our (social) tools fail to be foregrounded in our experience unless a bodily challenge forces such (social) prostheses into consciousness. As Sobchack writes,

As we go about our various projects in the world, in so far as we have learned to use them, we incorporate our prostheses and tools and unless there’s a function problem or they become of interest ‘in themselves’ they are experienced as subordinate to our focus on our goals and projects; that is they are generally the ground of our intentional movement and acts, not the figure. (Sobchack quoted in Jackson 6)

Sullivan would interpret this point to mean that the *figure* of the person and the *ground* of the environment (or tool) should be taken on equal terms. While Jackson and Sob-

chack perhaps give greater attention to the “grounding” factors, Sullivan is inclined to bring caution to privileging one factor over the other. The point here is that the individual and the environment (including other people), shape each other, and therefore, should be understood laterally. Figure and ground need to be taken on more equal terms.

Jackson aims for a similar understanding when she foregrounds systemic support. As she puts it,

The social world is in fact a large systemic prosthesis for the normative bodies its structures support. If, however, this social prosthesis is subordinate into our focus and goals, then it requires a break or deviation for us to remember that it is there...When everyday objects are not in reach, we register the contingency of the ground that supports our everyday acts of self-figuration. (Jackson 6)

The interruption of a tool’s usefulness serves as the “break” that helps one see this support, which prompts recognition of Wendell’s point that “social arrangements can make almost any biological condition that was not a disability into one” (Wendell qtd. in Sullivan, 21). Young is helpful here in advancing Jackson’s claim for heteronomous systems of support operating across social configurations, a claim that aims to expose the fallacy of self-governance. She writes, [e]veryone comes to a political conflict with some biases, prejudices, blind spots, or stereotypes. Frequently in situations of political disagreement, one faction assumes they know what it is like for others” (Young, “Inclusion” 77). To restate, the perception of self-governance demands the omission that one’s perspective inherently limits their ability to see another’s standpoint to the point that the individual believes they can fully grasp the perspective of another. For Young, “[t]hrough narrative the outsiders may come to understand why the insiders value what they value and why they have the priorities they have” (Ibid. 75). On Sullivan’s terms, “story” or “narrative” is put in more phenomenological terms as a corporal and environmental transaction in which a false atomized self does not thwart the dependence of one’s point of view on other factors; the self is instead seen as committed to transacting with other points of view in order to overcome epistemological blind spots.

CONCLUSION

For Jackson, the discourse of ability serves to point out some vital problems with political and aesthetic autonomy, problems that foreground the limitations and opportunities of performance. Ability only becomes *dis*-ability when capability is constructed in terms of the perception of a generalized normative experience, thus inflating the rhetoric of dependence for those who do not meet normative criteria. Yet the critique of disability also reveals that even the perception of normative experience (the ability to navigate the physical and social world without support), actually requires inherent support structures that can be illuminated when the rhetoric of disability is applied back to purported nor-

mative capacities. Tools of everyday living – cars, computers, and *associated others* – can be made more opaque in regard to the way normative experience depends on such “prostheses.” Thus social practice artworks according to Jackson assume that dependence on the skills of others is necessary to the production’s success. Rather than disregard or designate support as the background labor that silently assists in the production of the traditional autonomous artwork, now the notion of the social prosthetic is foregrounded as inherent to any successful and vibrant social production or configuration.

In this account of art and the politics of dependence, personal success is only possible when others support the individual in ways that allow them to flourish. Mobility, a successful theatrical production, a social practice art project, or a thriving social configuration cannot come about unless the extent of an individual’s limits are enmeshed with other standpoints, which in turn, have their own limits. Standpoint theory, as it is extruded through Jackson’s performance perspective, Young’s politics of inclusion, and Sullivan’s epistemological/phenomenological transactionalism, is made to suggest that the acceptance of the limits of one’s standpoint needs to be “supported” by other standpoints in relation to the “staging” or “background” of social groupings and institutions.

Where these values operate in visual art social practices can be made more explicit is when such practices are put in conversation with the “staged management” of theater and its wider performance genres in order to attend to the “run crews” who make social life possible. Jackson echoes Sullivan and Young’s observations when she eschews the superiority of the performance studies lens in order to recognize its limits, and instead views it as a lateral tool for sharpening the systemic support structures of visual art. She nonetheless puts that performance perspective into narrative transaction with the values and disciplinary concerns of art. By sidelining claims for superior points of view, standpoint theory as Jackson, Sullivan and Young understand it, acknowledges the non-hierarchical nature of all standpoints. Yet as Young and Sullivan attest, such a move should not lead to accusations of a relativistic conception of truth because the transactional and narrative processes strive for parity that can only come about by recognizing the outer edges of a singular standpoint under *continual revision*. On this view, an ethical commitment to caring for others through cooperative communication aims at democratic exchange.

Collaborative and participatory visual art practices that strive for reordered social reconfigurations are now understood as dynamic assemblages of systemic support that inveigh against atomized accounts of political and aesthetic autonomy. The notion of self-governance as something apart from a process and ethic of social support appears less tenable when it is confronted by the intersecting claims of performance theory, visual art social practices, and the politics and epistemological problems of bodies and their environments. Critical conviviality as a feature of social practices is made sufficiently rigorous, as Jackson sets out to do, because the concept is freed from consensus building

and is thus aligned with a more critical transactional process that requires “reflective voice to situated experiences” and a commitment to listening to others without assuming that one can fully grasp one’s own or the standpoints of others.

Long-term conversations grounded in the limits and possibilities of individual, contingent perspectives offer political discourse a direction for imagining the ethos of political and ethical deliberations beyond the “staging” of art – transactions, deliberations, conversations – that can only come about in a culture of *acknowledged* mutual support. Doing so requires recognition of the ways in which standpoints result in both opportunities and limitations. Recognizing that social action requires the understanding that individuals are able to function as a result of undergirding support systems casts doubt on lingering conceptions of self-governance that more and more appear to rehearse hackneyed ideals of liberalism. The critical perspective of feminist standpoint theory, as it intersects with disability perspectives and feminist pragmatism, give a context for robust social practices in art that point to a generative way to think about broader political life as a form of mutual interdependence.

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