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I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

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Independent body of research:

Disability, Identity & Surrealism.

Introduction:

A brief explanation of this research is to explore a selection of three keywords, backed with a minimum of three images, then creating links between them to form a research question. The three keywords I have chosen are, Disability, Identity and Surrealism. These topics relate to each other as well as my own personal practice and interests within the arts. The artists chosen for this all use the body or the sense of body within their practice(s) giving them all a baseline link, them being, Carolyn Lazard (Disability), Tracey Emin (Disability), Orlan (Identity), Leigh Bowery (Identity), Mark Ryden (Surrealism) and Stelarc (Surrealism).

Disability:

“You’re disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal activities” (UK Government, 2010)

Physical and Mental health are something that most people experience in their lifetime, whether it’s the common cold, flu, broken bones, depressive periods, forms of anxiety and more. These things are known commonly as something a person can get basic medical help with and overcome with time. Chronic health conditions

however are vastly different; they are conditions that last for one year or more and require constant ongoing medical attention and can limit the quality of daily living.

This is when they can become classified as a disability.

Within the art world, the themes and topics of disabilities are slowly becoming more normalised by artists creating works about their own experiences of such, but this hasn't always been the case.



Fig. 1, My Bed, Tracey Emin, 1998. ¹

Tracey Emin is an artist which has helped break the curve, many of her works have been deemed “controversial” due to her open and honest nature within her practice. Emin’s installation piece ‘My Bed’ became an art piece that caused massive backlash from the public. The piece itself consists of Emin’s own bed surrounded in

various objects from a period of her life where she struggled with a mentally challenging time experiencing suicidal depression. Spending four days without eating or drinking anything but alcohol while being sexually active. The installation itself shows a messy, unkempt bed with dirty bedsheets from bodily fluids and surrounding it was many objects from her room, such as used condoms, underwear with menstrual blood stains, empty alcohol bottles, half smoked cigarettes and much more. While 'My Bed' caused such backlash for being a piece 'anyone could've made' and 'A disgusting thing she should be ashamed of' the work helped the conversation of mental health to be more present, while yes, the work itself was a vulgar look into Emin's life, it was a honest representation of what it is like to experience such mental struggles. This work is a real honest piece; being shown again a few times since the first time it was exhibited in 1999. In 2015 the instalment was shown to recontextualise the work by surrounding the walls with paintings of the body. And now, in 2026 'My Bed' is currently being exhibited in The Tate. Each time this work is shown, it's a brutal reminder of the possible effects of mental health.

Alongside mental health, chronic physical health is equally as important to be shown within the art world. In the 1970s, particularly in Britain, Crip Art became an art movement to celebrate the experiences from the disabled community. The name itself 'Crip Art' reclaims the slur of crippled, empowering artists to be their true self and express what they have been through.

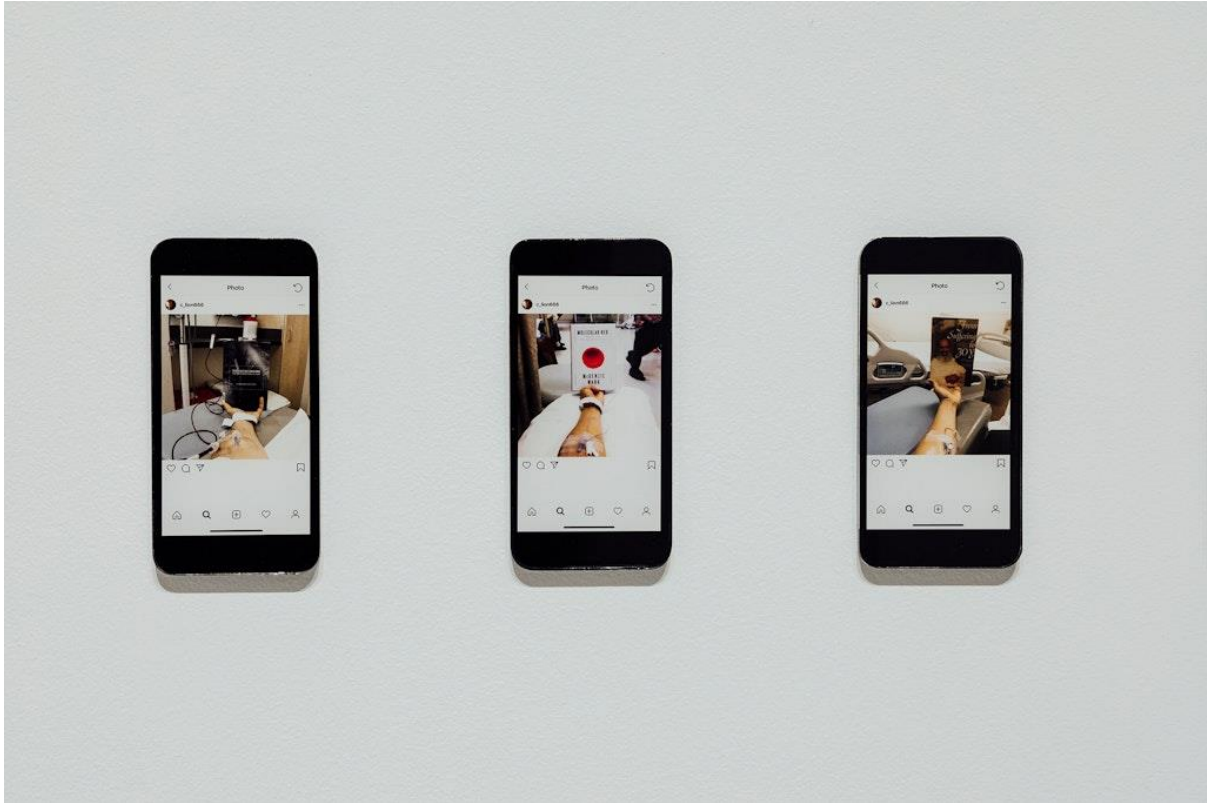


Fig. 2, In Sickness and Study, Carolyn Lazard, 2015. ²

Carolyn Lazard is an artist whose work is focused on their experiences of having chronic illness, living with Crohn's disease and a range of autoimmune disorders. In *Sickness and Study*, an ongoing artwork, Lazard uses Instagram to post their experiences in real time of what it is like inside a hospital. Each photo includes her own arm while undergoing iron infusions and a book she is reading while this process is happening. An infusion takes anywhere between 30 minutes and 2 hours, some infusions can take up to 4-5 hours depending on what medication is being administered.

"I find myself interested in the labour that facilitates our staying alive and that labour is care and care work" (Lazard, C, 2023) ¹

Many of Lazard's works are centred around how disability works within society, there is still a huge stigma attached to disabilities, that people face day to day. The idea of 'not looking disabled' is something that gets thrown around often, suggesting being disabled has a certain visual look to it, when disabilities come in many forms.

Another one of Lazard's works 'CRIP TIME (2018)' is a ten-minute video of her refilling her weekly prescription cases, showing how long it takes her to do a task she needs to be able to live day to day. Publicising these private moments of what helps her live a 'normal life' to prove the point that no one knows what others go through in life, disabilities can be something 'obvious' to onlookers but can also be hidden from the same onlookers. While the stigma is still relevant today, the topics of mental and physical health is slowly being talked about and normalised.

Identity:

The Definition of 'identity' states that it is the unique set of qualities, personality traits, religious/ solo beliefs and appearances that define who they are. Over many years the ways in which we as individuals can choose to alter our appearances has been widened. In the past, the themes of body modifications and such were used to signify status, beauty, spirituality and a groups identity. Tattoos are something in history which were used by some as a symbol to state their involvement with the tribe they were in. Scarification and branding were once used as a rite of passage or social standing particularly in Africa and indigenous societies. More extreme modifications such as foot binding and neck stretching are rooted deep in history as a tradition for some cultures. Yet in the modern day, body modifications are something that has been made more popular by mainstream culture. While yes, many modifications are

associated with some subcultures, the overall idea of body mods is heavily normalised with tattoos and piercings.

In the arts the use of identity is quite literally everywhere, something that is impossible to ignore. But there are a few artists from the past decade who have helped evolve the social norms of identity. Orlan being one of them, since the 1960's and 70's Orlan has challenged how the body is seen through politics, religious and social norms. In her work, she uses her own body to explore the themes of identity.



Fig. 3. The Reincarnation of Sainte-ORLAN, 1990-1993. ³

In the 1990's Orlan herself began working through a series of surgeries to alter her own body to transform herself into elements from famous paintings. Naming this 'The Reincarnation of Sainte-ORLAN' Using the Mona Lisa, Botticelli's Venus and Boucher's Europa as inspiration as well as having a pair of small horns in her forehead. This has helped Orlan create a striking visual look to herself for her own pleasure, thus creating an obvious clear identity to her name. Throughout the many surgeries during the years of 1990-1993, Orlan chose to use a film crew to document inside the operating theatre. She chose to lie awake for the procedures while they were being filmed, seemingly happy about what was happening. Said videos were created and showcased in galleries across the world, presented as performance art. Orlan was widely known as the first artist to document and show an operation in the eyes of 'art.'

In her "Carnal Art" Manifesto, she states:

"Carnal Art takes no interest in the result of plastic surgery, but in the process of the surgical-operation-performance and the modified body having become the subject of public debate." (Orlan, 1989)

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As well as Orlan, there are other artists that explore themes of identity in less extreme ways. Leigh Bowery was a queer icon in the 1980s, known in the fashion and club scenes as a flamboyant performance artist. He pushed the strict social norms of gender and identity, while being a muse for the painter Lucian Freud.



Fig, 4. Session IV, Look 21, Leigh Bowery, 1991. ⁴

Bowery, while having a short life of 33 years, made a huge impact to the fashion industry and queer culture, often pushing boundaries on what was acceptable to wear and do, embracing the ideas of shock value. His work consisted off handmade creative costumes, bold makeup, wigs and headgear. Using his own body as a 'shape shifting tool' to create bold and daring looks, his fashion choices were seen as controversial at times due to the use of fetish wear, such as latex and head wear. Everything Bowery did was in the name of his practice, his influence is still relevant today in modern media, especially in the drag community and pop culture. Bowery was always unapologetically himself and because of him, we got artists that are extremely known in the modern day, such as Alexander McQueen, Vivienne Westwood and even Lady Gaga. These artists have and continue to push social

normalcy in their fields of work and have inspired movements to evolve what Bowery once did.

Surrealism:

Surrealism is a 20th century avant-garde movement which has revolutionised modern art, the aim was to create a subculture of art that blends the dream world with reality by using bizarre and unsettling scenes with the added use of juxtapositions, to create contrast. Surrealism is heavily inspired by Sigmund Freud's studies of the unconscious mind, dream interpretations, repressed desires and the uncanny. Overtime, the ideas behind surrealism itself have been re-imagined repeatedly, in a way, this art culture has had to and will always have to adapt and grow with the world, forever evolving and changing.

Many artists have influenced and embraced the surrealism movement, Mark Ryden was known for being 'the godfather of pop surrealism'



Fig, 5. The Birth of Venus, Mark Ryden, 1998. ⁵

Ryden is known for his dark fantasy and fairy-tale like worlds he has created in his paintings, the singular style of art he has evolved over his body of work have key themes and symbols that are repeated. The use of childlike doll characters, religious references, Abraham Lincoln and raw meat are the most common. Ryden takes inspiration heavily from Alice in Wonderland as it was his first introduction to the world of surrealism, he also takes inspiration from vintage toys, religious paraphernalia, anatomically correct models and stuffed animals. He blends the themes of childlike innocence with religious ideas and the modern world, overall creating an initial cutesy scene but as you look closer it becomes deeply unsettling.

Stelarc is another artist that seems to create surreal like performance works, his practice is focused on the capabilities of the human body and extending them for one's benefit. Believing that the biological limitations we have as a species are 'obsolete' which means that we are no longer suited for the modern world. Stelarc believes that modern technology can help us become more suited for the future. He experiments with robotics, biomedical instruments, prosthetics and much more for his performance pieces. Most of his performances are physically demanding for him to create and showcase, pushing his body for his research.

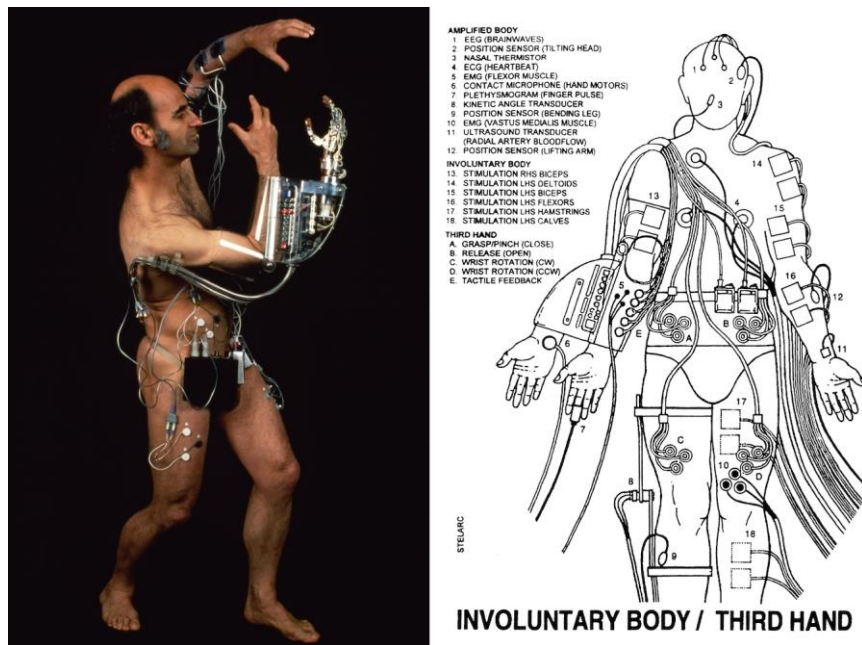


Fig. 6. Third Hand, Stelarc, 1980. ⁶

Integrating technology with his own body, Stelarc's work all visually seem very dystopian and futuristic and quite honestly, a little out of touch to reality. In the 1980's he created and performed, 'third hand' a mechanical human hand made from aluminium, stainless steel, acrylic, latex, electronics and more. This was attached to Stelarc's own right arm, now giving him three functional hands, the electronic hand had 290-degree wrist rotation ability, both clockwise and counterclockwise, clench and release capabilities as well as a tactile feedback system for a sense of touch. The motion for the third hand was made possible by using EMG, electrical signals of the muscles, from the abdominal and leg muscles, the overall craft was way ahead of its time. As well as the hand, Stelarc has created an arm extender, a stomach sculpture, six-legged walking robots, a prosthetic head and much more in hopes to help revolutionise and evolve human life. While modern technology is continuing to develop, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) could help push Sterlac's work forward, even though his work is already high risk and challenges ethical boundaries of

changing the body. Robotics are already becoming more normal, as they are starting to take over day to day such as customer service, retail and much more. The once thought of dystopian, cyberpunk, future where 'high tech' and 'low life' are combined doesn't seem that far away.

Conclusion:

Across my body of research, while delving into my three key words, a relationship between Disability, Identity and Surrealism is clear, with the most common factor linking them together being the body of course. Whether it is the mind or physical aspects the body is something that can be forever studied. Crip art being about the body and living with disabilities directly links to identity and the want to break the stigma surrounding it. While surrealism seems to heavily involve the body and what it could look like and what it could do. All key words bring up the idea of developing the body in some way. This creating the questions of 'how could the body be improved with modern technology' as well as 'why is the human form is so relevant in the modern art world' and 'what makes art pieces stand out from each other when having the same muse.' I aim to continue to research the human form and these queries I have developed and expand my practice alongside this. While also exploring more about the subcultures and history found with body modifications, religion and shared/ solo lived experience.

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