

## Sculpting Body Ideals: Alison Lapper Pregnant and the Public Display of Disability

By: Ann Millett

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### **Abstract:**

*British artist Marc Quinn's Alison Lapper Pregnant (2005) is a monumental marble statue in London's Trafalgar Square that displays a nude, full body portrait of British resident and artist, Alison Lapper. The work features Lapper, who was born without arms and with shortened legs, in all her glory — unclothed and seven months pregnant. The work has been highly criticized for capitalizing on the shock value of disability, as well as lauded for its progressive social values. Alison Lapper Pregnant and the controversy surrounding it showcase disability issues at the forefront of current debates in contemporary art. The work and Quinn's many previous marble sculptures of amputee models, in the series The Complete Marbles (2002), adopt the highly idealizing traditions and conventions of Neoclassicism, the art form characteristically employed for public statues, which idealize political figures and the often patriarchal and nationalistic social values such statues personify. In Quinn's piece and in Lapper's own self-portraits, Lapper's body on display makes a bold statement about representations of disability in the public realm. In this paper, I argue how Alison Lapper Pregnant disrupts artistic and social ideals for bodies, therefore becoming an anti-monument, and it simultaneously continues in traditions that purport public heroes. The work embodies the stereotypes of disability as heroic, tragic, and freakish and functions to make such stereotypes visible, part of public discourse, and open for debate. I underscore how artistic and historical contexts are crucial to interpreting the representation of the disabled body in art and public life. Lapper's own voice is a key component to these discussions of disability and artistic versus social representations, as are her self-portrait sculptures, photographs, and collages. By comparing Quinn's statue to Lapper's artwork, I illustrate the informative and beneficial results of viewing the work of non-disabled and disabled artists in dialogues.*

**Keywords:** Art, representation of disability, visual culture, body, Neoclassicism, British history

### **Article:**

In 2005, artist Alison Lapper was thrust into fame when her 11.5 foot tall, 13 ton sculptural portrait, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, was unveiled on the fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square. Lapper agreed to being cast in the nude by British artist Marc Quinn when she was 7 months pregnant and to be placed on public display; many have called the piece a collaboration. The controversial sculpture has brought widespread attention to the model's body and her life story. Lapper, born without arms and with shortened legs, is an alumnus of British institutions for disabled children and programs for disabled artists, a single mother, and an artist who makes work about her embodied experiences as a disabled woman. Carved from precious Italian marble in a seated, casual pose and placed on a pedestal among statues of naval captains, Lapper has been called a contemporary heroine of cultural diversity, while the work has also been regarded as a tasteless publicity stunt for Quinn. The exposure of Lapper's body transcends the fact that she is nude, for Lapper grew up in insulated environments of public intuitions and had limited interactions with public life; for Lapper, the work is a true coming out. *Alison Lapper Pregnant* makes a public statement about this disabled woman's right to be represented as a productive social subject and a reproductive sexual being and her right to represent others.

This paper will interrogate the sculpture's representation of disability within four contexts: (1) Trafalgar Square; (2) the genre of Public Art; (3) in comparisons with Quinn's previous series of sculptural amputees, *The Complete Marbles* (2002); and (4) with Lapper's self-representations. I will argue that *Alison Lapper Pregnant* significantly responds to, as well as transforms the history of its particular space and interacts with the populations who inhabit that space. Rather than displaying trite political correctness or simple shock value, as much of its criticism wages, the work plays monumental roles in the histories of both disability representation and art. As a public spectacle, it recycles, and contemporizes, the representation of disability as both heroic and freakish. The sculpture in the round poignantly brings into high relief contrasting perceptions and representations of disabled bodies and therefore forges important public debates. Lapper's photography and her recently published memoir are key components of such discussions, as they provide perspectives by and a voice to the disabled subject on display. By weaving together these contexts of and reactions to Quinn's and Lapper's works, this paper underscores the necessity of placing the works of disabled and non-disabled artists in dialogues with one another and with larger histories of visual culture.

Public art raises issues of social and artistic representation and the visibility and invisibility of certain members of society. Public space and its monuments have been gendered male and raced white traditionally, and public space is largely ableist in attitude, not to mention accessibility (or lack thereof). Public art, when the most effective, creates dialogues about the role of art in society and whom is included and excluded in the notion of the "public."

Found in spaces of both leisure and commerce, public art projects traditionally purport to create a harmonious community, increase tourism, and humanize and beautify space. In the 1980s and 1990s in the UK, where *Alison Lapper Pregnant* resides, many public art projects were funded as part of larger initiatives for urban renewal and life enhancement.<sup>1</sup> Public commissions for open air murals and sculpture consequentially increased, setting the stage for the Fourth Plinth program of Trafalgar Square, initiated in 1999.<sup>2</sup> Public arts training programs also developed, such as the ones that Lapper attended. These initiatives led to a flourishing of the arts and were based on the assumptions that art had inherent social and educational value. These public art projects were thought to have "civilizing" effects by creating social harmony, but also by leveling inherent public differences, tensions, and exclusions. Meant to appeal to the broadest notion of "public," publicly funded works were not meant to be largely critical or controversial and were constructed to produce economic, environmental, and social benefits, according to dominant social values and therefore following in the traditions of public monuments. Social geographer Malcolm Miles (1998) explains: "Monuments are produced within a dominant framework of values, as elements in the construction of a national history....they suppose at least partial consensus of values, without which their narrative could not be recognized" (58). Monuments have portrayed political stability and stasis historically, rather than reflecting social change. Further, Miles underscores that monuments are versions and visual mediations of history, specifically ones constructed by those in power. Monuments often refer specifically to acts that have enforced that power, such as wars, conquest, conversion, colonialism, and violence, and therefore monuments legitimize power and enforce that power visually.

Yet more contemporary initiatives have contradicted such historical bases. In the spirit of civil rights and decolonization movements, as well as postmodernism, such monumental histories were largely contested from the 1980s onward. Many challenged the notion that "public" art was socially inclusive, as political movements protested the assumed neutrality of art and its expression of ideology. Many minority groups demanded representation and a redress of conventional biases in public art along gender, ethnic, and class lines. Including disability rights and arts programs, these initiatives demanded that public art represent diversity by engaging non-traditional art forms and by embodying multiculturalism. Honoring individuals marginalized and erased by dominant values and the structures that personify them, many contemporary public art projects have explicitly protested the status quo. These projects attempt to capture the tensions and dynamism of the contemporary urban population, and are intended to create not just dialogues, but controversy. This "new genre" of public art, as art critic Suzanne Lacy (1995) has termed it, encompasses social and performative interactions between art

and the public and demands the decolonization of public spaces. These public art forms, in which I contextualize *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, embody cultural battles for and of representation.

The sculpture produces Lapper as a representative of the historically under-represented. Lapper (2005) has positioned the work at the forefront of such initiatives, stating: "I regard it as a modern tribute to femininity, disability and motherhood...The sculpture makes the ultimate statement about disability — that it can be as beautiful and valid a form of being as any other" (236). She acknowledges how her body becomes a monument to bodies and identities that have been socially devalued, shamed, and excluded from public life historically. Lapper goes on to note: "It is so rare to see disability in everyday life — let alone naked, pregnant and proud. The sculpture makes the ultimate statement about disability — that it can be as beautiful and valid a form of being as any other." Here, she characterizes her body as a form of anti-monument, for it represents the "other" to traditional subjects of public monuments, as well as an anti-ideal. Positive feedback about the sculpture also champions it as a liberating anti-ideal. For example, Bert Massie, the chairman of the commission, was quoted in *The Guardian* newspaper as stating: "Congratulations to Marc for realising that disabled bodies have a power and beauty rarely recognised in an age where youth and 'perfection' are idolised." This article also states that The Disability Rights Commission welcomed the statue as a source of pride and a blow against the cult of perfection that effectively disables bodies who don't conform to the norm (Kennedy, 2006). Others have suggested, like Lapper, that the work's depiction of a specific embodiment largely under-represented in visual life, at least in a positive way, broadens and humanizes notions of beauty, as well as humanizes certain socially stigmatized individuals (Searle, 2005). The work may function to force the viewer to question their perceptions of the "ideal," while also questioning whose ideals Lapper is purported to represent.

The work functions visually by confusing the "ideal" with the anti-ideal. Quinn's work is specifically a quotation of 18th- and 19th-century Neoclassicism. Neoclassical figurative painting, sculpture, and architectural programs taught lessons on heroism and moral virtue, often by depicting the deeds of great and powerful men. Some of the better known artists of this style are the French painter Jacques-Louis David, as well as British painters Joshua Reynolds and Benjamin West, and the sculptors Antonio Canova and Bertel Thorvaldsen. By reviving Classical figures, Neoclassical artists sought to portray eternal beauty and cultural idealism, in balanced, symmetrical, and "able," or extra-able bodies. In Classical traditions, on which Neoclassicism was based, figures were composed from the most idyllic features of different individuals and mathematically derived proportions in order to create a composite "whole" body ideal. Therefore, Neoclassicism and its Classical heritage communicate philosophical and political ideals through constructed body aesthetics. In Western culture from the Renaissance to today, this Neoclassical form is characteristically employed for public statues of religious and political heroes.

Quinn subverts the signification of Neoclassical form as the ideal "whole" in this work and in his series of life size, marble sculptures of real amputees, *The Complete Marbles* (2002), which adopt particularly Roman qualities of portrait likeness. By using many high profile disabled models, such as artist Peter Hull and the confrontational "freak" performer and punk rock musician, Matt Fraser, Quinn produces depictions of recognizable subjects and celebrities. Titled with the subjects' proper names, these works challenge how the viewer perceives the body in art, as well as in everyday life, as whole and/or broken. One of the few works in *The Complete Marbles* that is not titled with the models' names, *Kiss*, 2002, refers specifically to Impressionist sculptor Auguste Rodin's canonical work *The Kiss*. Quinn's *Kiss* features two life-size amputees cast from live models (Fraser and artist Catherine Long), leaning against one another (rather than seated, as in Rodin's original), to embrace passionately. Fraser's shortened arms caress Long's left shoulder and armless "stump." Quinn here showcases a disabled couple in an allegory of romantic love and as contemporary sexual beings, which challenges popular stereotypes of disability as sexually undesirable. *Kiss* and other works in *The Complete Marbles* series are portraits that call for re-visions of art history and social ideals.

Quinn titled the series *The Complete Marbles* strategically. *The Elgin Marbles* are precious Classical sculptures appropriated from the Parthenon in Greece (produced c. 438-423 BCE). They have been exhibited in the British Museum for the past 150 years and they are continuously a source of dispute between the British and

Greek governments on ownership rights, due to their cultural significance and material value. *The Elgin Marbles*, many broken and missing limbs and heads, were amputated from their architectural base (the Parthenon); they are fragments of profoundly aesthetic "wholes," for the Parthenon remains a cultural icon today for its integrated, carefully orchestrated balance and proportion and its intense, methodical control of aesthetics. Extracted from the Temple to Athena, the marbles both fragment and "stand" (or symbolize) one of the greatest symbols of power and wealth in Western history — specifically one famous for its ideal wholeness. Quinn's title for the series, *The Complete Marbles*, places contemporary disabled bodies in these historical legacies, and they are designated as "whole" by their own counter-conventional body standards and disarming beauty.

The title of the series points to the subjects' corporeal and subjective "wholeness;" they are indeed, "complete." Within the vernacular phrasing that someone has "lost their marbles," the sculptures' designation as "complete" implies a state of wisdom, peace of mind, and rationality — again, a reference spiraling back to Classical and Neoclassical notions of the ideal body as rationally, and therefore ideally, coherent. Quinn's studies of art history at Cambridge inform much of his work, an influence which he acknowledges, yet says he is more interested in how art history frames perception, rather than corrupting or deconstructing the discipline itself. Quinn's works question how seeing amputee bodies in marble may differ from seeing them in the flesh, and why some viewers find one form over another distasteful or shocking (Preece, 2000). However, many find Quinn's ambivalence about his motives disturbing, or at least discomfiting, and demand more "complete" explanation on his intentions by displaying disability, particularly within traditionally idealizing forms.

Quinn's artistic procedures and materials are central to the significances of his works. Like all of the pieces in *The Complete Marbles*, *Allison Lapper Pregnant* was sculpted in Quinn's studio in Pietrasanta, Italy, the center for Carrara marble — the same marble sought by Michelangelo and many Neoclassical sculptors. *Allison Lapper Pregnant* took 10 months to craft from the stubborn substance, which contains exalted histories and symbolic significances. Quinn is quite particular about the material, as he literally goes out of his way to use it, and he prefers this marble for its intrinsic and metaphoric content (Preece, 2000). Carrara marble provides a luminosity that makes his amputees shine and radiate, like works from the Greek Hellenistic period.

Also relevant to *The Complete Marbles*, many Hellenistic works struck poses that best conveyed the drama of human emotion. The subjects of *The Complete Marbles* strike predominantly active, dynamic, and expressionistic postures; many sit with shortened or amputated arms extended, balance on one leg to perform a martial arts side kick (ironically, with a thigh-length leg), stand at attention, embrace while standing on one leg, and repose classically with one leg bended. The poses of *The Complete Marbles* refer to the *Elgin Marbles'* portrayal of Greek myths and battles in graceful, powerful movements. Further, *The Elgin Marbles* depicted a pilgrimage to the shrine of Athena — they are images of devotion, as well as of mobility. *The Complete Marbles* embody multiple associations, while refusing to confine and label the subjects' impairments. The formal qualities place the works in longer art historical traditions of precious and revered objects.

However, many critics deem Quinn's art historical references as subversive, specifically because he focuses on disabled bodies. For example, art writer for the *Sunday Times*, Waldemar Januszczak (2000), states the following about *Allison Lapper Pregnant*:

By carving Allison Lapper out of pristine marble, Quinn is *taking on* the Greeks; he is *disputing* with Phidias, with Michelangelo, with Sir Joshua Reynolds, with every authoritarian with imagination that has ever insisted upon a standard shape for the human in art; he is contradicting 2,000 years of creative *misrepresentation* of what being human means; and he is giving Allison Lapper the same amount of artistic attention that Canova gave the Empress Josephine. As if that were not enough, Quinn is also cheekily rhyming his sculptures with the broken remnants of classical art — the armless Venus, the legless Apollo — that are the staple diet of all collections of the antique. These are serious achievements. (emphasis mine)

My italics here underscore how Januszczak describes Quinn's use of amputees in art historical, specifically Classical and Neoclassical images, as confrontational and revisionist, as if the works are affronts to these traditions because of the amputees featured. This comment suggests that certain social prejudices against amputees function in critical interpretations of Quinn's work. The form of the Lapper sculpture has been the target of much criticism; however, criticisms against the artistic value of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (the work) may suggest simultaneous rejection of Alison Lapper pregnant (as an embodiment and social subject). Many have charged Quinn with capitalizing on the shock value<sup>3</sup> and taboo nature of disabled bodies in public spaces. The work functions to make such stereotypes visible and open to public debate.

On the other "hand" (or stump), positive evaluations of the *Alison Lapper Pregnant* further complicate how the sculpture represents disability in the public eye, as they purport Lapper to be a hero. London Mayor, Ken Livingstone, stated: "Alison Lapper Pregnant is a modern heroine - strong, formidable and full of hope." This idea recalls the stereotype of a disabled hero that is premised on sentimentalization of and low expectations for disabled people in society. What kind of hero is Lapper in these descriptions, one who dismantles notions of appropriate versus shocking bodies, or one who rehashes the stereotype of "overcoming," which functions to ignore social constructs of disability and is based on the problematic notion of disability as an individual "problem." Framed as the representation of a heroine, the sculpture celebrates Lapper's impairments and perhaps also de-politicizes, or literally aestheticises disability, as a marginalizing social construct, for the public. Or perhaps it redefines our ideas about heroism and makes a disabled figure a role model, in a positive light.

Lapper's heroism may also be problematically tied to her pregnancy, such that motherhood becomes a means for Lapper to "overcome" disability by conforming to standards for women's roles in society, a point which Kim Q. Hall (2006) has interrogated. Hall quotes Quinn: "For me, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* is a monument to the future possibilities of the human race as well as the resilience of the human spirit."<sup>4</sup> Hall frames this comment within political propaganda that has imposed the duty upon women historically to reproduce the nation; such dogma is similar to that expressed throughout Trafalgar Square by the national heroes depicted. Hall argues that Quinn and many others champion the sculpture because it conforms to patriarchal and heterosexual values, which assert that reproduction validates women. Yet, Hall's persuasive arguments reframe how Lapper's presence in the Square plays upon traditional gender roles and disability stereotypes only tangentially, for the sculpture's and Lapper's own consistent divergence from convention affirms the work's adamant non-conformity to "family values." Mainstream discourses that breed women for motherhood suggest that a productive female member of the society is a *reproductive* one, specifically within the institution of marriage. Far from glorifying a nuclear family, Lapper was born to a single, working class mother and is herself an unmarried mother, who has benefited from public programs for disabled artists. Many may view Lapper's choices amoral and her subsistence as a public burden, therefore she hardly acts in the legacy of national heroes.

Lapper's maternal situation defies ideals of both society and art for women's bodies. Pregnant bodies, seen most often in art history as fertility figures and virginal Madonnas, occupy a liminal status, as both an ideal state of the female motherhood, yet one that contrasts with the conventions for the sexualized nude, particularly for 21st-century eyes. Popular representations have tended to idealize pregnancy socially, yet they also veil the pregnant female body, reinstating its preferred existence within the proverbial home. Pregnancy is glorified and yet stigmatized and indeed often considered a disability. However, images of pregnant women have become trendy lately, particularly among the elite, with the celebrity "baby boom" displayed in the aesthetic "bumps" on otherwise perfect bodies and within the romanticized unions of the Brangelinas and Tom-Kats of the world; Demi Moore, Melania Trump, and most recently, Brittany Spears have been featured by mainstream women's magazines as so-called liberated covergirls and centerfolds, revealing their scantily clad and fashionable pregnant bodies. Again, these pregnant bodies are framed specifically within dominant social ideals and values (with perhaps the exception of Spears and the notorious "Fed-Ex"), values to which Alison Lapper could never conform.

*Alison Lapper Pregnant* confuses perceptions of the body in art history and popular culture, ultimately because, for many, the work assertively provokes the fear that the disabled body will reproduce another "damaged" child

— from a "broken" body and a "broken" home. The work advocates controversial reproductive rights for disabled women and for single women more broadly. Further, any attempt on Lapper's part to fulfill her role to reproduce the next generation may produce a disabled one, which remains a horror rather than a triumph, according to mainstream values and exclusive social standards for quality of life. Lapper's maternal "acts" poignantly fail to service social ideals, as the sculpture becomes pregnant with ambivalent meanings.

Viewers' reactions to the work as shocking and/or inspiring seem polarized, and yet both connote, to varying degrees, the desire to make a lesson out of the disabled body, in order to justify its display. Many who critique the work and Quinn's *The Complete Marbles* series demand explanation about the cause of the models' impairments and the usefulness of such displays to society. Januszczak (2000) has also stated: "With a subject as serious as the loss of human limbs, or the birth of a child to a deformed mother, it is absolutely incumbent upon the gallery to cease playing aesthetic games and to make clearer the artist's intentions." This quite expresses viewers' desire for medical diagnosis to make the works more palatable and less sensationalistic. However, the sculpture also provokes some viewers to question their own desires to know "what happened" to the body and assumptions that the disabled body necessarily connotes accident or victimization.

The notion of making the disabled body into a lesson is relevant to the realm of public art specifically, within which the body becomes a monument to instruct, for public art has a duty, in the eyes of many, to educate and inform. Neoclassical works depicted the Classicized body in compositions meant to teach moral lessons through idealistic and heroic depiction of historical events. The figures served in historical and moral instruction, and the adherence to Neoclassical conventions for public statuary continues this tradition. The origin of the word "monument" derives from Latin *nomere*, meaning "to remind," "to admonish," "warn," "advise," and "instruct" (Griswold, 1992: 74). Poignantly, this word origin emerges also in the word "monster," as scholars of the freak show have pointed out, explaining how the disabled body has historically been seen as an indicator of either supernatural foreshadowing or scientific mistake. The use of the disabled body as a lesson has included public exploitation of so-called medical anomalies, practices which have reinforced medical models, crossed genres into freak shows, and staged the disabled body as an instructional object for the non-disabled viewers. The 19th- and early 20th-century freak show entertained and affirmed middle class spectators' senses of "normalcy," which was constructed specifically in binary opposition to the strikingly "abnormal" spectacle.

The freak show is a relevant comparison for considering the role of Lapper's body in a public space, particularly one that serves as a tourist attraction:<sup>5</sup> "She is presented "like some 19th-century fairground exhibit," one critic stated (Thomson, quoted in Cederwell, 2004). In the freak show, the disabled and other extraordinary (exotic, minority) bodies were eroticized; the nudity of the sculpture, to which some take offense, is intrinsic to its unashamed display of the pregnant disabled body and its Neoclassical form, for it places the work in a both a history of art and a history of displaying the body as spectacle, in the freak show, pornography, and other voyeuristic venues. This context raises a key question: does the sculpture exploit Alison Lapper?

Lapper is benefiting from the attention the work has drawn to her own art and her life, as she recently published a memoir. In it, she relates Quinn's sculpture to her own self-portrait nude photography, with which she expresses comfort in her own skin and challenges her personal history of being considered physically defective and sexually unattractive. . Addressing the controversy regarding the nudity of the statue, Lapper (2005) has written:

In most societies, even in Britain today, pregnant women are not considered to have a beautiful shape. On top of that, short people, who are missing both arms, are generally considered even less beautiful. I was someone who currently combined both disadvantages. How could Marc possibly think I was a suitable subject for a sculpture that people would want to look at? Statues are created and exhibited to give pleasure, to be admired. Would anybody be able to admire the statue of a naked, pregnant, disabled woman? (234)

She attributes the controversy of sculpture a society that is prudish to nudity in general, as well as to pregnancy and disability specifically. Many may deem the work amoral, and therefore in direct opposition to Neoclassical, moralistic traditions, and yet, as Lapper articulates, moral judgments are subjective to the eyes of the beholders.

Lapper does not express feeling exploited. Describing her decision to pose, Lapper (2005) writes:

It was January 1999 when I received a phone call from an artist called Marc Quinn...I was extremely suspicious. I thought he might be just another one in the long line of people who have exploited disability and used it for its curiosity and value. However, when we talked, I realised Marc wasn't interested in disability in the way most people wanted to depict it. He wasn't pitying or moralising - I knew it wasn't a freak show or some kind of weird sexual focus that he was aiming at" (236)

Lapper here recognizes the problematic tropes of representing disabled bodies as sentimentalized heroes or freakish spectacles, both of which make the disabled body into a symbol and lesson to the learned by the so-called normal. Poignantly, she ties these tropes together. Yet by collaborating with Quinn, Lapper makes a statement about the need for public education and exposure of/to disability in contemporary society in order to overturn the stereotypes and the status quo.

Trafalgar Square is an ideal place to raise and interrogate these issues. The modern city, and public squares like Trafalgar especially, were built for tourist gazing, urban surveillance, and commercial spectatorship (Miles, 1997). Trafalgar Square, designed by John Nash and built by Sir Charles Barry in the 1820s and 30s to commemorate British naval captain and famous imperialist Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758-1805), was named after the Spanish Cape Trafalgar where Nelson's last battle was won. Characteristic of 19th-century Roman revival in Britain, the Square's architecture and statuary is specifically Neoclassical to portray political ideals. A monument to Lord Nelson (1758-1805), became the central vision of the Square. This Neoclassical likeness of Nelson stands on a 185 foot tall column, overseeing the public — a tradition which continues today. Nelson's monument, modeled after the triumphant Roman Column of Trajan, and its surroundings place modern Britain in the traditions of Roman imperialism. Surrounding Nelson are other monuments to British military heroes, represented in idealizing Neoclassical forms. At the south end of the square is an equestrian statue of Charles I in a conventional pose suggesting royalty and conquest, which is based on a famous Roman statue of Marcus Aurelius and which also employs the favored position of Louis XV and Napoleon to emphasize their military strength and leadership (for example in David's triumphant, Neoclassical portrait *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* [1801], which served as Imperial propaganda). On both sides of Nelson's Column are the bronze statues of Sir Henry Havelock and Sir Charles James Napier, and fronting the north wall of Trafalgar are busts of Generals Beatty, Jellicoe, and Cunningham, all famous military leaders. All of the "heroes" are significantly honored for their participation in the colonization of India, Egypt, and the Caribbean, and they were known as brutal leaders of mutinous soldiers, who were often of the nationality of the countries they fought to dominate. Like the design of the square, the monuments display a particular side of British history and society, one whose power depends on the subordination of those rendered invisible. Erected in Neoclassical forms, these men's bodies serve as landmarks of patriarchal and colonial British histories.

With her marble, feminine curves and serene posture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* would seem out of place in such a paternalistic environment — the freakish anti-hero. And yet others see the sculpture as right at home with the other monuments. She has been compared symbolically and corporeally with Admiral Nelson himself, as the work reinterprets notions of disabled and non-disabled heroes and spectacles. For examples, in letters to the editor, Michael Gallagher calls Lapper: "A great Briton in the truest sense of the word. I am sure that Nelson would have recognised her as a kindred spirit," and Jeanette Hart (2005) notes: "...Nelson only had one arm, and was blind in one eye, and he was just known as a great man; no one labelled him." Nelson was indeed blinded in one eye during the capture of Corsica from French troops in 1794 and lost his arm in a 1797 capture of the Canary Islands. He continued to lead troops with these impairments until his death at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, an act that has augmented his status as a national hero. The column is topped by a statue of Nelson posed with his uniform coat sleeve draped along his chest and tucked into his suit coat. This pose is

conventional for depictions of leaders, yet Nelson's sleeve is empty. This view is not perceptible for the viewer below. Quinn's public display of Alison Lapper and its comparisons to Nelson's Column have illuminated for some that the disabled body is always already present in an existing vision of heroism. Viewing Lapper as a hero reinterprets or expands the image of a heroic body, and perhaps this designation does not simply rehash stereotypes of overcoming, but rather describes the meaning of her body as a public image within a specific location and historical context.

*Alison Lapper Pregnant* follows in multiple histories of public art that are celebratory of or in protest to their context — a simultaneous monument and anti-monument. All of the submissions for the Fourth Plinth project competition since 1990 have been consciously critical of the square's aristocratic, nationalistic, and paternalistic traditions, both in content and form. As art critic Paul Usherwood (2004) describes it, Lapper carries on this contemporary trend of mocking the square's "macho triumphalism and formality (43)." Lapper's Neo- or post-Classical form embodies also a breaching of boundaries between convention and subversion. And by embodying contradictions, Lapper once again fits right into Trafalgar Square and translates its history to contemporary debates over civil and human rights. The controversial debates surrounding the work continue a longstanding history of Trafalgar Square, which has been wrought with conflict historically (as evidenced by the background stories on the lives of the men honored there).

Trafalgar Square has served as the city's most popular rallying point and the site of: public executions; political, economic, and religious protests; interventions of military law; class battles; protests for freedom of speech and rights to assemble, for women's suffrage, and for civil rights, liberties, and decolonization; and pro and anti-war, pro and anti-Fascism and Semitism, and pro and anti-communism rallies (Mace, 1976). Poignantly, all these displays of activism represent multiple and opposing sides of social and political issues since the 19th-century, and, significantly, most of these demonstrations have centered on the base of Nelson's column, because of its physical prominence and its symbolic significance. The monuments of Nelson and Lapper both embody multiple significances contextually and over time and have been witnesses to multiplicities of perspectives. Both Nelson's and Lapper's bodies in Trafalgar Square pay tribute to the necessity of public debate.

The sculpture of Alison Lapper and its social and symbolic meanings must be considered within its specific context. The work embodies, transforms, and contemporizes the history of its space. *Alison Lapper Pregnant* carries on the Square's traditions by provoking debate and dissent. The controversy and many opposing opinions expressed publicly about the sculpture enact its social work. Lapper's body on display has provoked constructive investigation about the role of art in society and the roles of disabled bodies as heroes and spectacles. It asks us to interrogate our assumptions about what forms of bodies should or should not appear in public spaces and how. The dubious representations of disability that the work evokes are both liberating and stereotypical, which is necessary to provoke debate. That Lapper herself has been so vocal in the discussions is key, for her collaboration with Quinn and her public mediation of the work shows how perspectives of disability, not just *about* them, are necessary for any productive dialogue.

Comparisons of Quinn's work with Lapper's own body art, which self-narrates her experiences as a disabled woman artist, provide significant dialogues about disability and visual representation. Born in 1965, Lapper grew up in institutional settings and art schools. Although she was always skilled at making art, Lapper remarks on having to prove herself repeatedly to non-disabled people, intellectually, artistically, and sexually, due to assumptions about her so-called "lacking" anatomy. She moved to London at age 19, where she lived independently for the first time and attended the University of Brighton, graduated with a degree in fine art at age 28, purchased a home in Southwick, and continues to work as an artist. Lapper has been the focus of the BBC1 series *Child of Our Time* program, to which she has returned for annual appearances, and an hour long documentary by Milton Media for Denmark's TV2, titled *Alison's Baby*, which has been broadcast in many countries and won the Prix Italia and the Prix Leonardo. In 2003, Lapper won the MBE award for service to the arts. Since graduation from Brighton, she has worked fulltime for the Mouth and Foot Painting Artists' Association of England (MFPA). Funding for this program comes from the artists' production of decorative



images for card designs, marketed by the MFAP, and Lapper writes that she still enjoys producing such genre scenes and landscapes, along with her self-portrait work.

Lapper's self-portrait body art, in the forms of photography, sculpture, and installation, marks a continuous process of self-discovery. At the University of Brighton, an opinionated viewer challenged the nature of Lapper's figurative work of non-disabled bodies, by suggesting that perhaps Lapper had not fully accepted her own body. This moment became a turning point for Lapper, as she began envisioning her own body as a work of art. Inspired by a photograph of the armless or "broken" Greek statue, the *Venus de Milo*, in which she saw her own likeness, Lapper began casting her body in plaster and photographing herself in Venus-like poses. Like performance artist Mary Duffy, who delivers impassioned speech about her experiences of being medically and socially objectified, while posing in the nude, Lapper adopted the Venus de Milo as her body image. Lapper's graduation exhibit featured an installation the viewer had to enter on hands and knees, at the height level of Lapper herself, in order to see photographs and sculpted casts of her full body and body parts. This installation created an environment that removed the viewer from their own comfort zone physically and perceptively. Other disabled artists also employ their embodied perspectives in their work, such as little person Ricardo Gil. Gil photographs his wife and daughter, both little people, from the perspectives at which he views them — literally, in terms of his height, and figuratively, as intimate close-ups that establish affectionate, familial relationships between the subject and the camera's gaze. In *Johann's Kiss*, 1999, Gil features his smiling wife centered in the frame, embraced by an average-sized, kneeling man, whose head is cropped at the top of the photograph. Figures in the background are cut off at mid torso; however, these are not mistakes of an amateur. Here, "normal" size people don't fit in the little woman's privileged, compositional space or in Gil's proud gaze. Lapper's installation, like Gil's photographs, explored the relationships between the viewer's versus the artist's own acts of looking at, judging, and experiencing the disabled body.

Lapper's self-portrait work and her personifications specifically of the Venus de Milo (a cultural icon of artistic and feminine beauty), like Duffy's, explore the complicated interactions of disability and sexuality, particularly for women. Lapper's shameless public exposure in a public art display (*Alison Lapper Pregnant*) takes root in a longer artistic and personal process of "coming out" as a sexual, and indeed reproductive woman. In contrast with the mainstream vision of Lapper's often assumed a-sexuality, a bold and seductive body image emerges in Lapper's work. Lapper's *Untitled*, 2000 features three views of her nude body in Venus-like, s-curve poses. The photographic media articulates her musculature, flesh, and curve of the breast, while aestheticizing equally her upper-arm "stumps." The strong contrasts of the black background with the marble whiteness of her skin create a photographic sculpture in the round. The photograph, like Duffy's performance and Quinn's *The Complete Marbles* series, plays with the viewer's recognition of Classical statuary (particularly a goddess of love and fertility) and the disabled flesh, as well as perceptions of "whole" versus "deficient" bodies.

Carving a sculpture "in the round" refers specifically to Classical and Neoclassical methods of producing balanced, proportional "wholes." This symbolic practice was quoted also by feminist performance artist Eleanor Antin in *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (July 15, 1972-August 21, 1972), in which Antin documented her body from all sides daily, as it gradually reduced during a crash diet. Antin's photographs are formally clinical in their starkness, referring to the "before" and "after" photographs quite familiar in our makeover-obsessed contemporary culture, while her body becomes a piece of sculpture in characteristic practices of performance art (such as in the work of Gilbert and George). Particularly to 21st-century eyes, Antin's images refer to eating disorders and the extents to which women will go to "perfect" their bodies, according to increasingly narrow and impossible social standards for beauty. Lapper's and Antin's photographic sculptures in the round, like Quinn's sculptures, expose the notion of the "ideal" as fabricated. Lapper's work especially presents a certain disruption between artistic and social visions of the ideal and anti-ideal female body.

Art has provided a means for Lapper to interrogate others' and her own images of her body and to reinvent her image in the public eye. These themes continued in a 2000 exhibit at the Fabrica Gallery in Brighton, featuring sculptural works and photographs of Lapper from childhood to adulthood. The photographic collection intentionally crossed genres, by including artistic self-portraits, snapshots taken by friends at key moments in

Lapper's life, and early childhood medical photographs, which questioned viewers' assumptions about seeing her body in different visual contexts. The inclusion of medical photographs in particular was meant to disarm the viewer and incorporate, as well as intervene on, Lapper's experiences of feeling like a medical spectacle and specimen. Indeed, Lapper's unique medical history, chronicled in her memoir as a series of objectifying and shameful displays of her body by doctors to "instruct" their peers on deformity and anomaly, connects intimately in the process of her work; Lapper remarks on her extensive history of being measured and cast in plaster particularly, in both medical and artistic contexts. Other works in the show featured Lapper's face in the vintage black-and-white style of classic Hollywood photographs. These images were strategically placed in a frame on the floor and covered in salt crystals. The viewer had to kneel down and brush aside the crystals to see Lapper's face, portrayed in a photographic softness reminiscent of glamour shots and intended to offset the hard-edge format of the medical images. The demand for viewer interaction with these works, as well as their themes of veiling, revealing, and concealing the body, make them performative — another public display of the disabled body.

Lapper strives in this work to showcase the disabled body as artistic and worthy of aestheticized display. She also makes photographic collages with elements such as flowers and angel wings to symbolize her biographical and artistic journeys. In *Angel* (1999), Lapper's head and nude torso shot in black and white film project from the right edge of the colored frame. She bears wings and the body thrusts upward, soaring, like the winged messenger god, Hermes, or the confident, yet tragic Icarus, to unforeseen heights of knowledge and personal vistas. Winged figures, from Classical mythology to contemporary fantasy, transverse the heavens and the earth — the realms of the gods and mortals; they are figures with extraordinary bodies and supernatural abilities for travel. Lapper here incarnates goddess imagery, enacting a re-vision of art history and resurgence of the disabled body in shameless, empowered self display. She appropriates allegorical bodies to present her own body image. In this frame, *Angel* invokes also the winged Nike, the mythical personification of victory, who is sometimes depicted bearing wings in the place of arms (as in the monumental, *Nike of Samothrace*, c.190 CE). Believed to once stand at the helm of a ship, the headless and armless Greek Hellenistic Nike is now a grand attraction at the Louvre Museum in Paris and a relic of Western culture. The Nike form is poignantly a derivative of Athena, the goddess known for her protection of the city of Athens and who is venerated still today at the Parthenon, the original home of the *Elgin Marbles*. Athena, or Minerva as she was known by the Romans, was a single mother and the goddess of wisdom, women's deeds, and the arts — a quite fitting allegory for Lapper to embody. Further, as Marina Warner (1985) describes, Athena shape-shifted to a number of personas and bodies in order to invoke powers and enact deeds. These performative masquerades of the goddess included her strategic exposure and concealment of her body and identity. Like Athena's performances, Lapper's self-portrait works reveal and conceal her body in multiplying references and significances; similarly to *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, Lapper's body art is pregnant with meaning.

Lapper's works, like Quinn's, juxtapose the portrayal of the body as symbolic allegory and as a portrait subject. As an allegorical figure, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* follows in a tradition of staging the female body particularly as a symbol of heroic, virtuous, and largely patriarchal social values. Justice, Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance, for examples, are values embodied by the female allegory of British history, Britannia, a Neoclassical figure derived from the Roman Minerva (Athena) and featured most prominently in Neoclassical design on Roman-inspired British coins. Classical Roman revival in Britain, which inspired the architecture and figurative program of Trafalgar Square, appealed to traditions of piety, austerity, and humility in British society, social ideals upheld still today across much of Britain's political landscape. *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, as a Neoclassical sculpture in the round, brings to life the corporeal reality of metaphysical, bodily allegories. Lapper's arch defiance of such longstanding conservative ideals, however, radiates from the sparkling surface of her body and tells "other" stories of British citizenship. She both conforms to and reforms stereotypes of disability, as well as of the British "public." Lapper's self-portrait photographs present additionally graphic portrayals of her particularized experiences, while co-opting the powers of infamous female beings. Britannia follows in the legacy of Minerva as the civic goddess and as a symbol of law abiding chastity; as a reincarnation of these goddesses, Lapper gives birth to new histories of the Square and the British nation, both by posing for the statue and by producing self-representations.

Lapper's role in the mediation of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* has brought a voice to its depiction of a pregnant amputee woman, as well as of a contemporary artist; Lapper's own work, which has experienced more attention, albeit slowly, contributes to significant dialogues and representations of disability in visual culture, both today and historically. Quinn's and Lapper's images cause the viewer to do a double-take and to perceive bodies on display in different lights and with frameworks outside of the strict conventions of social ideals. These artists call into question the integrity of Neoclassicism and other idealizing and/or disfiguring traditions for displaying the body in art, as well as in everyday life. These juxtapositions also emphasize the necessity of placing the works of disabled and non-disabled artists in dialogues with each other and with larger visual contexts, in order to see art through new eyes and from the perspective of disability. In collaboration, such dialogues can forge fresh, multidimensional images of disability in the public eye, and potentially, can sculpt new, liberating body ideals for the public.

### List of Illustrations

*As a result of delays in attempting to secure copyright permissions for all these images, it has not been possible to publish the images here. All images are currently available online via "google" or other search engines.*

- Fig. 1: Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005
- Fig. 2: Marc Quinn, *Kiss*, 2000
- Fig. 3: Auguste Rodin, *The Kiss*, 1886
- Fig. 4: *The Elgin Marbles*, c. 438-423 BCE
- Fig. 5: Marc Quinn, *Peter Hull*, 2002
- Fig. 6: Marc Quinn, *Helen Smith*, 2002
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- Fig. 8: Edward Bailey, *Statue of Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson*, c. 1820
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- Fig. 10: *Venus de Milo*, c. 150 BCE
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- Fig. 12: Alison Lapper, *Untitled*, 2000
- Fig. 13: Alison Lapper, *Angel*, 1999
- Fig. 14: *Nike of Samothrace*, c.190 CE

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#### Endnotes

1. Examples of other public art projects in Britain that resulted from 1980s and 90s initiatives are: Victoria Square, Birmingham; Broadgate Business Park; Cardiff Bay, Birmingham; London Docklands, and various projects gracing transportation stations, hospitals, and parks (Selwood, 1995).

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2. The Fourth Plinth Project is under the auspices of the Mayor of London and sponsored by the Arts Council of England. Information is available at: <http://www.fourthplinth.co.uk/>.

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3. Quinn has a certain reputation as a "bad boy" among art critics, exacerbated by inclusion in the controversial exhibit of 1991, in which he debuted one of his most famous pieces, *Self* (1991), a self-portrait bust made from 9 pints of Quinn's blood frozen. Some have connected *Alison Lapper Pregnant* with a longer interest in birth in Quinn's work, as exemplified by *Birth* or *Lucas* (2001), a frozen representation of his son Lucas' head made from real placenta, three days old. His work has many bodily and biological themes; has worked with DNA imaging (*DNA Garden* (2002), grid of 77 Petri dishes), test tubes, and silicon preservation. Examples of Quinn's other works that use body fluids and forms are: *Yellow Cut Nervous Breakdown*, *Invisible Man*, *No Invisible Means of Escape XI* (formed from cast white rubber resembling flesh), *The Great Escape* (a cast of his body inside pod), *Continuous Present* (2000) (which features a skull that rotates around a reflective cylinder), *Shit Paintings* and *Shit Head* (1997), *Incarnate* (a boiled sausage form with his blood), *Eternal Spring I and II* (1998) (a series featuring Calla lilies suspended in water), and *Garden* (2000) (a glass walled installation of flora and fauna that was deceptively composed of frozen units of silicon). As exemplified by these examples, Quinn's work has repeatedly used blood, placenta, excrement, ice, and flowers. He chooses materials are chosen because of their corporeality and symbolic connotations.

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4. Marc Quinn is quoted on the Fourth Plinth Project website: <http://www.fourthplinth.co.uk/>.

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5. The Square is a center of tourist and civil exchange. It sits on a tourist path from the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey and at the top of the Pall Mall, which leads to Buckingham Palace. The National Gallery, the Admiralty, and St. Martin's of the Field Church are also on the square.

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