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Abstract: *In this paper, I propose an affective-formalist reading of what I call the affective affordances of disability; the way in which the representation of disability is able to move us. Through a comparative reading of two artworks, Michelangelo's* David *and Berlinde de Bruyckere's* Into One-another III, to P.P.P.*, this paper explores the relationship between how reading for form in the mimetic representation of disability informs how we are affected by it. Concurrently, it explores how affect, conceived as a visceral force that moves through and impresses on bodies, can be generated through the way in which disabled bodies are represented in art.*

Keywords: *Affect Theory, Disability Studies, Formalism.*

In this paper I will examine how we can conceive what I will call the "affective affordances" of the representation of disability. I define affective affordances as the way in which the form of the representation of disability may evoke affective responses such as fear, disgust, and admiration in viewers and readers. I will commence with a comparative reading of two photographs of two statues: *David* (1501-1504) by Michelangelo Buonarroti and *Into One-another III, to P.P.P.* (2010) by Berlinde de Bruyckere. Following this, I will examine how my reading of the representation of disability is tied to how this representation evokes affective responses, and consequently why the act of reading itself is an important mode of interaction with, and relating to, disability. Informing my reading of these photographs with relevant scholarly literatures, I will then analyze and argue how cultural artefacts and texts that engage with disability generate affect and how affect cannot solely be reduced to a theme for mimetic representation. In the final section of this paper, I argue that an affective-formalist approach to the study of

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artworks allows for the critical consideration of the particularity of disabilities that other paradigms in disability studies currently do not allow.

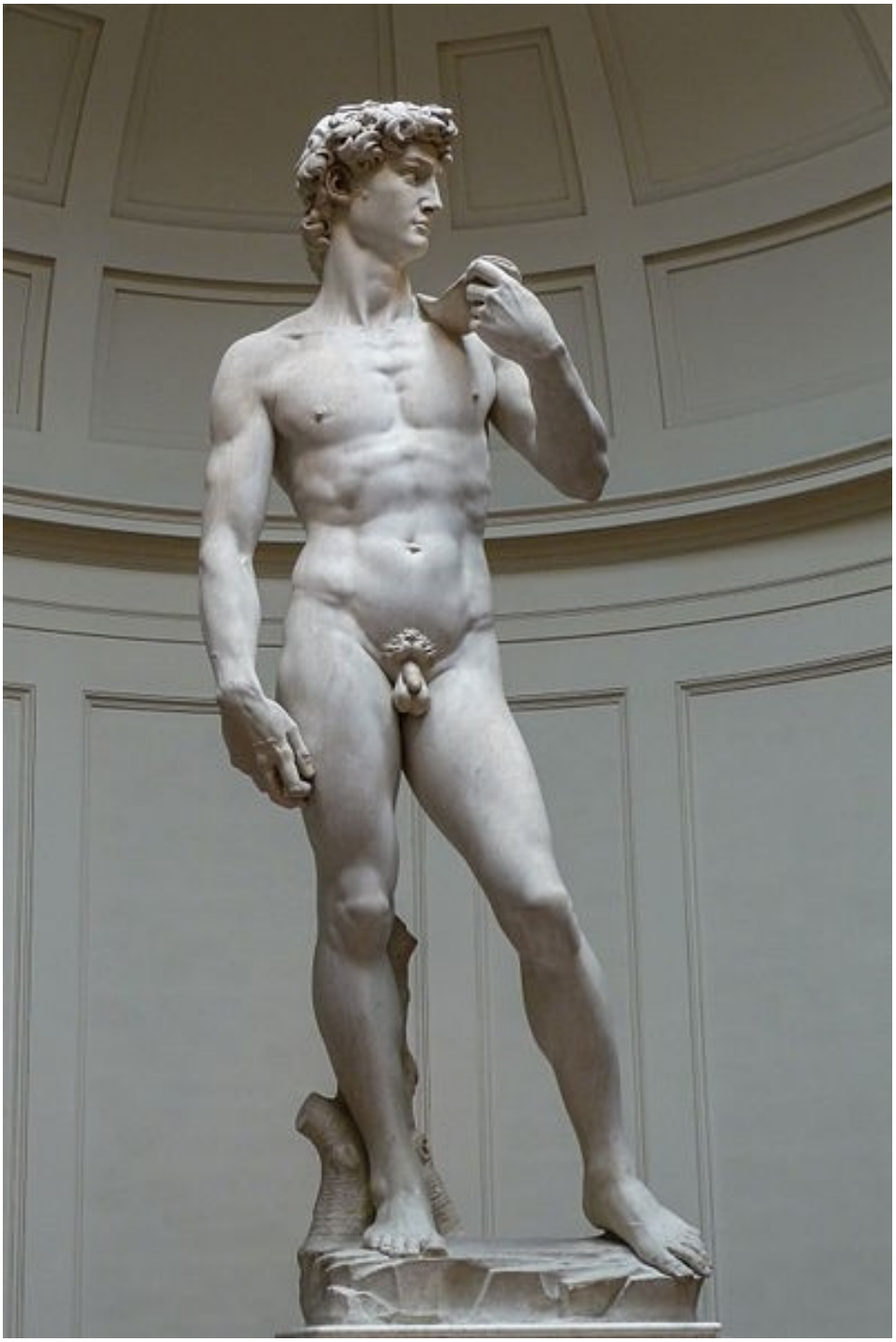

Figure 1. Photograph of Michelangelo Buanarroti, *David* (1501-1504). Photo copyright © 2008 Jörg Bittner Unna (Creative Commons CC BY 3.0).

Figure 2. Photograph of Berlinde de Bruyckere, *Into One-another III, to P.P.P.* (2010). Photo copyright © Mirjam Devriendt. All rights reserved.

The juxtaposition of the two images shown above may lead to an immediate sense of conflict with regard to how these images affect us. The first image shows Michelangelo's *David*, one of the most recognizable bodies in (art) history (see figure 1). The second image, of Bruyckere's *Into One-another III*, shows a body that is more abstract and harder to define; instead we may sense that we are looking at something *to do* with the body (see figure 2). The more unfamiliar and abstract second statue works affectively as it employs dissonance through combining familiar elements in an unfamiliar bodily composition. The statue *David*, on the contrary, might be experienced as more pleasing; its elements are composed in a familiar way, which is experienced as consonant. The image shows a body that is resting its weight on its right foot, seemingly between moderate tension (the pressed brow, slightly coiled right hand, right foot firmly on the ground) and nonchalance (slightly hanging shoulders, left foot floating over the ground at the heel, sling casually draped over left shoulder and aslant torso).

The second image, by contrast, complicates the process of such a formalist mode of reading. Is it just one body, or as the title suggests, two bodies fusing into one? Reading the image from the right to left, there appear to be two bodies.

At the far-right end of the image, there seem to be two pairs of upper legs and knees, but moving our gaze to the left, only a single pair of lower legs remains. If we move our gaze up from there, we might read the statue as two "torsos" pressed on (or indeed, into) one another. Only the upper torso has arms and hands. In the far-left of the image, on top of what could be read as the "shoulders" of the upper torso, there appears to be a "stump" or "outgrowth," seemingly akin to the heel of a foot, draped in the hollow of the torso below it. If we look at the position of the statue, the weight of both "torsos" seems to be supported by their knees and the hands of the upper torso that support it.

The second statue is disruptive in another way as well. In the West, the dominant way of reading is to read horizontally from left to right and vertically from the top of an image to the bottom. The *David* is consonant with both these directions. It is stable and firm on the right half of the body (visually left) while most of the movement in the statue appears in its left limbs (visually right). The statue also supports a reading from top to bottom. Light falls on the image from the upper right corner, illuminating its head and torso, while shadowing its lower half. In contrast, *Into One-another* is read most easily from the bottom upwards, where we see identifiable aspects of a body in the form of limbs. Moving upwards, the reading process becomes increasingly difficult as the number of recognizable bodily elements decreases. The light that falls onto the statue enters the image from the right side, similar to the photograph of the *David*, but the light is more evenly dispersed on the top "torso." It is the bottom figure that is darkened by shadow.

Apart from the formal structure of these images, the *David* is easily identified as young, muscular, and male. As such, it is highly mimetic in its representation of the most familiar characteristics of the normative human body. *Into One-another* does not allow to be read with similar ease through identifying categories such as age or gender. Thus, in reading the *David*, my description is characterized by identifying characteristics; we can read the *David* in relation to a certain frame of reference. *Into One-another* does not as easily allow for this mode of reading; it resists the process of identification that we naturally tend to do when reading a cultural artefact. If we continue reading for form, something else becomes apparent regarding the ways in which these statues support themselves. *Into One-another* is arched back, resting on its knees and hands with its torso exposed. If we carefully look at the *David*, we can see that, due to the slightly slanted left foot, its weight rests on its right leg. However, upon further reading it appears that the right leg is enveloped in a tree stump, prosthetically

functioning to support the leg in order for the statue to stand and remain upright.

When reading images, we initially tend to read for the things we recognize and are attuned to. What my reading above shows is that two things happen during this process of reading. Firstly, there is a relationship between reading the familiar and the unfamiliar and the way this can affect a reader of the image; familiar things tend to be more pleasing to look at, whereas the unfamiliar and the difficult-to-read is often experienced as dissonant. Secondly, we tend to miss things when reading an image for the first time: the tree stump enveloping the *David*'s leg might be attributed as "merely" decorative, yet without it the statue would likely tumble over. Close reading, then, not only allows for an affective experience, but can also *alter* the nature of that experience. It is unlikely that anyone would initially read the *David* as a disabled figure, yet through close reading the image this interpretation becomes intelligible.

This line of reasoning is the inverse of the slogan often seen in public spaces and transport that "not all disabilities are visible." Rather, it matters how, when, and where we read disability. In this sense it is similar to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's statement that the fact that "anyone can become disabled at any time makes disability more fluid" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 14). I argue that this fluidity of disability extends to the process of reading disability itself, for the act of reading disability has the potential to diminish or nuance a complex understanding of disability.

This argument should not be confused with the idea that the legibility of disability consequently makes disability a social construct, as has been argued within disability studies. Rather, I tie the question of this legibility to our affective responses to disabilities. As Garland-Thomson argues elsewhere, "[b]ecause we both crave and dread unpredictable sights, staring encounters are fraught with anxious contradiction," and "[s]eeing disabilities reminds us of […] the truth of our body's vulnerability to the randomness of fate" (*Staring* 19). Staring may be passive in that we do not necessarily actively interpret while we stare, although staring can eventually render something legible (*Staring* 15). Reading, by contrast, is active and requires the attention and interpretation of a reader in making bodies legible.

The prosodies of gaps and bodies: Affect theory and disability

The relationship between affect and the representation of the (disabled) body has been the object of scrutiny in different scholarly literatures. Why and how do

certain bodies evoke responses that are affectively charged, such as sympathy, disgust, or laughter and amusement?

In the conclusion to her study *Fictions of Affliction* (2010), Martha Stoddard Holmes presents a political aporia that is often linked to the concept of disability; the acknowledgement of disability being experienced as "different" has to lead to either its embrace or abandonment, while ignoring it only leaves the "problem of how culture assigns meaning to bodily difference" unexamined, which does not mean that this process does not take place (192). Holmes does not explicitly examine how the evocation of affect is related to this process of signification. Rather, her argument points out that the way we feel about disability carries with it political consequences and claims that the "stories that pervade our lives make disability resound so intensely in emotional terms that all other possible registers [...] are often informed and overshadowed by affect" (3). This statement reinforces the notion that disability is a matter of discourse, but it does raise the question of how that discourse is "informed and overshadowed" by affect.

Since I primarily use the term "affect" rather than "emotion" in this article, these concepts may require some further elucidation as these terms can mean different things in various scholarly literatures. In a critique of what has been called "the affective turn," Ruth Leys argues that affect refers to the "formless, unstructured nonsignifying forces or 'intensity'" (442), which is similar to a definition used by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg who argue that "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body" (1). Sarah Ahmed's reflections on the distinction between affect and emotion in affect theory primarily focus on exploring how different bodies can impress on one another and the affective *effects* emotions can have while explicitly not seeking to separate consciousness and intentionality (208). What Leys and Ahmed share is the notion that emotion is prone to being reduced to intentional and subjective experience which affective intensities could transcend.

I argue that the question concerning the distinction between emotion and affect needs to address in what way this distinction can advance the way we think about these concepts as well as how making this distinction could help us in analyzing problems, and with regard to this study, the relationship between affective responses and the representation of disabled bodies. To contrast emotion and affect purely on the notion of the subjectivity or intentionality of experience is to distinguish them not carefully enough; when we experience an emotion, it is quite clear that affect is involved; something, an object or a body (or a multitude of those) impresses upon us, which may lead us to exclaim a

sensation of a specific emotion such as love or hate towards this object or body. Often, however, such emotional states are jumbled, confused, or unclear. This leads to the following question: How do we represent a concept that, by its very definition, entails forces and intensities barely registered?

One literary theorist who addresses this question is Isobel Armstrong in the chapter "Thinking Affect" of her monograph *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000). Through a scrutinizing review of different sources, Armstrong examines various definitions of affect. One of these definitions states that affect is "a triple 'combination', bodily discharge, perception of that motor action and a qualitative assessment of pleasure or pain, held together by an indefinable 'core' experience" (110). Armstrong questions the way in which affective forces, as they are *corporeal forces*, can be represented through symbolic means like language and images. The fact that an affective experience is de facto a bodily experience means that ultimately signs will always fail to represent affect fully, since a part of this experience lies precisely outside of the process of symbol-making and signification.

One of the conclusions Armstrong offers is that affect is best thought of as residing in a space in between the forming of subjective experience and the directness of unconsciousness. Thereby, this conceptualization of affect rejects the binary opposition between thought and emotion, and the value of aesthetic experience as necessarily having to reside in fully formed symbolic meanings. As noted by Armstrong, "[a]ffect is not hostile to intellect but simultaneously feeds it and feeds on it. This is a theory of 'travail', of the work or labour of affect which brings epistemic questioning into being. Affect can do this because it is *mobile*" (119). This mobility is vital, according to Armstrong, because it underscores the somatic sociability of affect; it moves and impresses upon and through different bodies. It is precisely in this mobility that traces of symbols and signs can be formed through corporeal expression, while at the same time this expressivity itself is caught in a continuous productive process of signification.

Armstrong summarizes such a poetics of affect as follows:

> As I have said, we should be thinking of the rebus and its capacity for suturing disparate languages or dialects from different orders of the self as 'representant' and hybrid symbol/affects. We should be thinking not only of the prosody of the body – the grimace, the shudder, and their somatic inscriptions in languages – but also of the prosody of the gap, the blank space, articulation through the pause, the moment of void. More important, we should be thinking

> less of the representation of these elements in the text in terms of substitution of symbol for originary affect; thinking more *of the reproduction of the conditions of affective life within the text itself*. If affect is untranslatable, and cannot be *in* language, cannot have content, we might seek for devious evidences of its inscription and consider the way it cheats itself into language or inhibits symbol-making, but in the last analysis the idea of substitution has to be abandoned and replaced by a dynamic understanding of the text as generating new affect patterns and thought structures. (124)

Armstrong's words suggest a kind of formalism; affect is not *in* language but can be evoked by it through reading the different ways in which signs are used, and not used (i.e. gaps) in a text or cultural artefact. These prosodies evoke affective, and analyzable, patterns and structures. The emphasis here on "the reproduction of the conditions of affective life within the text" and the affective-generative power of texts is crucial; rather than reading for the way in which a certain emotion is represented (in which affect would be reduced solely to "content" without regarding form, and consequently stops being "affect" as conceptualized earlier), the reproduction of affect through the form of a text can show how art itself is generative of affect.

Still, the problem of representing affect could also be approached in opposite manner; the two prosodies mentioned by Armstrong, that of the gap and that of the body, show different approaches to affect, which, like the relationship between affect and emotion, is both distinct and entangled. The issue of "thematizing" affect has already been noted as a problem for representation. It is the prosody of gaps, with its focus on reading for pattern of form, which allows a different approach to exploring how texts may generate affect. Yet, the prosody of the gestures of the body, with its emphasis on bodily expressions (which are themselves also signs), is not unimportant – least of all to this study. It is key that these prosodies are not understood as opposites but as being entangled. Bodily expressions themselves can form patterns and sequences; in order to interpret how affect may be generated through representational means, it is necessary to examine how the impressions it forms move between and through different represented bodies. In this way, representational bodily expression is not opposite to affective formalism, but rather a part of the structures studied by it.

Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects* (2014) is an example of a study that explores the type of approach suggested by Armstrong. Brinkema is dissatisfied with what she calls "neo-formalism" in film studies and the

developments within this field. She argues for what she claims is a "radical formalism," which in terms of methodology means reading for form, while arguing for the notion that affects may have forms themselves: "Reading affects as having form involves de-privileging models of expressivity and interiority in favour of treating affects as structures that work through formal means, as consisting in the formal dimensions (as line, light, color, rhythm and so on) of passionate structures" (37). Unlike Armstrong, then, Brinkema insists on affects as *having* forms. But as Armstrong argues, this move would by extension suggest that affect is itself representable, rather than generated through formal means, including what might appear as "absent" in an artwork through its gaps. Brinkema introduces a concept akin to this that she calls "mise-n'en-scéne"; "in addition to reading for what is put into the scene, one must also read for all its permutations: what is *not* put into the scene; what is put into the *non-scene*; and what is *not enough* put into the scene" (46), closely resembling Armstrong's prosody of gaps.

The relevance of affective formalism for the way in which we read disability can be elucidated through these two prosodies of gaps and bodies. In my reading of the *David* and *Into One-another*, the gap in the form of the *David* that a surface reading may overlook is the prosthetic function of tree trunk enveloping its leg, stabilizing the statue's position. In reading for that which is in plain sight, we pass this over as being mere decoration. By contrast, *Into One-another* foregrounds a reading of the body *as form* by not offering expected signifying markers carried by bodies such as gender, race, or age, and thereby allows for an analysis of how this form generates affective responses. Affectively reading *for* disability, then, is always a matter of reading where and how we see gaps, lacks, and deviances when we read these bodies (and when we do *not* see these absences), both in their formal appearance as well as in their gestures and actions.

In *Forms* (2015), Caroline Levine posits that one way of reading for form is to look for the "affordances" of a particular form: "To capture the complex operations of social and literary forms, I borrow the concept of *affordance* from design theory. *Affordance* is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" (6). Levine's "borrowing" of this concept is especially useful to literary disability studies; rather than reading for the way in which disability is discursively framed within a text, what I propose is to read the representations of disability for what they afford; how are these representations ordered and structured to generate affective responses in their audiences? This approach requires a meticulous and scrutinizing form of close-reading. As Armstrong has argued, the *conditions* by which life is reproduced within a text to

generate affect, methodologically points to an analysis of the complex interweaving of the various forms that texts have to offer.

As such, I argue that when we read for disability, we need to examine the different formal structures this way of reading can uncover in order to understand how the affective responses generated by and through our engagement with these texts and artefacts relate to these formal structures. While this proposed method does not denounce a discursive analysis of disability in cultural and literary texts and should be understood adjacent to it, this affective-formalist approach thus foregrounds the potential for a deeper understanding of the affective responses that the mimetic representation of disability may evoke.

Disability and its paradigms

In *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (2009), a series of three essays concerning methods for textual analysis, Giorgio Agamben explores different approaches to reading texts other than the established methods of semiotics and hermeneutics. The first of these essays is concerned with the concept of the paradigm, often associated with T. S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* ([1962] 2012). In Kuhn's study the term is so often used that it is difficult to pinpoint an exact definition, although Agamben distils two definitions as the most significant. The first is the paradigm as a "set of techniques, models, and values to which the group members [of a scientific community] adhere" (Agamben 11). The second use is defined as "simply an example, a single case that by its repeatability acquires the capacity to model tacitly the behaviour and research practice of the scientists" (Agamben 11). These two meanings suggest a complex relationship to be covered by a single term: on the one hand the paradigm is the particular practice, on the other it is an example within that practice, which through being an example of the practice reifies it.

Within disability studies, a common distinction is made between the medical and the social model of disability. The medical model refers to how disabled bodies are seen as bodies that need to be treated or corrected. The social model differentiates between the physical or mental impairment a person might have and how an environment, that may be both social and physical, is arranged and disables a person's mobility in that environment (Goodley 8). These models are paradigms in the sense that they constitute methods to conceptualize disability, yet within these models there are also specific cases or examples that reify these models as paradigms. The medical model works through a taxonomic logic that is inductive; a certain manifestation of a disability is compared to the other paradigms of the taxonomy in which it is placed, unless it does not fit within

the existing taxonomy, and as such becomes a separate paradigm and a new entry in the classificatory scheme. The social model, on the other hand, works the other way around; how does an environment (e.g. a school, an office, public transport) disable a particular person with a particular impairment? This model is therefore deductive.

These models showcase the seemingly necessary practical applications of their method, but also the accompanying shortcomings. Moving from the universal to the particular or vice versa, both paradigms reify the opposition between the two, and as such specific and particular iterations of a perceived disability are always examined within the limitations of their respective paradigms. This is motivated through the reasoning that many manifestations of perceived disabilities share similar or the same characteristics, and as such methods of treatment are often also similar and knowledge of treatment may be shared within the paradigm. However, the problem with such a paradigm is that it does not ask *what has become lost* by accepting this method as a *given* when engaging disability; how is *this* manifestation of a particular disability separate and distinct from *that* one. This is why paradigms, as particular examples, appear paradoxical specifically because of their particularity *and* in their capacity to simultaneously be an example. As each disability is itself an example of perceived anatomical deviances and irregular behaviors that allows it to be placed in its respective paradigm, it *can be* an example in the first place. Yet, concurrently, no two disabilities are exactly the same. It is through their dissimilarity that we can examine their own particularity.

Agamben goes on to argue that if induction is moving from the particular to the universal, and deduction from the universal to the particular, the paradigm supposes to move from the particular to the particular, undermining a conception of a strict binary opposition of what we can conceive as solely universal or particular. If disability is generally approached and examined through established inductive and deductive paradigms, reading for the conditions through which affective life is reproduced within texts means being attentive and sensitive to the relationships in which those conditions can be simultaneously read as examples and in which they differentiate and are particular. To examine the relationship between different particularities in an artwork, then, constitutes not only examining the formal elements that we can discern in that artwork, but also the relationship between these elements. This is because individual aspects of an artwork, when considered by themselves, may be repeated, paradigmatically, throughout various artworks (and in certain instances, as in plot structures for example, the relationships between different aspects as well). This is precisely why

examining these conditions within artworks is so valuable; all art offers particularities which themselves may also be extrapolated to be used as examples of (aesthetic) paradigms that they are representative of and may be included in. What separates the study of art from other conceptual paradigms for the study of disability then, is that, in the study of an artwork, an understanding of disability can be considered and created *in its particularity*. As such, this approach complicates, and could even resist, the gesture of extrapolating disabilities into universal paradigms, in which we risk reducing the complexity of both our understanding and experience of disability to becoming general paradigmatic notions.

In my comparative reading of the *David* and *Into One-another* I have argued that while the *David* conforms to established categories of identity such as gender and age, *Into One-another* resists the process of understanding it in these categories, thereby evoking an affective response of dissonance. Therefore, these artworks relate differently to the concept of the paradigm, although both may be understood in a paradigmatic fashion. Whereas the *David* is paradigmatic as a young, male body, *Into One-another* is paradigmatic in how it represents those bodies that resist being understood in relation to, and interpreted through, those same categories of identity. Understanding how these statues can be read allows deeper knowledge of how they relate to and deviate from established paradigms. Simultaneously, this knowledge may influence our affective responses to art. The relationships between different aspects of an artwork are themselves both particular (the *David*'s leg enveloped in the tree stump, allowing us to read it as a disabled figure) and an example of a paradigm (the *David*'s paradigmatic function as a young athletic male). This particular feature of an artwork offers a different way of reading disability that other paradigms do not allow; it provides a method for being attentive and sensitive to the particular, thereby reifying Armstrong's suggestion to read for the reproduction of the conditions for affective life within cultural texts and artefacts, as these conditions and their patterns, even though they may share similarities, can never be exactly the same in two artworks.

Affect, unlike the many specific emotions that relate to a direct object and/or event, is itself in part informed and constituted by the conjunctions between the series of objects and events that, in turn, make up such conditions for affective life. Therefore, affect should not be perceived as being antagonistic to representation. The difficulty to interpret *Into One-another* in terms of established categories of identity is a primary element at work in how it evokes affective responses. Each statue considered on its own can be paradigmatic and

can be read as a cultural artefact. To read for a specific set of conditions that reproduce affective life through mimetic representation, then, also means to read for the ways in which relationships between these conditions are specifically established within and through the artwork.

Conclusion

I have argued that reading for disability in mimetic representation matters in how these representations evoke affective responses. Following this, I have proposed that the method to examine the affective affordances of disability in visual art is through a formalist approach. This approach to reading artworks focuses on how structures within artworks may generate affect through the reproduction of the conditions for affective life, rather than to solely represent affect as "theme" or "content" within an artwork. Finally, I have argued that this method allows to engage with the particularity of disability in and through mimetic representation, which could lead to a better understanding of how disabilities relate, resist, or fit into existing paradigms, including other models currently used in disability studies. This approach may ultimately provide a deeper understanding of, as well as a renewed interest in, the relationship between the particularity of disabilities and their mimetic representation.

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