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THE MAD WOMEN PROJECT: DISABILITY AND THE AESTHETICS OF HUMAN DISQUALIFICATION

Disqualification as a symbolic process removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death.[1] That people may be subjected to violence if they do not achieve a prescribed level of quality is an injustice rarely questioned. In fact, even though we may redefine what we mean by quality people, for example as historical minorities are allowed to move into their ranks, we have not yet ceased to believe that nonquality human beings do exist and that they should be treated differently from people of quality. This belief supports the most serious and characteristic injustices of our day. Disqualification at this moment in time justifies discrimination, servitude, imprisonment, involuntary institutionalization, rape and sexual trafficking, euthanasia, human and civil rights violations, military intervention, compulsory sterilization, police actions, assisted suicide, capital punishment, and murder.

It is my contention that disqualification finds support in the way that bodies appear and in their specific appearances—that is, disqualification is justified through the accusation of mental or physical inferiority based on aesthetic principles. When a person encounters another person, what really happens is a meeting between two bodies at the level of appearance and its attendant emotions. Bodily feelings and sense perceptions are the substrata on which aesthetic responses are based, and aesthetics as a human science calculates how some bodies make other bodies feel. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to study feelings in the heat of everyday encounters between bodies. These encounters show our responses at their most mundane and raw—raw precisely because they occur in the most mundane circumstances, when feelings of attraction and repulsion, of acceptance and rejection, surge forth with embarrassing immediacy, fierceness, and clarity. These are the feelings that we negotiate everyday when we turn a corner and find ourselves face to face with another body, and yet it is almost impossible to discuss these feelings, precisely because they are at once familiar and alien—familiar to our experience of being human, alien to the standards with which we judge our own humanity.

But things are different in the world of art. Here not only may we discuss the feelings that other bodies inspire in us, but we are encouraged to do it as part of the experience of art. The human appreciation of art has given birth to a culture of feeling, a long tradition of aesthetic response, a complicated history of theories and

[1] These opening paragraphs take their impetus, form, and argument from my *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010), chap. 2.

vocabularies about art—all of which are determined to judge how and why art objects make people feel. And yet rarely, if ever, have the theories developed in the art world been applied in the social world to the aesthetics of human disqualification. There seems to exist no interest in understanding what our responses to art objects might tell us about our responses to other people and the tendency to disqualify some of these people as inferior based on how they make us feel. I wish to claim that art works, because they so intensely focus our attention on feelings, are unmatched as resources for contemplating the ways in which disqualification relates to aesthetic principles in everyday life.[2]

Consider as an example the opening photograph in the *Mad Women Project* (*Mich'innyŏn Pŭrojektŭ*) by Park Young-Sook.

Figure 1
Park Young-Sook,
The Mad Women Project,
Project 1, Photograph 1
(120cm x 150cm, C-print) 1999

The Project consists of eight series of photographs, taken between 1999 and 2005, that capture women with mental disabilities (fig. 1). Park is a South Korean artist, activist, and feminist. Here is her description of the origins of the photograph:

[2] A small caution to keep in mind: using aesthetic objects to exemplify and clarify disqualification inhibits the understanding of their status in and relation to the history of art. For a broad consideration of the aesthetics of human disqualification in the context of the history of art, see my *Disability Aesthetics,* again chapter two. Most obvious here is the example of Cindy Sherman (see n.5).

> I made a visit to a mental hospital. The male director was giving me a tour, and while walking toward a certain ward, we saw a woman standing alone in the hallway. She had something wrapped around her arm, and she was holding it so tightly to her. . . . She had been married, but things didn't go well with her new husband, and they ended up in court to get divorced. The issue was the custody of their child. It was decided that custody could not be granted to a woman without a profession. . . . After that, she could think of nothing but wanting to see her child, and it just drove her over the edge. . . . This is where my 'Mad Women Project' started. (83-85)

I promise to provide more information about Park's project in a moment, but first I want to ask some questions. If madness appears, what is its appearance? Why do we think that this woman is mad? How is her madness made known to us? Why do we think of madness as a disqualifier, a feature that marks some people as inferior to others? In short, how does this photograph involve us in the aesthetics of human disqualification?

My questions are difficult in themselves, but they are made more difficult by a recent trend in disability studies. Disability studies as a field increasingly considers physical and mental disability as separate categories—and there is every reason to do it, if we wish to overcome the historical neglect of the mentally disabled found in almost all categories of analysis, including that of disability studies. The isolation of mental disability from physical disability allows a stronger focus on the specific desires and identity formations of people with mental disabilities, allowing for the fact that their perspectives and problems are unique and too little represented. However, with respect to aesthetic disqualification, the emphasis on appearance, on how mental disability appears, despite the idea that mental disability is not equivalent to physical disability, is made necessary by the fact that discrimination actively distorts the meaning of human appearance, gestures, and movements—those visible signs by which human beings appear to one another in the world. Because mental disability is known and vilified through appearance, we need to focus on it as the means through which disqualification does its insidious work.

The medical approach to disability provides the standard measure by which appearance leads to disqualification because medical doctors presume to read the symptoms of disease and disability on the surface of the body. In this doctors are not unique but practitioners, as we all are, of aesthetic disqualification. Consider again the first photograph in the *Mad Women Project*. What are the visible signs of madness, the symptoms, marking the young mother in this photograph? She stands off to the side, near the right-hand frame, isolated as the sole and lonely subject of the photograph. Her position confirms the belief that madness is a solitary and anti-social condition. She is disheveled: her light cotton skirt contrasts with the top of heavier fabric. Her shoes are not on her feet entirely. She stands on them rather than wearing them. The woman seems either unaware of social codes of appearance or unable to follow them. Finally, she has dark shadows under her eyes, and she clings to the pillow in a gesture that is both protective and needy. Her body reveals her suffering, providing the outward symptoms of internal, psychological turmoil. Her appearance, composed of these many gestures and characteristics, stirs emotions in beholders, and it is easy to name some of these emotions: pity, sadness, distrust,

perhaps rejection, and feelings of charity. This emotional response disqualifies the young mother, using aesthetic judgments to establish her in an inferior position relative to the beholders making the judgments about her.

None of the woman's postures, gestures, or characteristics is itself indicative of psychopathology, but in the realm of appearance they add up to an image that puts into question the mental and emotional stability of the young woman. Similarly, none of the disqualifying markers presented by this photograph should justify that the woman be marginalized, ostracized, or thought inferior. And yet the disqualifying markers do both: they at once place in doubt the quality of her humanity and justify her inferior treatment. Visible signs provide the markers of disqualification that determine how some people relate to and treat other people. Disqualification binds together ideas about physical appearances and emotional states, creating reactions to human difference incommensurate with its real nature. Disqualification makes a mountain out of a mole hill, justifying violence and unequal treatment based on little proof. Moreover, no one ever questions the belief that inferior human beings do exist. There is always the possibility of proving the inferiority of any given human being on the basis of mental and physical characteristics.[3] Such is the depth of our belief in the reality of inferiority.

Disability studies attacks historical patterns of disqualification by insisting that the belief in biological inferiority lurking at the bottom of all forms of unequal treatment is based on misunderstandings of human ability and appearance. The core belief on which disability studies is founded as a discipline is the claim that disability is not an individual defect lodged in a person but the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment. Disability studies does not treat disease or disability, hoping to cure or avoid them; it studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being. Disability does not spring from inbuilt or biological inferiority but from the failure to design a social and built environment open and accessible to people of all variations.

The disqualification of disabled people as inferior, then, is a violation of human rights perpetrated on one group by another. But this injustice is not necessarily due to malicious intentions. Rather, the violence is often based on and justified by primitive and irrational feelings—a tendency that returns us once more to the question of aesthetic disqualification. Disability is wrongly conceived as connected to disqualifying appearances that summon emotions of fear, horror, and disgust, and these emotions validate the idea that disabled people should be excluded from society because they are inferior, dangerous to the general health and welfare of society, or represent undue economic burdens for other people. That these feelings of

[3] The point is to read this series of photographs by Park not as examples of cultural differences, where the nonwest may serve as a normalizing block-term held against western ideology, but as examples where the aesthetics of human disqualification may summon any mental or physical characteristic to prove the inferiority of a given human being. See Eunjung Kim, "Contesting Cultural Rehabilitation: Disability, Nation, and Gender in Korea." (Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Illinois at Chicago, 2007).

antipathy seem involuntary further suggests that nature itself justifies violence against disabled people. Given the belief in so-called natural impulses, it is no accident that people with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged and persecuted groups in the human population.

Here is another photograph from the first series of the *Mad Women Project.*

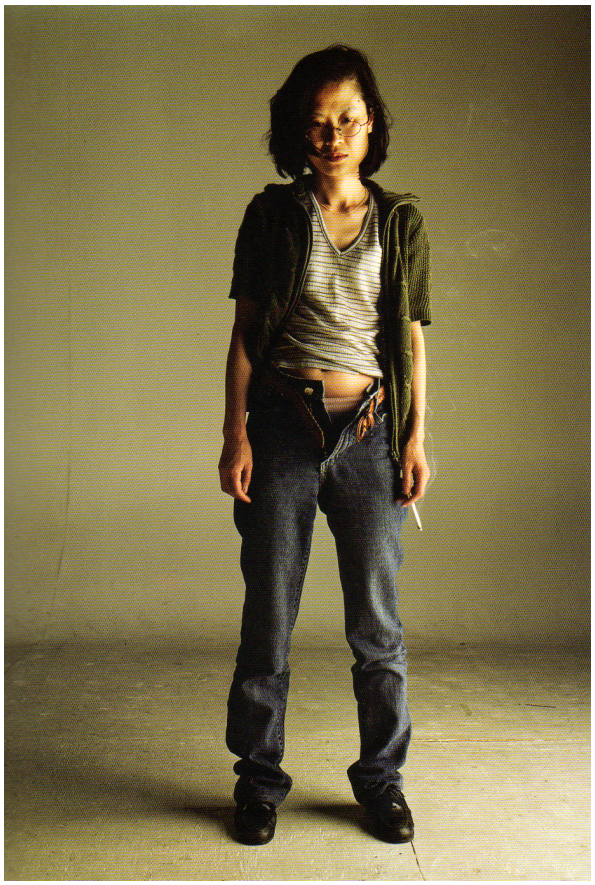

Figure 2
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project
Project 1, Photograph 3
(120cm x 150cm, C-print) 1999

It reinforces some of the ideas taken from our examination of the initial photograph in the series. First, it stresses again the solitary nature of madness (fig. 2). The woman occupies centrally the frame of the photograph as her own exclusive space, but the effect is less a representation of autonomy than a representation akin to the medical specimen. She does not obey obvious social codes. Her dress is disheveled, and her pants are unbuttoned, exhibiting her inappropriately to beholders. She strikes one as incommunicative and isolated. Her legs are apart, and her feet are rooted in place, giving her the appearance of being frozen in thought or unthought. She drops her arms to her sides in a sign of resignation, a single cigarette dangling from her left hand. Her gaze is downcast, her face, expressionless. She seems unhappy at best, depressed at worst. The woman's appearance compels us to question her mental state, making us wonder about her sanity and whether it would be safe to approach her. Furthermore, her emotional state contaminates the feelings of beholders. They feel melancholy as well, at once pitying and rejecting the object of their gaze.

So far we have been analyzing possible aesthetic responses to a small selection of bodies. Not all bodies, however, are considered equal according to aesthetic response. Beautiful bodies summon feelings of pleasure, while other bodies, called ugly, summon feelings of horror and repulsion. Disabled bodies number most frequently among those bodies thought ugly, and the feelings that they inspire reverberate with fear, disgust, and pity. Nevertheless, the aesthetics of human disqualification concern not only how some bodies make other bodies feel but also how some bodies express feelings about other bodies. Bodies that inspire pain are more easily disqualified than those that inspire pleasure, but we also pass aesthetic judgments about the degree to which bodies account for and express their own feelings of pleasure and pain. Aesthetic judgment is not only about feelings; aesthetic judgment is also about feelings about feelings.

For example, some bodies are capable of expressing their feeling about other bodies, while others cannot express feeling. Those bodies able to express feelings hold superior positions in the social order, exercising great power, authority, and opinion over other bodies. The body thought capable of expressing its feelings is believed automatically to express a superior quality of feeling, and the greater the quality of feeling expressed, the more superior supposedly is the person inhabiting the body. "Sentience," or the quality of emotional response, determines the superiority or inferiority of bodies according to many tried and true arguments in the philosophical tradition. A superior body is apparently most capable of expressing its feelings of pleasure and pain. It demonstrates a refined sense of emotion, characterized by subtle gradations and degrees of expression. The sensibilities of this superior body define the best properties of human beings as such, and the words and objects made by this superior body are recognized, prized, and preserved as the highest exemplars of human creativity. This superior body also exercises power over bodies that have an inferior sentience or quality of emotional response. Bodies with lesser quality of emotional response may be enslaved. It is easier, if you have sentience, to justify the killing of bodies without sentience, either for food or to protect them from suffering that they cannot withstand.

If it is not obvious, the point that I am making is that the presence of disability changes not only emotional response but aesthetic judgment. Aesthetic judgment determines the quality of the body appearing before us. How a body appears to us and how it makes us feel justify conclusions about its superiority or inferiority. But the success or failure to make aesthetic judgments also represents a factor in disqualification. Having aesthetic judgment, sometimes called "taste," indicates superiority. In the eighteenth-century, David Hume defined human beings possessing the highest level of emotional response as "the standard of taste." These men of taste, for they were always men, had a refined eye, an attentive ear, a discerning palate, and delicacy of the imagination, whereas the inferior responses of other people were attributed to what Hume called "defect or imperfection in the organ":

> Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ. A man in a fever would not insist on his palate as

> able to decide concerning flavours; nor would one, affected with the jaundice, pretend to give a verdict with regard to colours. In each creature, there is a sound and a defective state; and the former alone can be supposed to afford us a true standard of a taste. . . .[4]

The superior person has an able body. The inferior person has a disabled body. Defective eyes, ears, and palate produce inferior and incorrect emotional responses. Disability weakens the sentience of some people, situating them below men of taste in the natural order. Disability changes not only the ability to have feelings but the ability to express and to judge feelings. The greater the ability to have and to express feelings, the more superior supposedly is the person.

Nevertheless, sentience as the measure of superiority soon falls into contradiction. On the one hand, the existence of involuntary response seems to confirm the rightness of judgments based on feelings. Often described as instincts, involuntary feelings of repulsion and attraction arise as natural reactions to the objects placed in our path, supposedly existing to protect us against dangerous bodies. Nietzsche refers to this theory as "the biological value of the *beautiful* and the *ugly*":

> That which is instinctively *repugnant* to us, aesthetically, is proved by mankind's longest experience to be harmful, dangerous, worthy of suspicion: the suddenly vocal aesthetic instinct (e.g. disgust) contains a *judgment.* To this extent the beautiful stands within the general category of the biological values of what is useful, beneficent, life-enhancing. . . . Thus the beautiful and the ugly are recognized as *relative* to our most fundamental values of preservation.[5]

Biology supposedly announces in our involuntary feelings the truth about the body before us, causing us to reject harmful bodies and to embrace benevolent ones.

On the other hand, involuntary response represents a loss of control that undermines the reliability and accuracy of emotional states. Hume's able-bodied man of taste seems to have a refined response to the bodies appearing before him, but he cannot control his feelings. Works of art make him feel a certain way—sad, disgusted, happy, melancholy, elated. Standing before the Venus de Milo, beholders experience involuntarily the glow of female beauty and all of its attendant sense perceptions: fitness, formal harmony, physical desire, intelligence—all of which, in this case, are put into relief, contradicted, and finally heightened by the statue's broken arms. Picasso's *Guernica* attacks its beholders with feelings of violence and horror from which they do not easily find relief. Works of art compel feelings in beholders beyond their control.

Aesthetics almost always define feelings produced in bodies by other bodies as involuntary, as if they represented a contagious possession of one body by another.

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[4] David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Four Dissertations.* 1757. URL: http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=704&chapter=137522&layout=html&Itemid=27 (accessed September 29, 2010).

[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), §804.

Aesthetics are the domain in which the sensation of otherness is felt at its most frightening and powerful. Whether the effect is beauty and pleasure, ugliness and pain, or sublimity and terror, the emotional impact of one body on another is experienced as an assault on autonomy and a testament to the power of otherness.

If we return to the Mad Women Project, it becomes apparent how arbitrary are the judgments produced by aesthetic responses. Park Young-Sook makes the case, with startling images, that the accusation of madness is highly gendered, and that any woman risks the accusation of madness in patriarchal society. Her project title in Korean does not include the neutral term, "mad women." *Mich'innyŏn* is a derogatory term, used as a curse word and better rendered by the English "crazy bitches." "Mad Women is an epithet," Beck Jee-Sook explains:

> that any woman living in patriarchal society would hear at least more than once in the course of her life. Women who do not go along with the system, and women who challenge male hegemony and power are called Mad Women. . . . It is an epithet in the same class as 'bitch' 'cunt' 'whore' and other such expletives, with little difference in derogatory degree among them, hurled at women who are perfectly normal.[6]

Any woman, no matter her behavior or appearance, may be called at one time or another a "crazy bitch" by a man in her life. Under the pressure of this omniscient accusation, no woman can escape the appearance of madness. It is stitched into the fabric of male-dominated society.

Park's project is to expose this dilemma—both the fragility of women's sanity in male society and the ease with which any appearance or action may represent a woman as a crazy bitch. The first phase of the project alternates stereotypical images of female madness with other images that are almost completely neutral, in effect testing the limits of Park's audience's desire to over-read any image to summon the archetype of the crazy bitch. The seventh photograph in the first project is remarkable in that it includes more than one subject, a rarity in the *Mad Women Project* (fig. 3). It pictures a simply but elegantly dressed woman sitting in a chair and staring with a neutral expression at the camera, while holding a young girl's feet. Presumably, she is the girl's mother. But something is terribly wrong. In the place of the usual clutter of toys attending children's play is an array of dangerous and inappropriate objects: a knife, a dust pan, a half-empty jug of wine, a butane gas can, and matches—all mingled with items of clothing and random household objects. While the mother and daughter seem perfectly happy, there is subtext of danger and mayhem saturating the photograph, giving the impression that this is a scene of madness. It is worth remarking in passing that this photograph exemplifies the extent to which social context also controls aesthetic response. Evidence of social disorder in a particular context changes perceptions about bodies, rendering their appearance differently and disqualifying them on the basis of the incongruity between body and context.

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[6] Beck See-Yook, "Mad Women Project: A Feminist Perspective on Women's Reality," in Young-Sook Park, *Mich'innyŏn P'ŭroject'ŭ 1999-2005: Pakyŏngsuk Sajinjip* [Mad Women Project 1999-2005: Photographs by Park Young-Sook], (Seoul: Nunbit, 2005), 14.

Figure 3
Park Young-Sook,
The Mad Women Project,
Project 1, Photograph 7
(120cm x 150cm, C-print) 1999

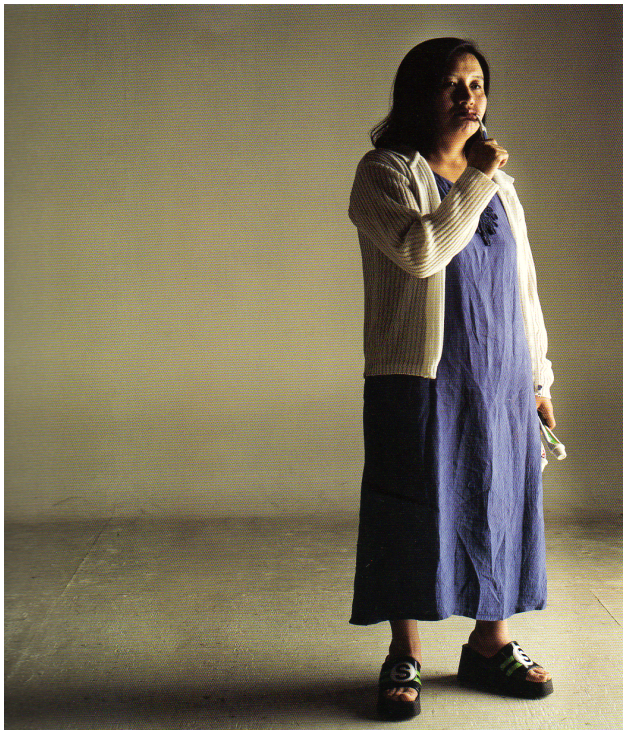

Figure 4. Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project,
Project 1, Photograph 5
(120x150 cm, C-print) 1999

The fifth photograph in the first project provides an entirely different scene, one so ordinary that it challenges the imagination of any beholder trying to identify a representation of madness (fig. 4). Similar to many of the photographs in the first project, it pictures a woman, standing off center, in an empty setting, but this woman is simply brushing her teeth. She is distracted, but signs of high intellect and curiosity do not usually animate the faces of people brushing their teeth. Only misplaced expectations could fault the woman for looking bored. Moreover, there is nothing particularly unusual about her posture or clothing. If this woman is mad, any woman can be mad. But, of course, this is Park's point. Any woman can be called a "crazy bitch," if she attracts the attention and anger of men in power.

The eight projects in *Mad Women* obey the same imperative, alternating diverse images of women, some stereotypical of madness, others routine or mundane. The aesthetic values of the photographs sometimes shift, displaying lesser or greater artfulness, but the content under analysis does not change. To provide some idea of the breadth of Park's work, here is a rapid slide show of photographs that come from most of the eight projects.

First, consider photograph five from the second project (fig. 5). By now its technique should be familiar.

Figure 5
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project,
Project 2, Photograph 5
(120cm x 167cm, C-print) 2001

The woman alone occupies the image. Her clothing is torn and slightly disheveled. But, unlike other women in the project, she does not display depression or distraction. She stares defiantly from the photograph, demonstrating self-possession, even pride. And yet she is a crazy bitch.

The Osaka project begins with a photograph of a woman in a Japanese Kimono, seated in a less institutional setting than displayed in earlier phases of the project (fig. 6).

Figure 6
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project,
"Osaka," Project 4,
Photograph 1
(120cm x 120cm, C-print) 2004

Her posture is feminine, calm, and traditional. She rests her hands on her lap and looks into the camera. Her modest clothing is well kept and precise, as are her hair and make-up. Her surroundings are uncluttered. And yet she is a crazy bitch.

Photograph five in the Osaka project displays a woman doctor in a lab coat standing in an office (fig. 7). She has a stethoscope around her neck, an identification badge clipped to her pocket, and a cluster of lego toys in her hands. The surrounding office is cluttered but not in a way that reflects on her, since it houses many other people. Rather, the clutter in the office tells the tales of many lives and their activities: personal photographs, toys, purses, an umbrella, coats, etc. The photograph seems to capture the doctor as she goes about her regular duties at work. And yet she is a crazy bitch.

Figure 7
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project,
"Osaka," Project 4,
Photograph 5
(120cm x 120cm, C-Print) 2004

Figure 8
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project,
"Osaka," Project 4,
Photograph 9
(120cm x 120cm, C-print) 2004

The ninth photograph in the Osaka project takes the untypical course of featuring three young women (fig. 8). There are surrounding them teacups and a teapot, cigarettes and an ashtray, and a video camera. The women are dressed casually in sweaters and warm-up pants. They are lying across a mattress on the floor, smiling for the camera. And yet they are crazy bitches.

Park entitles the sixth project "A Flower Shakes Her." This project displays mad women in the presence of flowers, perhaps playing on the tradition in both the East and West of considering mentally disabled people as somehow closer to nature or taking greater pleasure in it. Some of the photographs imply disqualifying markers, but usually these markers are sufficiently dubious to cast any meaning in doubt. The first photograph in the project shows a woman lying in a field of flowers (fig. 9). Her eyes are closed and she is dressed casually, but there are very few indications about her, other than the fact that she seems to be enjoying herself. Is she a crazy bitch?

Figure 9
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project
"A Flower Shakes Her," Project 6,
Photograph 5
(120cm x 120cm, C-print) 2005

Photograph seven is formally striking in the contrast between the green vegetation, the purple flowers, and the lilac blanket covering the shoulders of the principal subject (fig. 10). The woman, who wears make-up and earrings, stares into the camera, as if the photographer has surprised her. She gathers the lilac blanket about herself, as she hurries past the flowering tree. Does the photograph capture a woman on an errand, a quick dash from the house to the garage to look for her forgotten

keys? Or are her surprise, the fact that she may be in flight, and her state of dress signs of madness? Is she a crazy bitch?

Figure 10
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project,
"A Flower Shakes Her," Project 6,
Photograph 7
(120cm x 120cm, C-print) 2005

Finally, consider a few photographs from the seventh project called "The Witch Inside of Me." It represents a strong aesthetic shift from the previous six projects. All of the photographs have a black background and wreath the subjects in colorful etchings. Some images appear to display women in poses that are a little mysterious or evocative. Photograph one shows a woman dressed in black velvet eating a chocolate cookie and staring at the camera (fig. 11). In number two, another woman, also dressed in black, offers an apple dramatically to the beholder of the photograph (fig. 12). Does the witch inside of her dabble in poison apples?[7] Photograph four pictures a woman in goth dress (fig. 13). Her ears, nose, and chin are pierced. She

[7] Kim Youngok offers an alternative reading in which Park's photographs depict women going mad by way of illumination. Here the two projects, "The Flower Shakes Her" and "The Witch Inside of Me," examples of which may be seen in figures 9 and 12 respectively, show women, "seduced by flowers," "who merge with the floating colors and the madness of the earth" (14) or the woman who is "given a red apple to reckon with the witch in her for a séance, and thereby partake in the festival of unburdening the weight of our souls" (14). See Youngok Kim, "Montage of Records for Memory: Park Youngsook and the Camera," and "Her Women within/without the Photograph," in Park Youngsook, *Mad Women Project* (Suwon, South Korea: Gyeong Gi Cultural Foundation, 2009), 6-63.

wears black boots, a stud necklace and bracelet, and many rings. If the woman is a witch, her portrait nevertheless seems mundane, almost conventional. The seventh project continues the practice of perplexing beholders with images that tempt them to make accusations of madness, while placing in serious doubt the justifications for these accusations.

Figure 11
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project
"The Witch Inside of Me," Project 7,
Photograph 1
(120cm x 160cm, C-print) 2005

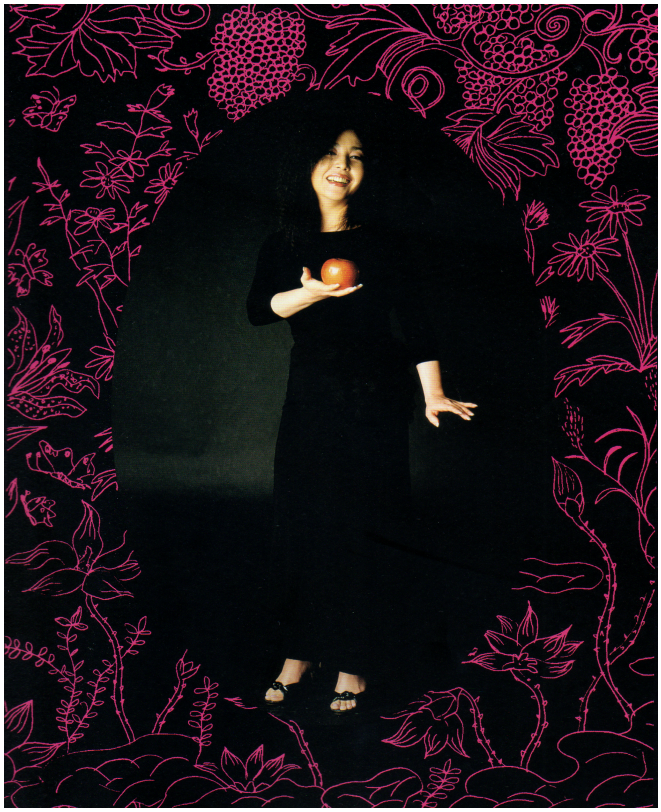

Figure 12
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project
"The Witch Inside of Me," Project 7,
Photograph 2
(120cm x 160cm, C-print) 2005

Figure 13
Park Young-Sook
The Mad Women Project
"The Witch Inside of Me," Project 7,
Photograph 4
(120cm x 160cm, C-print) 2005

I hope that you have by now a good idea of the goals and techniques of the *Mad Women Project,* but perhaps you are growing a bit suspicious of the photographs, and it is time to confirm your suspicions. I left out an important detail, I am afraid, when I first described the nature of Park's project: the project includes no photographs of mad women, only photographs of models playing the part of mad women. Like many postmodern artworks, the project relies on parody and pastiche to create its effects. Park's closest friends, "well-known artists and activists in the arts and feminist circles in Korea, appear as the models in the series" (14). Park insists, however, that the political content of the project springs from their work of reenactment. "The feminists who played the 'mad' women in the photographs," she argues, "are speaking for all women. The experiences of these women are representative experiences. The experience is one of sharing—this work itself is a work of sharing. This is an activity that challenges stereotypes, and then comes the work of dismantling everything we have accumulated inside us."[8]

The practice of repeating stereotypes until they cave in upon themselves, like beached whales, is by now a familiar postmodern gesture. Its theoretical version finds its most celebrated instance in the work of Judith Butler who embraces "performativity" as a reiteration of norms and stereotypes that provides a basis for resistance to them (1999). Perhaps the best-known aesthetic version of the practice is the work of Cindy Sherman. Butler confirms her compatibility with Sherman, concluding that the "forms of subjectification" that produce "new norms of humanity" are "brought into crisis" by Sherman's work.[9] I want to move toward my conclusion by suggesting the degree to which Park Young-Sook departs from this familiar postmodern technique as well as from the work of Cindy Sherman. Sherman is obviously a strong influence on Park, and yet on the subject of disability Park manages to free herself, I want to claim, from many ideas that disqualify disabled people, while Sherman excites the aesthetic response to her work by using disqualifying images of disability. To re-state my argument more directly, Sherman uses images of mentally disabled women to make her audience feel uncomfortable and thereby produces the defining sensation of her work, while Park makes her audience uncomfortable with the uncomfortable feelings wrongly inspired by the appearance of disabled women, thereby pursuing a critique of aesthetic disqualification itself. I am giving preference to Park at the moment, but it goes without saying that Sherman has aesthetic value worth understanding in a fuller context that would take into account the growing influence in the history of art of disability as an aesthetic value in itself.[10]

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[8] Young-Sook Park, *Mich'innyŏn P'ŭroject'ŭ 1999-2005: Pakyŏngsuk Sajinjip* [Mad Women Project 1999-2005: Photographs by Park Young-Sook], (Seoul: Nunbit, 2005), 85. See also Youngok Kim, "Montage of Records for Memory: Park Youngsook and the Camera, and Her Women within/without the Photograph," in Park Youngsook, *Mad Women Project* (Suwon, South Korea: GyeongGi Cultural Foundation. 2009), 6-63 and 99-101.

[9] Margaret Soenser Breen, et al., "There Is a Person Here": An Interview with Judith Butler," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 6:1-2 (2001): 7-23, esp. 16.

[10] This consideration of Sherman would follow the lines of the argument set down in *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 2010), 4-9, 35-39, 139, where I argue that the modern in art emerges with the growing significance of disability as an aesthetic value. Sherman's photographs, insofar as they participate in the modern project, rely on the representation of disability. The irony of her work is that she

The usual interpretation of Sherman holds that she unveils through appropriation or parody the various stereotypes produced in Western society by the subjection of women. She presents women in her work as victims, sex objects, abject bodies, and vulnerable subjects because these are the representations dominating women in our society. What the usual interpretation has so far left out is that Sherman attacks these disqualifying stereotypes not only through images of femininity but images of disability. A great number of Sherman's photographs bear the disqualifying markers of mental disability in particular. The generic content of her photographs is, first and foremost, the disability of women because her images demonstrate repeatedly that being female is not merely a liability but a disability. Consequently, Sherman's work cannot be understood without engaging in the critique of disability representation demanded by the theoretical advancement of disability studies—a task not yet pursued, to my knowledge, by anyone.

The early work on the *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) and *Rear Screen Projections* (1980) shows the exception to the rule, the part of Sherman's corpus not orchestrated by disability. The vast majority of these pictures, based on cinematic representation, are glamour or voyeur shots; they focus intense attention on female traits and postures considered alluring.[11] Female beauty, put on display for the male gaze, is a major trope of Hollywood cinema, as Laura Mulvey demonstrated many years ago.[12] Aside from glamour shots, the film-based stills also tend to focus on damsels in distress. The aesthetic response to these images emerges from the pleasure of viewing women in danger or subject to violence, thereby playing out a second major trope of Hollywood cinema. The film-based photographs not only stir attention and thoughtfulness; they critique the stereotypical representation of women pursued by mainstream, narrative cinema. They are fittingly Sherman's most famous and expensive photographs.

Before and after the cinema work, however, Sherman depends more often than not on images of disabled people to inspire aesthetic response, following in the footsteps of her acknowledged model, Diane Arbus (54).[13] Consider the brief catalogue of disability in Sherman's corpus. Sherman's first *Untitled Series* in 1975 uses make-up, facial expression, and posture to suggest intellectual disability.[14] Sherman turns directly to disabled mental states to inspire emotions of concern and pity, sometimes disgust.[15] The woman in each photograph typically lies in bed or on the floor, often

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identifies with and simultaneously disqualifies women with mental disabilities. On the one hand, Sherman takes her distance from the representation of disability; on the other hand, she lays claim to it as a source of aesthetic power.

[11] *Untitled Film Still #21,* 1978: www.moma.org/collection/object.php ?object_id=56618

[12] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 833-44, 836.

[13] David Frankel, "Interview: Cindy Sherman Talks to David Frankel" *Art Forum International* vol. 41 no. 7 (March 2003): 51-55.

[14] *Untitled B*, 1975: www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sherman-untitled-b-p11438). In 1982, with *Centerfolds/Horizontals*

[15] *Untitled #92,* 1981: www.criticsatlarge.ca/2012/05/disappearing-act-cindy-sherman-at- moma.html.

suggesting apprehension or a desperate inner life. "The woman," suggests Régis Durand about this series, "appears by turns defeated, martyred, or gripped by anxiety or terror."[16] From this point on, Sherman never looks back but focuses deeply on the representation of mental and physical disability. *Pink Robes* (1982) pictures women who are in mental and emotional crisis, as do *Fashion* (1983-1984) and *Fairy Tales* (1985). *Fashion, Untitled #137,* for example, shows a woman with frizzy dark hair, a downward despondent glance, dressed in a clay-red dress and overcoat; her face and hands are smeared with blood-red coloring.[17] Another figure in this series, *Fashion, Untitled #299*, 1994, pictures a woman in an extreme mental state. Holding her hand, mimicking a pistol, to her temple, she gazes at the beholder with an expression of loathing from which she does not herself escape.[18] One example from *Fairy Tales* depicts a woman lying on a heap of gravel. Her front teeth are broken, and she appears to be semi-conscious.[19]

Disaster (1986-1989), as its name implies, takes up accidents, photographing subjectless scenes of disaster but also using dolls and masks to personify injury. *History Portraits/Old Masters* (1988-1990) includes many images of people with extravagant facial deformities, *Untitled #195* shows a man in period dress with an enormous nose.[20] (). *Civil War* (1991) displays dead bodies. *Sex Pictures* (1992), *Horror and Surrealist Pictures* (1994-1996), *Masks* (1994-1996), *Broken Dolls* (1999), *Hollywood/Hampton Types* (2000-2002), and *Clowns* (2003-2004) employ doll parts and elaborate prostheses as props to represent dismemberment, distorted facial features, psychopathology, broken bodies, profound withdrawal, and grotesque emotions and mental states. One photograph from *Masks* uses broken features and twisted flesh to represent the face as a wound from which two eyes stare outward in an expression of despair (*Masks, Untitled #314e*, 1994). An image from *Hollywood/Hampton Types* depicts the beginning of the appearance of the Sherman woman as clown; the expression of inner sadness, swollen lips, oversized mole, exaggerated make-up, and huge breasts make of the woman a mockery (*Hollywood/Hampton Types, Untitled #360*, 2000). The women in Sherman's photographs grow increasingly outlandish until they appear as circus clowns.[21]

That Sherman ends with clowns exposes her beginning in disability because the history of clowns grows out of the disqualification of disabled people. The earliest clowns were disabled, and to the current day the humor of clowns relies on the ridicule of mental and physical differences. Rare is there an alternative in Sherman's work to this vision of mentally disabled women as grotesque clowns. These photographs make a place for the spaces of appearance where human

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[16] Régis Durand, and Jean-Pierre Criqui, (*Cindy Sherman.* Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 240.
[17] See: www.art.net.com/ magzineus/features/saltz/cindy-sherman-at-moma-2-23-12_detail.asp?picnum=6.
[18] See: www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/photographyimages/Cindy Sherman -Untitled-299-1993.jpg
[19] See: *Untitled #145,* 1985: www.skarstedt.com/exhibitions/2000-05-06_cindy-sherman/#/images/3/
[20] See: *History Portraits/Old Masters, Untitled #195,* 1989: www.skarstedt.com/exhibitions/2008-11-08_cindy-sherman/#/images/13/
[21] *Clowns, Untitled #412*, 2003: www.christies.com/lotfinder/phographs/cindy-sherman-untitled-5363086-details.aspx

disqualification haunts dispossessed subjectivity—the ultimate point where inferiority and mental disability meet.[22]

Park's work, we saw, represents women called crazy, redirecting the violence toward them against the unjust stereotypes of male society. Park shakes the boundary between mental disability and nondisability, placing the distinction constantly in doubt. The boundary between disabled and nondisabled women, between women called crazy bitches and those who resist the label, does not appear to exist in Sherman's work. The boundary is not an object of representation, then, let alone an object of interrogation. In Park, male society accuses women of being crazy—and we wonder what is wrong with that society as a result. In Sherman, male society drives women crazy—and we wonder what is wrong with women as a result. Sherman's photographs recognize women as victims but provide few resources to question the violence against them because almost every image of women created by Sherman relies on the aesthetics of disqualification. A simpler and more precise way of putting this idea is to recognize that disability is always disqualified in Sherman. Her work does not doubt the idea that some human beings are inferior to others. Moreover, this inferiority is made visible for anyone to see in the form of disability.

The reiteration of stereotypes, their performativity as Butler calls it, supposedly leads to an act of resistance by which stereotypes may be viewed differently.[23] But this action is only a half-step because the dominant stereotype remains visibly in place—and necessarily so—if resistance is supposed to emerge. In fact, so dominant is the stereotype that nothing else apparently rises to consciousness for many beholders. Butler insists again and again on how difficult it is to think against the norm. It is only through subtle intelligence and agile interpretation that stereotypes and norms enter into crisis and acts of resistance arise, but this mental grace and agility seem unique, so difficult to achieve, that they place another, better view of the world beyond the ken of most people.

When Butler raises issues of the imagination, they are minimal and often without consequence, but Park's entire project depends on fiction-making. Butler's references to materiality have value, I think, for a connection to dispossession, especially for thinking about embodiment. Sherman's preoccupation with abjection cries out to be interpreted along the lines of human disqualification, while her images of dispossession inevitably represent disability. Butler envisions an idea of human rights relative to dispossession, because rights do sometimes represent kinds of individualism as forms of social agency. Only the action of superior intelligence has in this scenario the power to unveil and to contest the disqualification of human beings. For this superiority seems another version of the mental superiority attributed by Hume and others to the refined human beings capable of aesthetic judgment. Like Hume's man of taste, Butler's

[22] On the spaces of the aesthetic and the politics of exposure, see Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013), 193-97.
[23] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

theorist of repetition supposedly understands better than others the power of sentiment produced by works of art.[24]

In artworks where the disqualification of mental disability is itself the main subject, the necessity of superior mental ability to resist disqualification only produces more disqualification. At worst, the cycle of disqualification amounts to a vicious circle impossible to break. At best, the end result is only a transference of the disqualification of mental disability from the level at which art is produced to the level at which art is interpreted. The aesthetics of human disqualification remain firmly in place in both cases, untouched by critique and continuing to inspire feelings of superiority in some people before the appearance of other people.

Park explains that she wants her photographs to cast in doubt the accusation of madness directed against women. When any woman, at any time, may be thought mad, she argues, because some man insists on it, madness reveals itself as a construct created by the social environment rather than by organic defects in the individual. The appearance of madness is only that—an appearance—dependent on the aesthetics of disqualification. But the *Mad Women Project* has a second achievement—one that advances the goals of disability studies. At the same time that Park places in doubt the madness of women she questions the idea that mental disability disqualifies people as inferior. Her many images insist that mad women look and behave like everyone else. It becomes increasingly difficult as one views her work to pick out an example of human inferiority. Moreover, the downward spiral toward aesthetic disqualification seems to reverse itself almost completely. As the boundary between ability and disability melts away, we see not more and more inferiority but less and less. Disability as a signifier fails to represent a negative value.

Disability is the signifier reserved by disability studies for the tendency to misunderstand human variation as a symptom of sickness, imperfection, impairment, defect, and weakness. The continued existence of the practice of interpreting disability as deviance rather than as human variation reveals a shocking conclusion hard to accept in this day and age. It is shocking to discover that disability represents at this moment in time the final frontier of justifiable human inferiority. While it has grown more difficult to argue for the inferiority of a person on the basis of race or gender, significant numbers of people believe that the disabled may be justifiably treated as inferior. [25] Disabled people are robbed of their civil rights without protest. They are institutionalized involuntarily.[26] Their lives are taken from

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[24] Consider Butler's tendency, similar to Hume's, to attribute inferior aesthetic judgments to an imperfection of the organ, here applying the metaphor of blindness, in this statement on Diane Arbus's photographs: "when I asked a few friends to accompany me to Arbus, nearly everyone declined: They had political repugnance for the objectifying photos; they thought it would be 'depressing.' To them, Arbus's photographic gaze seems inappropriately fascinated by human distortions, playing on spectacle, pandering to the unseemly desire to gawk at what might seem aberrant, to peer, to invade. However true these criticisms may be, there is something else going on with these photos to which some of this moralizing may well be blind" (118). See Judith Butler, "Surface Tensions," *ArtForum International* 46.2 (2004): 118-24.
[25] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 2008), chp. 1.
[26] Harriet McBryde Johnson, "The Disability Gulag," *New York Times Magazine,* November 23, 2003, 58-64.

them in the name of human dignity. They are killed to end their suffering.[27] These actions name only a few of the many crimes committed against people with disabilities in every part of the world.

As long as the belief in human inferiority exists, as long as anyone, at any time, may be thought inferior based on mental and physical characteristics, disabled people will continue to be classified as people without quality, not only considered unequal to other citizens but considered less than human and so subject to terrible violence. An alternative view of people with disabilities requires nothing less than the radical rejection of the aesthetics of human disqualification. Only then will the disqualification of disabled people fail, and fail precisely, because it has no basis in human appearances, physical states, and mental conditions deemed inferior.

Siebers, Tobin. "The Madwomen Project: Disability and the Aesthetics of Human Disqualification," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 15 no. 2 (Spring 2016): 4-25.

[27] Tobin Siebers, "In the Name of Pain," *Against Health: Now Health Became the New Morality,* ed. Jonathan M. Metzl and Anna Kirkland (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 183-94.