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An interview with visual artist and body positivity activist viola thiele on visible hidden disabilities

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Nina Stuhldreher (Vienna/ Berlin/ Internet) is a perpetually re-emerging visual artist, university lecturer and alternative realities activist with multiple incompatibilities. She has exhibited and lectured internationally and is currently - while trying to exorcise academic discourses from her own brain – aiming to help establish a debate on neurodiversity in the art field. Following her interest in the entanglement of normativity and surveillance, she has been lecturing on disability studies, internet activism and cognitive disobedience from a feminist perspective at the University of Art and Design in Linz (Austria).

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Abstract

As part of my research into non-normative bodyminds as epistemological tools, I have conducted interviews with artists with hidden disabilities. “Fatness” is in plain sight but not (yet) fully canonized as disability, thus remaining invisible. Visual artist and activist Viola Thiele shared her experiences and strategies in regard to fat shaming on body positivity with me.

Keywords: hidden disabilities, fat positivity, shame, gender roles, artistic genius, bodymind, ableist gaze

Viola Thiele is a classic Berlin-type artist: well-read, expert in both contemporary theoretical debates and fashion trends, with a wide range of skills from graphic design to music production, and with a multilateral versatility that allows her to speak comfortably in both high and subcultural art. She holds an MA in “Art in Context” from University of the Arts Berlin, works as political educator about German Nazi history with young students, and has an artistic career that reaches from gigs in off-spaces to performances at prestigious institutions like Fondation Cartier Paris and the Venice Biennale. She is part of an artist’s community where anti-discrimination politics, feminist theory, and a certain criticality towards normativity, are understood as essential elements and preconditions for a contemporary approach to art production. And yet, even in that environment, one important aspect in Viola’s life has so far been overlooked as a social problem and categorized as a merely personal one, or even regarded as her own fault: her body size. In the context of my research into non-normative bodyminds as potential epistemological tools that can help generate more universally valid new perspectives, I became interested in the social effects of invisible disabilities that especially artists experience. I decided to interview Viola in regard to this topic. While in plain sight, “fatness” is not (yet) fully canonized as a disability and, as such, remains invisible. Approaching the experiences of someone with a non-normative body size with the same set of questions as those I chose for artists with “classic” hidden disabilities, seemed to me to be the appropriate method.

Our conversation was even more productive than expected. Viola’s thoughtful observations about her own and other people’s ways of dealing with her appearance bear the opportunity to make the skinnier-bodied rest of the world realize how canonized—or brainwashed—we all are in relation to our concept of what is a “normal” body size. Applying this perception onto more general aesthetic theories and extending the deconstruction of the socio-optical filter trained into us from its view onto body norms to that onto all visual forms, the ability to see the world with the eyes of a “fat person” could even be a game changer in relation to the goût that has been perpetuated for centuries

within the (white, Western) field of high art. This potential change of perspectives shows the productively disruptive power that disability studies can have, and should actually come with a trigger warning for art educators—as it could result in no less than causing the existing system of academy entrance exams to tumble, which nowadays are mostly not testing craftsman skills, but are rather a selection method for incoming young artistic positions expected to match the dominant taste and thus guarantee the continuity of what one might call a certain *ableist gaze*. The following section is my interview with Viola about such matters.



Figure 1. Viola Thiele (left) and Isabel Reiss (right) as Mosh Mosh, photo shoot for an interview with the Swiss women’s fashion magazine *annabelle* (2009). ©Karin Heer.

Nina: Can you describe your disability? Were you born with it and, if not, when did you acquire it and was it difficult to adjust to it?

Viola

My condition is plus size, fatness, overweight—or actually nothing really, because that type of monstrosity is a social construct. I got aware quite early that I am a bit more chubby or lumpy than other kids, that kind of stigmatization already started in Kindergarten and continued in school, where kids would make fun of my “huge ass.” Even other parents thought addressing me with pejorative terms would be okay, one father always called me “thick noodle,” probably in order to create a difference to the looks of his own daughter, who was almost as chubby as me. I know that tactic, I actually applied it on some other girl who was more obese than I was, and I joined in picking on her to create a distance to her. I discriminated someone so not to be discriminated. Initially I was told it would be puppy fat and go away, but it didn’t, that condition is simply natural for me. But my mum used to taunt: “Viola hides her beauty behind fat pads,” the quintessence of which being I would be more valuable if I was skinnier. She also believed she herself would be too fat — and she was a mannequin for fashion boutiques! — and still asks my cousin to convince me to diet with her or tries to talk to me about it for “health reasons.” I was always super afraid to go to the school doctor. Until today I am afraid of situations where one is being categorized and measured and weighed.

Nina: How does disability affect your daily life?

Viola

People are obviously quite keen on commenting whenever they see a body with visible anomalies. They feel absolutely legitimated not only to judge your looks, but also to draw conclusions about what shape you are in, what state of health you are in or your general situation, as it is commonly assumed that being fat derives from overindulging, letting oneself go or even forms of self-neglect. I react to that with an inner ambivalence, thinking “I don’t give a hang” on the one side and erecting a wall around myself on the other, so that I do not need listen

to such idiocy. And it is nothing that people only do to children or teenagers. Still today, if people are talking about me and try to specify who I am, they go like — “do you mean her?” (*puffs her cheeks and indicates a large body volume with her arms*). It is also sometimes seen as a sexual fetish, but a very ambivalent one, that is seen as weakness and is used for demonstration of power at the same time. That has happened repeatedly that the adult brats that hang out on the corner of the street near my home are coming on to me. When I gave one of them a sound bite about why I do not approve of this, he yelled after me: “Nobody wants to fuck you anyway, fat pig!” That really got me thinking, how easily those words crossed his lips—it is obviously still okay to discriminate “fatsoes,” everyone agrees with that, as of course, it “is their own fault.” I also know that among young girls that insult is considered worse than “slut” or “bitch.” I do not know any other form of discrimination that still is as widely socially accepted and internalized as that of obese people. Maybe ageism.



Figure 2. Viola Thiele (left) and Isabel Reiss (right) performing as Mosh Mosh during one of the « Nomadic Nights » at Fondation Cartier, Paris, dedicated to the film «Blutbad Parade» by Pauline Curnier-Jardin that Thiele is starring in (2015). ©Olivier Ouadah.

Also, you are being permanently reminded of that by the fashion industry or even objects or architecture. It is being discriminated by objects that are not intended for people like me to use them. And surely, I find clothes, but you are not allowed to choose what you wear. You simply wear whatever you find. Yet then you have designers like stupid Karl Lagerfeld publicly say things like “I do not want a fat [dress size 42] to wear my clothes,” and the media broadcasts that. It has become a bit better in the past years, with “fatshion” blogs and plus size models. But still, just look at all these dehumanizing TV shows, not just Heidi Klum and “Germany’s Next Top model” and the like, but all these casting show formats that disassemble the participants into single pieces. No matter what it is, whether you are not thin enough or sing out of tune, a malicious glee about your incompatibilities gets publicly endorsed.



Nina: Do you ever feel ashamed or guilty because of your disability? Or is there even some advantage about it?



Figures 3. and 4. Viola Thiele, overpowering Pauline Curnier-Jardin during Mosh Mosh’s performance at a «Nomadic Night» at Fondation Cartier, Paris, dedicated to Curnier-Jardin’s film « Blutbad Parade » (2015). ©Olivier Ouadah

Viola

As I already described, the experiences related to my “condition” are almost entirely about body shaming. But my work with “Mosh Mosh” (2007) is my outlet for the experiences I have in daily life, we turn it around and dedicate it to body positivity. “Mosh Mosh” is an electro-glam-fem-trash-performance duo that consists of me and Isabel Reiss, our shows are based on self-written electronic music songs that we sing, dressed in costumes. The project does not scream “Wow, fat positivity!” It is more about a diversity of bodies, or diversity in general, we want to point to alternatives, alternatives in lifestyle, in politics. We do all kinds of things that are deemed socially unacceptable. We play with expectations and normativity linked to a mainstream social narrative, and especially with images that girls and women get assigned to. Girls are supposed to be innocent, well-behaved, beauty-pageant-oriented—these divisions also have economic aspects, there is a whole industry behind that, separate markets for boys’ products

and girls' products. In the videoclip to the song "Lovely & Nice," for example, we do not dress up as you might expect one does for a music video, but we show the non-glamorous reality of our bodies. It deals with the idea of ladylikeness, we put on make-up, we use mascara, but we do not only apply it to our eye-lashes but also onto our teeth, exactly in order to play with and crack those images. In our shows, we also deconstruct this artificial kind of glamour, we go from gala-style divas—who already display certain disruptions—to full-on punk style chaos. We do all kinds of ecstatic "stage acrobatics" like crawling over the floor, jumping on tables, climbing on cars outside the venue, Isa is riding on my shoulders through the audience or attempting to do stage diving—possibly without being caught (*laughs*). I am quite fit, but if someone is not super skinny and wiry, people can often not believe what you are able to do, like doing the splits, or climbing up the loge as I once did in a Berlin club. We are aiming at a reaction when people say, "she isn't really doing that, is she?" And then we double down.



Figure 5. and 6. Left: Thiele, conquering the bar during the performance of Mosh Mosh at SUPERBOUM 7, le Stakhanov, Nantes (2012). Right: Thiele carrying an alleged art critic on her shoulders during Mosh Mosh's opening act for the Swiss pavilion at Venice Biennale (2013). ©Mosh Mosh archive.



Nina: How does your disability influence your work—practically but also topically? Was it relevant for choosing a profession in the art field? Would you make a different kind of art if you did not have that disability?

Viola

Becoming an artist on the one hand was the wish to fit in somewhere, as I always felt a bit excluded and never really belonged somewhere. On the other hand, being an artist enables you to freedoms you otherwise would not enjoy. It was some kind of forward escape, turning one's flaws into a strength or even promoting it as a uniqueness. For example, the French artist Pauline Curnier-Jardin casted me for her work *Bloodbath Parade* (2015), a surreal video about a real circus that was accidentally bombed out during World War I, for the role of the circus director. She always produces very strong images and body images, and underlines that with glamorous costumes and an overall "extrovert" aesthetic. And a certain reminiscence to the historic movie *Freaks* (Browning, 1931) was very likely intended. But I was never able

to reach that all by myself, this idea of “harvesting” one’s flaws, I always needed the context of a group for that. When I am with a group, those are the moments when I feel strong, whereas when I am alone, I tend to behave in a way so that I am not attracting attention, simply pursuing my everyday activities and not aiming to stand out. My stage persona “Lady Mosh” is a different person than Viola, it is almost like walking in someone else’s shoes or lending my body to a person who deals totally differently with it, in a way, which I am not “allowed” to.

Nina: Do you feel that you have to hide your disability from colleagues, or do you openly talk about it? If not, for what reason? Do you have the impression that disability is accepted in the art world and complies with the notion of the artistic genius?

Viola

I do speak about my “fatness,” just not necessarily with people from the art world. A general acceptance of body positivity has very well arrived here, but rather in relation to the idea of diverse bodies and not in relation to fat bodies. Even when speaking to my artist friends I often reach the point where I realize there is in no way for a larger open-mindedness, they are part of the same system of thought as everyone else. Although they know which topic I have been dealing with for years and how much it affects me, they still complement each other in front of me like “Oh you look good today—so slim!” and so on. There is only very little understanding for how bad it is to reproduce certain biases and images. Of course, there is a general understanding that it is not okay to discriminate people. But even if people say to me that it would not matter to them if someone is corpulent or skinny and that they would not regard fat people as ugly, they still live their own lives according to this meta-narrative and try everything to lose weight for whatever reason and keep making these shady compliments. And even I myself always need a moment to step out of that stereotyped thinking, I do not exclude me from that. There is no such thing as an “outside,” I am part of this society, it is very important to be aware of that and accept that.

But the concept of the genius is anyway not relevant to me. Maybe that has to do with the fact that, to me, the construction of the genius always has a male connotation, it is a very outdated idea. I do, in fact, sometimes think “hey, that is ingenious” in relation to intellectual outpourings that people have. But I regard that as rather being something connected to the field of inspiration. If you read that notion of the genius the other way around, it is about people who “always stay in character,” who do not have an “everyday self,” who are always these “ingenious” artists, sparkling with inspiration and great ideas and sweeping others along.



Figure 7. Viola Thiele taking the performance outside into the rainy streets and doing the splits on a sidewalk during a performance of Mosh Mosh in context of the exhibition « Screen Realities » at IG Bildende Kunst, Vienna (2010). © Mosh Mosh archive

I just think that has to be a construction, that does not really exist, except for, maybe, if you are maniacally driven, I do not know if that is being a genius or having a condition. I am aware that this comment is not exactly scientific, but I know such artists personally who have quite an aura which they probably also “cultivate” to a certain extent in order to fit an image—but of whom I also know that there is a crack in that image.

Nina: With the concept of the genius and ableism yet appearing to be generally still such constitutive elements to the predominant notion of art, do you have hopes there will ever be a change of perspective in the art world? Do you have any specific wishes, ideas or even action plans in relation to all that?

Viola

Yes, I will work as an art teacher at a state school from 2019/20 on.

Nina: Sounds like a perfect place to work as influencer. Good luck and thanks a lot for the interview!

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