

**Book Review**

*Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship:  
Unconscious Performers*  
by Bree Hadley (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

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In *Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship: Unconscious Performers*, Bree Hadley investigates what she identifies as ‘interventionalist performances’ by people with disabilities: performances that make acts of looking visible to those who look. In the public sphere, the disabled body is a spectacular body, and people with disabilities are involuntarily cast into the ‘daily social drama of disability’ (2). The way people with disabilities are seen is circumscribed by social narratives and tropes that lock them into the dominant cultural discourse. For Hadley, this paradigm holds as a subtext that threatens to surface in everyday exchanges and encounters even when the disability is not visible. Her selection and readings of performances in *Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship* are driven, in large part, by her own experience as someone who uses a cane to walk and has, she says, become conscious of just how much this sense of self as social performer informs the practices—not just the content, but the structure, staging and performer-spectator interface—of many of those who choose to touch on their disability in their performance-making (3).

That she takes her topic personally is key to the book’s success. When she writes of the ways these artists push back against reflexive sympathies and the pieties that are customarily attached to narratives of resilience in the face of infliction, she is not simply (or simplistically) empathetic. Rather, she is genuinely curious to find out how these artists define themselves in relation to the public sphere, how they engage their accidental audiences in performative play, and how these staged encounters can be understood as ethically and politically radical in their own right.

*Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship* is theoretically grounded without being overrun by academic-speak. Hadley is primarily reliant on Emmanuel Lévinas for his influential theories about otherness and alterity, but she also implicitly builds on feminist and queer theory, on the pioneering work of Rosemarie Garland Thomson, and the foundational theories of Michel Foucault, among many others. Moreover, the way she sees the ambivalent visibility of disabled people echoes and extends discussions of the spectacularity of women and persons of colour. For Hadley: ‘As soon as the disabled body enters the public sphere – on the street, in social institutions, in medical institutions

or in popular theatre, television, film or literature – it becomes a spectacle’ (2). Being seen to be disabled turns the disabled into performers and passers-by into spectators in a largely unconscious drama that conforms to the dominant discourse and casts ‘the disabled body as a source of curiosity, discomfort, stigma or pity’ (2). The companies and performances selected by Hadley for presentation and analysis in *Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship* work to ‘find a way to speak back to the modes of seeing, imaging and imagining disability that do violence to them, with a spirit, if not strategies, similar to other political artists’ (9). They avoid the expected, autobiographical, narratives of ‘diagnosis, crisis, overcoming and cure’ (9) to stage less linear, more complex theatrical and/or performative encounters that run from the playful to the confrontational.

Hadley’s book is structured as a series of close readings of recent performances by artists with disabilities in Australia, the US and the UK. Precisely evocative descriptions of the experiences of watching (and being watched) lead to detailed, persuasive analyses of the performers’ strategies for engaging spectators spatially in order to expose and upset the conventions at play in the social drama of disability. The book is organised into four substantial chapters, each directed towards analyses of theatrical actions taken in public spaces—galleries and malls, sidewalks and boardwalks, squares, television and the internet—that have been configured to confront, seduce or slide spectators into new understandings of corporeal or cognitive difference. Throughout, Hadley closely examines the ways the selected performances were designed to provoke laughter, to revoke sympathy, to evoke self-awareness, and to invoke a new ethics of encounter between peoples of diverse abilities.

Chapter One, ‘Weebles, Mirages and Living Mirrors: The Ethics of Embarrassed Laughter’, attends to performances in art galleries. Each takes on ‘the modern medical or diagnostic gaze that has come to define the disabled body, as the discourse of freaks, mutants and monsters has given way to more politically correct ideas about disability in the twentieth century’ (27). Each makes the act of spectatorship visible. They call on spectators:

[T]o respond, and take responsibility for their responses, in a context where a whole host of people can see them doing this, either in the space itself, through windows that allow passers-by to see into the space, or through recordings to be shown to any number of people after the fact. (37)

In James Cunningham’s *Mirage* (2006), for example, spectators entered into a whitewashed gallery that mimicked both a sideshow hall of mirrors and a surgical ward. Their images were refracted, fragmented in the sharply angled mirrors and seemingly shifted out of place on their own bodies and those of other spectators. The effect, Hadley says, was to leave spectators ‘giddy, giggly and confused by these tests to their perceptual integrity’ (41). Spectators then entered a second, darker space where they encountered Cunningham both in the flesh and figuratively. By turning, lifting and pushing his limbs—dancing—he was seen alongside fragmented and contradictory images of himself that were asymmetrically produced, reflected into a pool of water and projected onto scrim.

Hadley observes that spectators were thus 'drawn into a visceral experience of what it is like to have one's body defined, redefined and redefined again. There is never a moment at which the body comes into permanent sync with its image or vice versa' (43–44). Through this unsettling play of Self and Other, spectators were brought, Hadley argues, to a different body-consciousness. Instead of seeing difference set into a conventional social frame, they experience their own images and those of the performers as a kind of mirage—a phenomenological destabilisation.

Where Cunningham's *Mirage* confronted spectators with different ways of seeing their bodies in relation to others', in *Exercise in Losing Control* (2007) and *We Are For You Because We Are Against Them* (2009) Noemi Lakmaier, who ordinarily uses a wheelchair, performed alongside spectators in 'weebles': wobbly circular balls that contain and constrain the body as a tangible metaphor for physical and psychological limitation. In *We Are For You Because We Are Against Them*, Lakmaier's 'guests'—eight participant/spectators seated in weebles—joined her for a dinner party in a gallery in Dublin, eating, drinking and carrying on as if normal as others—spectators and passers-by—watched. The notion of a 'fixed bodily state', Hadley tells us, came undone, became absurd in the weeble environment (54). Finally turning to Alison Jones's *Portraits By Proxy*, Hadley analyses what happens when, as someone who is visually impaired, Jones engaged with 'the dynamics of staring that define the disabled body as different or deficient' (58) by asking spectators to describe what she looks like to herself. Spectators were, that is, invited to see themselves seeing. As with the performances by Cunningham and Lakmaier, these spectators were brought to experience themselves as an 'Other's Other' (73), a necessary precursor, perhaps, Hadley tells us, for development of a new ethics of encounter.

Chapter Two, 'Drug Deals, Samaritans and Suicides: Bodies on the Brink of the Visible', carries forward Hadley's meticulous readings of performances that reframe the relationship between looking and being looked at in everyday environments, outside the gallery, and in public spaces such as streets, squares and shopping malls. These are disruptive performances, a kind of guerrilla theatre aimed at subverting dominant cultural logics by exposing the ways both disabled and non-disabled people perform identity in the public sphere. In re-performing actions and interactions of daily life they call attention to what Hadley calls the 'dirty work' (102) attached to the social drama of disability in shoring up the oppressive social contract that constrains disabled people in the public sphere.

Hadley's analysis of Back to Back Theatre's *Small Metal Objects* (2005) focuses on the way the company positioned spectators on a platform, making them effectively more visible, more extra-ordinary to passers-by than the performers. Bill Shannon's *Regarding the Fall* (various dates) encompasses both public space interventions and performative lectures on 'Performative Sociological Anthropology' and the 'Weight of Empathy' in order to open for critique the 'Samaritanism' of non-disabled people: the insistence on 'helping' and other forms of intrusion into his sense of autonomy and agency. Hadley concludes the chapter with a look at the ways Aaron Williamson and Katherine Araniello,

performing together as The Disabled Avant Garde in *Assisted Passage* (2007), staged a protest and petitioned passers-by to support Araniello's right to end her life. In effect, they set the logic of assisted suicide—a political stance regarding agency and autonomy of the individual—against the not-uncommon notion that someone who appears severely disabled, in this case Araniello, might, in fearing reliance on others for intimate care, desire death.

Chapter Three, "'That you would post such a thing...': Staging Spectatorship Online', is focused on the way artists with disabilities can be seen to enter performatively into the media sphere: websites, blogs, Facebook, etc. By provoking people into opinionated displays in public fora, these performances, online and off, can be seen 'to create new chains of thought, confusion, uncertainty or changes of perception (112), producing 'cascading series of new performances, new uncertainties, and new reactions that in the end may (or may not, or may not predictably) effect changes in the public sphere' (113). She looks again at the work of Katherine Araniello, who pushes the question of assisted suicide further in *Suicide Messages* and *Cast Offs*, and also at the work of Rita Marcalo's *Involuntary Dances* and Liz Crow's *Resistance on the Plinth*. In *Involuntary Dances* (2009), Marcalo confronted the 'invisible disability' of epilepsy by attempting to induce a seizure in herself. In looking at *Resistance on the Plinth*, Hadley stirs a close reading of Crow's performance into a critical investigation into the online and offline commentaries it produced. Hadley considers how spectators—seeing the work live or, just as likely, in the news and on social media—took up the work of interpretation, of making meaning from the spectacle of the artist dressed in Nazi regalia posed in her wheelchair as part of Antony Gormley's *One & Other* (2009)—a public art project that invited people to perform for an hour on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square.

In contrast, Araniello blurred the line between fiction and fact on social media in her performance of suicidal contemplations that troubled conventional notions of 'self-determination, response to disability, disease, illness and depression, and responsibility (or otherwise) for our own responses to others facing these situations in their daily lives' (138). Hadley then discusses Jack Thorne's *Cast Offs*, a six-episode television mockumentary modelled on the *Survivor* series that featured a group of disabled actors performing everyday tasks in a forest environment. The series produced conflicted readings in social media posts by its viewers, in particular because the line between 'acting' and 'being' was—as is typical of reality television—substantially fuzzied. Hadley closes with an effective analysis of the dramaturgical commonalities in the online responses to these performances: competing claims of authority, authenticity and knowledge, and debates about how people with disabilities should or should not act.

Finally, in 'Same Difference?: Disability, Presence, Performance and Ethics', Hadley turns to performances of disability by apparently non-disabled artists—what she terms 'voluntary enfreakment' (151)—in Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Museum of Fetishized Identities* (2001), Marie Chouinard's *bODY rEMIX / gOLDBERG vARIATIONS* (2008), and the television series *Glee*. Hadley sees Gómez-Peña's appropriation of the wheelchair and other implements of disability performance as part of his complex

challenge to the ways difference—in particular of Latin Americans—is signified in American culture. Chouinard’s deployment of prosthetics, crutches and other devices, detached from the realities of disability, transform the ways her dancers move and interact, creating what Hadley calls ‘a mutant realm of the imagination, beyond the scope of standard human bodies, behaviours and movements, in which just about anything seems to be possible’ (160). Hadley’s critique of the ‘cripdrag’ of Artie Abrams, *Glee*’s wheelchair bound character reproduce conventions of disability and resilience is the one point in the book where she slips into easy judgment, I think. The chapter’s coda is a brief discussion of the contemporary freakshow’s explicitly corporeal interplay with the dominant cultural imaginary.

In closing, Hadley reflects on her own acts of spectatorship and interpretation, her position in performing readings of these provocative performances, and the ways in which looking at such performances by artists with disabilities can help us imagine more ethical encounters with other Others. To perform consciously in the social drama—whether of disability or not—is to disrupt dominant cultural narratives and our habitual ways of looking at, and playing with, each other. This is increasingly difficult and yet imperative, given the oppressively smooth surfaces of contemporary life. Hadley’s investigation into how these performances go beyond the articulation of alternative images of disabilities to interrupt ‘the mechanisms of imag(in)ing disability themselves’ (183) could, and should, be extended to other performative encounters. In showing the potential in these interventionalist performances to destabilise the social drama of disability, Hadley opens our eyes to how being seen as different—whether because of disability, race, gender or sexuality—is constituted and consumed socially, and offers new ways of imagining how such acts of seeing might be theatrically confronted and socially transformed.

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