

Kenny Fries “Crip Time”

The sign next to the interior ramp at the Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) indicates that it is too steep for wheelchair users. Though there is an elevator to access the three floors of exhibition space, the inaccessible ramp and its sign form an apt metaphor for the “Crip Time” exhibit.

Disability/feminist/queer scholar Alison Kafer defines crip time as follows: “rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.”¹ By this definition “Crip Time”—unlike Shannon Finnegan’s refashioned one-handed clocks, *Have you ever fallen in love with a clock?* (2021), in which the days of the week replace numbers—has not bent the clock nearly enough.

An entire major museum dedicated to disability-related work from 41 international artists and collaboratives is a big deal; as far as I know, on this scale it’s unprecedented. But the work is shown without the necessary cultural, historical, and political context. Too many times one is forced to ask how the work relates to crip time and, even when the connection is obvious, it is too often in the medical model of disability, in which the body’s impairment is at issue, rather than the social model, in which physical and attitudinal barriers are the disabling agents.

The exhibit starts promisingly in the spacious first-floor atrium with Emilie Louise Gossiaux’s sculpture *Dancing with London* (2021). The joyful double presentation of Gossiaux’s guide dog London, reinforced in drawings hung in a room nearby, gives an intimate look at the relationship between the artist and her support companion.

Nearby is Constantina Zavitsanos’s *Specific Objects (stack)* (2015), disabled access horizontal grab bars hung vertically on the wall. Here, the display of assistive devices brings to mind Donald Judd’s minimalism, as well as a Duchampian ready-made. It is both beautiful and, in its appropriation, transformative, though its relationship to crip time is not clear.

With Isa Genzken’s untitled overturned wheelchair, which positions the chair as a sculptural object removed from what the exhibition guide calls its “drab functionality,” the curation fails to make clear the relationship of the artist with the device. Genzken’s *Krankenhausfotos (Hospital Photos)* (1991), which document incidental details from the artist’s hospitalization, are included as if to justify the artist’s presence in the exhibit. What do these pieces add to the notion of crip time beyond the medical realm? What is a wheelchair without its user? Those familiar with Julia Watts Belser’s 2016 essay “Vital Wheels: Disability Relationality, and the Queer Animacy of Vibrant Things” or Jo Spence’s cancer photographs will know that more apt inclusions could have been chosen to illuminate and expand the show’s central theme.²



Chloe Pascal Crawford, *For the 12 disabled people in Lebenshilfehaus (Area of Refuge)*, 2021. Installation, dimensions variable. Photo by Diana Pfammatter. Image courtesy of Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.

“Crip Time” includes work about HIV/AIDS, but Wolfgang Tillmans is the only living artist with HIV included in the show. His *17 years’ supply* (2014)—a photo of his medications, which was his public “coming out” as HIV-positive—is time counted in pills.

Some important disability history is given in brief videos (Leroy F. Moore Jr.’s 2015 *Black Disabled Art History 101*, the Karrabing Film Collective’s 2020 *The Road*). But the exhibit’s overall lack of historical context is most evident in the room of work about and referencing the Holocaust and Aktion T4, the Nazi program that mass-murdered disabled people. Instead of making a more immediate and contemporary connection, “Crip Time” proffers Gerhard Richter’s *Tante Marianne (Fotofassung zu WV 87)* (1965/2018), a photo version of his well-known painting about his aunt who was killed in Aktion T4. With most viewers unlikely to know much, or anything, about T4, the lack of contemporary work about this crucible of disability history is a missed opportunity. Instead we are given Rosemarie Trockel’s *Art is Depression* (2017), a rather bland metaphorical sculptural box about confinement.

However, across the room is the work of the Brothers Sick (Ezra and Noah Benus) who, thankfully, make the connection in their directly powerful *Right to Rest in the Rhythm of the Sick/Work Will Not Set Us Free* (2021). The disabled brother artists, through their spiraling text, transform by countering the eugenicist idea of the disabled being “useless eaters,” affirming our right to rest while questioning the capitalist work ethic underlying much disability oppression. This work is especially important in the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately affected the disabled.

The most obvious missed opportunity is perhaps Chloe Pascal Crawford’s site-specific *For the 12 disabled people in Lebenshilfehaus (Area of Refuge)* (2021), a commemoration of those who were trapped and drowned by the floods in Germany in July 2021. Crawford places her work in and down a staircase. The only access for those barred by stairs is through a convex mirror, which shows a room down around the bend. By placing her room in an inaccessible place but still allowing for non-disabled access, Crawford re-inscribes the inaccessible rather than force the non-disabled to experience it.

Which brings me back to the ramp. Why not cordon it off, thus equalizing and prioritizing access? Too often “Crip Time” seems like an anesthetized hospital providing limited access to the wide variety of disability experience and to understanding what crip time actually is.

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Kenny Fries is the author of *In the Province of the Gods*, *The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin's Theory*, and *Body, Remember: A Memoir*. His current work-in-progress is *Stumbling over History: Disability and the Holocaust*, excerpts of which are the basis for his video series *What Happened Here in the Summer of 1940?*

1

Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.

2

Julia Watts Belser, "Vital Wheels: Disability, Relationality, and the Queer Animacy of Vibrant Things" in *Hypatia* Vol. 31 No. 1 (Winter, 2016), 5-21.