ISSN: 2345-0479 / eISSN: 2345-0487

VILNIUS TECH
Vilnius Gediminas Technical University

CREATIVITY STUDIES

2026
Volume 19
Issue 2
Pages 585–593
https://doi.org/10.3846/cs.2026.26534

HUMAN DIFFERENCE AS CREATIVITY: FROM WITCH HUNTS TO DISABILITY ART

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Article History:
- received 31 March 2026
- accepted 25 September 2026

Abstract. This article introduces disability art, a form of art gaining social visibility and attracting academic attention worldwide. It aims to demonstrate how disability art can broaden our understanding of reality, including the phenomenon of humanness. By revealing the creative dimension of disability, which we consider a form of human difference, this article draws parallels between the negative social treatment of disability and witch hunts, arguing that such treatment is a prejudiced exclusionary social practice directed against human difference. It has become especially prominent in the context of scientific and technological expansion, which shapes the cultural conditions of the contemporary world. The analysis integrates the disability rights discourse, the concept of artistic research, and one author's technologically mediated experience of disability, further exploring the relationship between disability and the revelation of human creative potential (Markuckas, 2026).

Keywords: disability art, human, artistic research, transhumanism, difference, deaf art, witch hunts.

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1. Introduction

Since ancient times, disability in Western thought has been understood as a threatening element of human existence that must be eliminated. This view remains prevalent today, with this kind of rejection most explicitly expressed in the vision of human development, which emphasizes unlimited human capacity and invulnerability. This article reflects on how society treats disability from the perspective of witch hunts, identifying common ground between the two phenomena in their social exclusion of human difference.

Against this background, this article critically examines the deficit approach to disability by focusing on creativity. Building on an earlier analysis of the experiential and cognitive dimensions of disability and their creative potential (Markuckas, 2026), the main aim is to show, through disability art, that disability as a form of human difference contains a creative dimension that enriches both individual and collective existence. Disclosing this dimension makes it possible to raise the following question: Is the socially dominant negative evaluation of disability justified? The analysis integrates the disability rights discourse, the concept of artistic research, and one author's technologically mediated experience of disability, which serves as an illustrative example of disability-based revelation of human creative potential.

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2. Witch hunts and disability

The expression *witch hunt* primarily refers to the persecution, including executions, of people in Europe and North America between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries who were accused of causing misfortune by drawing power from evil spirits. These people were accused of causing conflicts, disease, death of livestock, crop loss, and other harms affecting individuals, families, or communities. Since the twentieth century, the expression has increasingly been used as a metaphor for an environment of political and ideological radicalization: "[a]s in the supernatural cases of witch hunts, the metaphorical witch hunt consists of a single-minded, bullying campaign in which a person or group is identified as possessing an unacceptable or subversive viewpoint – especially in regard to politics – and is, hence, persecuted" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

In this sense, the term *witch hunt* refers not only to a specific historical period but also to a broader social mechanism by which a person or group of persons is positioned as a source of danger to be eliminated to preserve the social body. The understanding of witchcraft as a force that allegedly threatens the established order becomes especially apparent in relation to how society sees disability, a kind of human difference that challenges socially entrenched psychophysical norms. Several scholarly studies have focused on the historical and cultural associations between witchcraft and disability, including bodily deformities and mental disorders (Hemphill, 1966; Reid-Cunningham, 2009; Eaton, 2020).

Nevertheless, it would not be accurate to identify the history of the persecution of people accused of witchcraft with the history of the oppression of persons with disabilities, even if, in some historical periods, the social perceptions of these phenomena were closely intertwined. Long before the formation of witch hunt practices in Europe and North America, disability was understood as a human deficit associated with moral flaws and social marginalization. Compared with the history of the stigmatization of disability, which can be traced back to the ancient societies of Sparta, Athens, and Rome, the witch hunt as a historical phenomenon is only a brief episode in human history. Even though these histories should primarily be considered separately, deeper cultural and social logic links them: the oppression of human difference.

It should also be noted that even today persons with disabilities are yet to be fully freed from the category of "witchcraft" or from the irrational discriminatory attitudes and socially eliminative practices associated with this category. The moral evaluation of disability has been replaced by medical pathology, and open accusations against persons with disabilities have been abandoned. However, this does not mean that the view of disability as a socially destructive force has disappeared. Rather, disability is now seen as a persecuted witch, pursued based on the belief that technoscientific knowledge can eradicate human disability completely and, thus, improve the existential condition of individuals, societies, and humanity. This process is not limited to medical practices or attempts to cure or rehabilitate persons with disabilities by restoring them to normal functioning. It rests on a much broader cultural and intellectual basis and can be recognized both in the increasingly influential technoscientific narratives of the omnipotent human (whom Harari (2016), for example, refers to as "Homo Deus") and in analyses of future-oriented scholarly discourse – the so-called sociology of futures – suggesting that disability simply does not figure in these visions, which thereby treat persons with disabilities as futureless beings (Morgan & Tutton, 2025).

3. Social control and disability art

The sociopolitical drive to control the human body is by no means unique to our time. Foucault (1978) discussed how the state seeks to shape its population (biopolitics) alongside the modern normalizing control of individual bodies (anatomo-politics). Agamben (1998), in turn, demonstrated how the value of life is formed within the field of political power, including the notion of a "life that does not deserve to live," and traced this formation back to antiquity. Taken together, these analyses reveal that human life is shaped through conformity to social norms (Foucault) and through political and legal decisions (Agamben, 1998).

Today, the mechanism of control over the body and its life is most clearly defined by the socially dominant aim that as few people as possible are born with certain diseases or disorders (preimplantation genetic testing, prenatal diagnostics) and that seriously ill people should have the possibility of ending their lives without waiting for death to occur naturally (euthanasia, assisted suicide). Between these two most fundamental points defining human existence, birth and death, the value of human life is measured according to its capacity to sustain a norm-conforming mode of being, both individually and biopolitically. Any form of life that fails to meet the demands of normativity is regarded as a source of existential threat – something that exceeds full human control and disturbs the ideal image of an ordered world and must therefore be identified and eliminated.

Hughes's (2012) analysis emphasizes this idea by showing that disability constitutes a fundamental challenge to the ableist-oriented project of Modernity. By employing the term "ontological invalidation," Hughes emphasizes that "[e]limination and/or correction have been the primary social response to disabled people in modernity" (ibid., p. 17). Although Hughes concentrates his analytical attention on Modernity, he reveals that the eliminative drive directed at persons with disabilities has a long history, reaching back to Antiquity and the Middle Ages, where disability was understood as an eliminable "moral and ontological pollutant" (ibid., p. 19). Therefore, the distinction Hughes draws between Antiquity and Modernity is not decisive; the main difference is that the ancient attitude toward disability as pollution within modern thought is recognized as a problem requiring not only social condemnation but also a solution. In this and other texts, Hughes emphasizes that Modernity relates to disability in two ways: either by banishing it or by correcting it (Hughes, 1999, 2002 cited in ibid., p. 30). However, according to Hughes, "[b]oth strategies – to kill or to cure – transmit the same core cultural message: disabled people represent 'what not to be' and are, therefore, ontologically invalid or 'uncivilised'" (ibid., p. 18).

The difference of disability is often reduced to impairment and treated accordingly as the opposite of life or as an incomplete, unworthy life. However, by refusing to recognize and seeking to control what, in the broadest sense, might be called the diversity of bodies – understood as a fundamental structure or mode of functioning both of the individual and of society – one risks not strengthening but rather weakening life's creative impulse by rejecting those specific, or even unique, perspectives of experiencing the world that different embodiments offer. Such refusal also reinforces the reductive binary thinking that tends to impose a distinction between ability and disability, vulnerability and resilience, weakness and strength, defect and ideal, and so on. This is emphasized by Rosa (2020), according to whom

the fullness of life is attained not through the effort to control the world but through an insight into the value of its uncontrollability.

The recognition of the importance of life's uncontrollability poses a conceptual challenge to the entire tradition of Western cultural thought, which from its very beginnings in the religious heritage of Judeo-Christianity and the philosophical legacy of ancient Greece was oriented toward the idea of a reality deliberately and willfully controlled by human beings. The apogee of this idea was reached in Modernity, when ultimate faith was placed in human omniscience and omnipotence – the ability to know reality and shape it. This faith, in turn, was expressed in the hope for human emancipation characteristic of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. However, as human history testifies, it ultimately revealed itself in the formation of totalitarian control. Zygmunt Bauman reflects on the Holocaust as the most extreme example of such control. He does so by employing the image of the "gardener": "[m]odern genocide, like modern culture in general, is a gardener's job" (Bauman, 1989, p. 92); the "gardener" recognizes certain people as "weeds" that must be isolated from the "garden" and, if necessary, exterminated.

Bauman's image of the gardener is productively linked to Hughes's account of the sociocultural construction of disability as "ontological pollution." What links them is the pursuit of purity through the exclusion of human difference, which appears in both cases as a *modus operandi* for normalizing social control. Bauman's thoughts may be employed to reflect on the aforementioned visions of the sociology of futures, in which human disability is envisioned as uprooted in the hope of creating a perfect social condition. Whether the hope of such social creation is justified is worth considering by reflecting on one tangible element of human creativity, namely disability art.

4. Normativity or difference? Disability art as a form of social enrichment

Adorno (2002, p. 8) presents art as "the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it." This idea is well illustrated by disability art and related movements, such as art brut and outsider art. These forms of art may be recognized within the broader category of marginal art (Andriolo, 2005). What unites them is the view that art can arise from a source of human otherness. Artists belonging to these movements often belong to groups situated on the margins of society, such as persons with disabilities (disability art), neurodivergent people (art brut), and people who do not conform to the dominant social and cultural norms (outsider art). Their distanced relationship with society is not merely an expression of will or free choice; it arises from human difference and can justifiably be regarded as not only an ethical but also an ontological relation.

As already discussed in this article, the encounter between society and human difference has long been complicated, or more precisely, oriented toward the elimination of the latter – whether as a witch hunt, the cultivation of the garden of humanity, or the ontological cleansing of reality in the pursuit of a perfectly ordered world. In our time, this effort is echoed by the visions of human transformation driven by scientific advancements and cutting-edge technologies. All these visions may be referred to under the name of transhumanism, an

ideology that has been gaining increasing attention in both academic and public discourse and is grounded in the conviction that the present human can and should be remade into a far superior being – limitless, invulnerable, and perfected. From the currently dominant transhumanist perspective, disability and persons with disabilities are treated as an obstacle to an enhanced mode of existence (Markuckas & Ruškus, 2026).

However, disability art challenges this view and opens a way to reflect on the soundness of transhumanist projects. By overlooking the human potential inherent in the diversity of disability and treating disability solely as a human limitation, the proponents of transhumanism reveal their own limited understanding of limitation (Markuckas, 2026). Their emphasis on the boundless human power to transform the world prevents them from recognizing what Timothy Morton, for example, observes by reflecting on the relationship between fragility and creativity. According to Morton (2017, loc. 772), creativity arises from the fragility of humankind, which he describes as "ontological disability." Therefore, creativity can be understood as humanity's response to its own limitations. This idea calls into question whether the transformation of the human into an invulnerable and unlimited being is truly desirable (Markuckas, 2022/2024). In light of this, the phenomenon of creativity challenges the idea that disability is a human deficit and makes it possible to discern in it a metaphysical feature, or fundamental ability, namely, the capacity, through a different human mode of existence, to expand the understanding of humanity, as well as the experiential and existential boundaries of reality.

This issue may also be approached through disability art, which provides an empirical form for the idea of ontological human disability as a creative source and enables us to rethink the metaphysical, sociopolitical, and cultural meaning and status of disability. The starting point for this approach is the critical intention of disability art: it aims to transform the social and political representation of disability and liberate people with disabilities from social mistreatment (Sandahl, 2016). Alongside this critical intention, it is important to recognize the affirmative character of disability art – or the alternative aesthetics emerging from it, which are "based on the particularities of the bodies and minds of people with disabilities" (ibid.). This reference to the distinctive embodiment of persons with disabilities as a source of creativity makes it possible to question the structure of humanity: Can it be confined within some norm or ideality (physical, mental, or psychological), or is it intrinsically diverse? The latter position is supported by international disability rights discourse. In the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* of the United Nations (hereafter the CRPD), persons with disabilities are presented as part of human diversity and humanity (Article 3(d)). Moreover, the CRPD emphasizes that this diversity can be socially productive. Article 30(2) specifies that the States Parties "shall take appropriate measures to enable persons with disabilities to have the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential, not only for their own benefit, but also for the enrichment of society."

The fact that such enrichment is not merely declarative is well illustrated by Deaf Art, a form of disability art. Deaf people have been creating art long before it was identified as Deaf Art. The De'VIA Movement Manifesto, published in 1989, for the first time explicitly defined De'VIA as an expression of Deaf cultural experience (Miller et al., 1989). De'VIA artworks are often divided into two thematic directions: Resistance De'VIA, which critiques discrimination and audism, and Affirmation De'VIA, which emphasizes Deaf cultural pride, the beauty of sign

language, and community identity. Deaf Art is characterized by a distinctive creative potential and visual expression arising from the singular sensory experiences and visual thinking of deaf people. As Deaf culture is oriented toward visual perception, artistic expression relies on bodily movement, organization of space, and visual symbolism (Bauman et al., 2006). Visual art enables deaf artists to present experiences and ideas related to the structure of sign language, bodily movements, and spatial communication. Such visual orientation gives deaf artistic expression its distinctive character: works rely on symbolism, contrasting colors, and expressive bodily elements conveying the deaf worldview. Deaf Art can also function as a powerful form of communication, enabling deaf and hearing audiences to better understand deaf experiences and cultural perspectives (Durr, 1999, 2006). Therefore, it can be reasonably stated that Deaf Art is not only art created by deaf people but also a human perspective on the experience of deafness, a unique identity, and an often discriminatory relationship with the hearing world.

In this context, Deaf Art in particular and disability art in general may be understood as a unique creative way to disclose the phenomenon of humanness. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson develops the concept of disability through that of a "misfit," which points to the lived experiences of persons with disabilities and their generative potential, in contrast to the experiences of so-called "normates," whose bodies are regarded as socially and culturally acceptable. According to Garland-Thomson (2024, p. 14), "[t]he experience of misfitting can teach us about being human. Misfitting forces us to recognize the fundamental distinction between flesh and world, and with it both the limits and possibilities of the human capacity to act and to be." Drawing on this understanding of disability, Garland-Thomson responds critically to technologically grounded efforts to eliminate disability from the field of human existence, for example, by stating that "the rapidly developing gene editing technologies that aim to normalize us all would reduce the number of people who generate distinctive gains or benefits to persons and worlds" (ibid., p. 20).

Garland-Thomson substantiates this gain-oriented position toward disability by reflecting on artistic creation. In her article "Disability and Representation" (2005), Garland-Thomson points to the artistic evolution of Claude Monet and Chuck Close, brought about by the disabilities they experienced. According to her (2005, pp. 523–524), "[b]oth the impressionist artist Claude Monet and the leader of contemporary photographic realism, Chuck Close, developed significant disabilities later in their careers. Monet became almost blind, and Close became paralyzed. Each artist was forced by his disability to change both the way he painted and the content of his art. Monet's aesthetic shift from more representational painting to more intensely impressionistic, literally fuzzier, renderings of his famous gardens and bridges resulted from his diminished sight, while Close's celebrated move away from photographic realism toward an almost cubist rendering of his large-scale portraits resulted from his loss of manual dexterity. In other words, disability enabled what we think of as artistic evolution. Monet and Close did not overcome their disabilities, but, rather, they accommodated their disabilities, and their art changed. They were great artists not in spite of disability but because of disability. This is the story we need to understand."

It may be reasonably argued that the idea Garland-Thomson presents here goes far beyond artistic creation alone. It tells us about creative existence, which arises precisely from the

human experience of disability. Juha Varto's concept of artistic research is worth considering for a more precise epistemological articulation of this experience. This research is based on the phenomenological assumption that knowledge is always embodied. Varto (2018, p. 57) points to the artist's embodiment as a tool for creating and for perceiving reality – what he refers to as "body wisdom." Although Varto links artistic research to the activity of professional artists, as suggested elsewhere (Markuckas, 2026) by one of the authors of this study, the strategy of artistic research may also be related to the experience of disability. In that text, the basis of this effort, the extension of the concept of artistic research beyond artistic practice, is rooted in Foucault's insight (1997, p. 261) that every human life has the potential to become a work of art and that restricting art to objects rather than individuals or life itself, as well as associating it exclusively with specialization or expertise, is too narrow an understanding of art.

The present article develops this line of thought further through the existential experience of disability of one of its authors, which is employed here as an illustration of the human creative potential understood in terms of the Foucauldian idea of life as a form of art and the Vartian idea of embodied knowledge. Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (2008) clarifies this point. Its fundamental observation is that seeing the world is never neutral or objective but always takes subjective forms. From this perspective, the author's experience presented here can be related to the question of how disability can be connected with creativity, or at least presented as a distinctive way of seeing. This author has a mobility-related disability and uses an electric wheelchair. The wheelchair's maximum speed, which has also become the norm of its user's movement, is fourteen kilometers per hour, which is more than twice the usual walking speed of pedestrians. The wheelchair user observes the ground surface extremely carefully to avoid tipping over and possible injury as he moves through the world. This is unusual for people who walk, whose bodies are far more resistant to falling, and whose visual perspective while moving is usually oriented forward rather than downward.

The type of movement in question, mediated by the wheelchair's technological properties, experience of disability, and individual embodiment, allows the wheelchair user to notice things that might otherwise remain outside the sight of able-bodied individuals. For example, during a ride around the city, his cell phone camera "caught" the following "witch" (Figure 1).

Had it been noticed by another passerby, it would likely have appeared to them only as bird droppings polluting the city, provoking disgust, and calling for removal from the ground surface. However, does this rejecting gaze not resemble the social gaze cast upon disability itself as an existential human condition, long recognized as an ontological pollutant of humanity and, as at least some visions of humanity's future testify, understood as an object to be wiped away? Moreover, this seemingly minor episode illustrates Morton's insight that human fragility can be genuinely creative. It also raises the question of whether creativity, rooted in the fragile essence of humans, can, in principle, be fully replaced by the transhumanist image of an invulnerable being empowered by technology.

Even if we grant that the briefly described photographic hunt of the witch cannot be identified with an artistic practice and that the "witch" cannot be regarded as an art object, one may still ask: Does this episode not show that disability can teach one to see artistically – or at least see in a different way than usual? Is this different way of seeing not already creative



Figure 1. The witch (source: author's personal archive, n.d.)

or, at least, capable of opening creative potential? Finally, does it not enable a fundamental rethinking of human creativity – or at least invite doubt as to whether eradicating disability from the field of human vision truly leads to the creation of a better world?

5. Conclusions

The analysis carried out in this article reveals that the socially dominant negative evaluation of disability, particularly evident in the transhumanist visions of human development, is unfounded. Disability as a form of human difference, within which creative potential is embedded and whose most tangible empirical expression is disability art, can justifiably be seen as an existential source that enriches our understanding of both human existence and reality. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the representation of disability as an existential element that impoverishes the human condition, as well as the attempt to eradicate disability as an alleged testimony to human deficiency, should essentially be treated as a present-day witch hunt, that is, a flawed social practice rooted in a limited understanding of humanity shaped by the enforcement of normality and the irrational rejection of human diversity.

Acknowledgements

The research outcomes are based on the project results. This project has received funding from the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT), agreement No. S-PD-24-175.

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