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This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Hadley, Bree J.](#) (2011) "That you would post such a thing implies that you are a despicable human being": spectatorship, social media, & the struggle for meaning in disability performance. In *Performance Studies International (PSi) Conference 2011*, 25-29 May 2011, Utrecht University, Utrecht. (Unpublished)

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“That you would post such a thing implies that you are a despicable human being”: Spectatorship, Social Media, & The Struggle for Meaning in Disability Performance

Bree Hadley

Artists with disabilities working in Live Art paradigms often present performances which replay the social attitudes they are subject to in daily life as guerilla theatre in public spaces – including online spaces. In doing so, these artists draw spectators’ attention to the way their responses to disabled people contribute to the social construction of disability. They provide different theatrical, architectural or technological devices to encourage spectators to articulate their response to themselves and others. But – the use of exaggeration, comedy and confrontation in these practices notwithstanding – their blurry boundaries mean some spectators experience confusion as to whether they are responding to real life or a representation of it. This results in conflicted responses which reveal as much about the politics of disability as the performances themselves. In this paper, I examine how these conflicted responses play out in online forums. I discuss diverse examples, from blog comments on Liz Crow’s *Resistance on the Plinth* on YouTube, to Aaron Williamson and Katherine Araneillo’s Disabled Avant-Garde clips on YouTube, to Ju Gosling’s Letter Writing Project on her website, to segments of UK Channel 4’s mock reality show *Cast Offs* on YouTube. I demonstrate how online forums become a place not just for recording memories of an original performance (which posters may not have seen), but for a new performance, which goes well beyond re-remembering/re-mediating the original. I identify trends in the way experience, memory and meaning-making play out in these performative forums – moving from clarification of the original act’s parameters, to claims of disgust, insult or offense, to counter-claims confirming the comic or political efficacy of the act, often linked disclosure of personal memory or experience of disability. I examine the way these encounters at the interstices of live and/or online performance, memory, technology and public/private history negotiate ideas about disability, and what they tell us about the ethics and efficacy of the specific modes of performance and spectatorship these artists with disabilities are invoking.

“That you would post such a thing implies that you are a despicable human being”: Spectatorship, Social Media, & The Struggle for Meaning in Disability Performance

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Artists with disabilities working in live art paradigms present performances which replay the social attitudes they are subject to in daily life in public spaces – including online spaces. In doing so, they draw spectators’ attention to the way their responses to disabled people contribute to the social construction of disability. They provide different theatrical or technological devices to encourage spectators to articulate their response to themselves or to others. But, use of comedy, confrontation or counterposed images notwithstanding, the blurry boundaries of these works leave some spectators confused as to whether they are responding to real life or a representation of it. This results in conflicted responses which reveal as much about the politics of disability as the performances themselves.

In this paper, I examine how these conflicted responses play out in online forums. I draw on four examples, including Rita Marcalo’s offline *Involuntary Dances*, Liz Crow’s offline/online *Resistance on the Plinth*, Katherine Araneillo’s online *Suicide Messages* clips, and *Cast Offs*, a TV show viewable on YouTube, to examine how spectators respond via social media. I track the way meaning-making plays out in social media forums, and the way these encounters at the interstices of performance, memory, history and technology negotiate ideas about disability.

There is what Helen Freshwater (2009) calls an “orthodoxy” in performance studies which suggests that the live, ephemeral, event-ness of performance makes it a privileged site for contested citations and recitations of the dominant cultural narratives. But the ephemerality of performance – its ability to disappear, allowing de-contextualised descriptions and documentation to dominate memory, meaning-making and media debate about its ethics, politics and impact– also determines the way in which it intervenes or has lasting effects in the public sphere. This ephemerality means, as John Houchin (2008) and Miriam Felton-Dansky (2008) say in an issue of *Theatre Journal* on ‘Censorship & Performance’, and controversies like the Janet Jackson “wardrobe malfunction”, that performance can be co-opted into the mechanics of controversy, as a receding centre around which combat between opposing ideologies can be played out. They point to the phenomenon of people misreading a performance, or denouncing it on the basis of what they’ve heard. Here, the original encounter in which – at least according to Emmanuel Levinas (1996a&b) – we engage with something or someone other (at a pre-ontological level) disappears. The

other is translated into something readable (at an ontological level), and readings are informed by cultural histories, habits and memories.

This phenomenon, in which a performance becomes a receding centre around which a new performance, a new negotiation of ideas, ideologies and discourses, takes place, undoubtedly characterises responses to disabled artists work in social media forums.

A recent example is response to Rita Marcalo's *Involuntary Dances* – a 24-hour piece in which she stopped her medication, took stimulants, and subjected herself to triggers such as strobe lighting, in as an effort to induce a seizure – and make the invisible condition of epilepsy she normally works hard to hide visible.

Newspapers immediately began citing experts from the National Society for Epilepsy, or Epilepsy Action, expressing concern about *Involuntary Dances* (Norfolk 2009, n.pag; cf Verrant 2009). So did people commenting on a review of it on Disability Arts Online. “As a person who has had seizures since the early 80s,” one poster said, “...the idea of inducing an uncontrolled seizure in a steel basket scares me” (Brian Newman, DAO, 17 December 2009). “[T]he reason I am so angry about this work,” another said, “is that it threatens my identity. Rita Marcalo may have delighted a well-established disability arts community, albeit a tiny audience, but has alienated the mainstream E-Type community” (Richard Johnson, DAO, 17/12/09). Some said that if Marcalo's was contemplating this her condition must not be authentic, or severe. “It seems,” one said, “this young woman only has two seizures a year, I have already had two seizures in the past three days” (Anna Kennedy, DAO, 13/12/09). Others suggested it was Marcalo's fault that she fears negative public perceptions of her fits. “Rita's [disability],” one said, “is her inability to cope with her perceptions of what others might feel. ...I have a sad feeling that any negative reactions from the spectators would have had the effect of justifying her own negative viewpoint about public reactions and not given her an opportunity to focus on her own issues” (Laura R, DAO, 16/12/09). Many called *Involuntary Dances* a “circus act in front of a crowd looking for blood” (Brian Newman, DAO, 17/12/09), or “humiliation as entertainment” (John Breet, DAO, 20/12/09), saying “anyone who went to watch it should be ashamed of themselves” (Cat Watson, DAO, 13/12/09), because Marcalo was “portray[ing] the victim-figure most of us reject” (Richard Johnson, DAO, 13/12/09). “This performance,” one said, “... has re-inforced the view held by some police and health professionals, that E can be faked, that people with E don't work as part of the healthcare team ... that they are not to be trusted” (Richard Johnson, DAO 14/12/09). Others came to Marcalo's defense, arguing that the medical model still asks epileptics to hide, conceal and control what can't be cured, so people do feel a compulsion to fit in private, and pressure to follow doctor's advice. As one commentator said, Marcalo “raised a lot of issues about our right to make

out own decisions” (Allan Sutherland, DAO, 14/12/09). Marcalo demonstrated the damage the medical model, which tries to normalise disability, can do – and, at the same time, the non-normalisability of the reality of the fits, fatigue and pain. Amidst the commentary, counter-commentary, and claims about the works impact, people noted that it got a debate started – and that the fact that there’s not many forums for it debate explain the emotion. There was, then, acknowledgement that tensions that exist within the public sphere were being played out, not only in Marcalo’s performance, but in the remediation of it online – effectively a new performance – even if the editor apparently cut more extreme attacks.

As I have said, Marcalo’s performance wasn’t posted on online, but still drew single drop-in-and-state-my-view comments, dialogue, and debate, in the Disability Arts Online forum. Is this because the performance did recede behind the commentary? Or do we see similar patterns of response with performances like which are – in one sense or another – performed online? Tracking social media responses suggests we do.

In *Resistance on the Plinth*, Liz Crow presented herself in a wheelchair in a Nazi uniform atop the vacant fourth plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square as part of Antony Gormley’s (2009) *One and Other* public art project. Crow’s counter-posed two images – the wheelchair, and the Nazi uniform, associated with eugenics, euthanasia, and a desire to eliminate people who do not accord with the Aryan ‘norm’ – which do not make sense together (Crow 2010) to make it difficult for spectators to reconcile the conflicting realities, and encourage them to “stop, look and think” (Crow 2010), about British media debate about genetic testing, eugenics and euthanasia – which, for Crow, characterises disabled people as needing to be “pu[t] out of their misery” (Crow 2009b). Crow’s performance was simple – raising a flag with Martin Niemoller’s anti-Nazi statement which begins “First the came for the sick, the so-called incurables and I did not speak out”, then taking of the Nazi uniform then flying the flag again. The simplicity was deliberate, because in *One and Other*, Crow was engaging both live and one online audiences, and the Sky TV web streaming meant misreadings, misrecognitions of the culturally recognisable image of the Nazi, and confusion about whether Crow was a Nazi, or a wheelchair user, were a possibility. The reaction to Crow’s work, which The Guardian listed amongst the One & Other top ten, started with ‘WTF’--what the fuck (Crow 2010). Spectators then tried to work out the meaning of the image, draw links to their own experience, and to Crow’s or their own art activism. The tone was positive. “It is very moving to watch you sitting there” (Jan Fairley, 08/08/09, Artichoke et. al.), or “at first i was a bit shocked. ...then i read why ya there...and it all became clear” (Martin Morris, 08/08/09, Artichoke et. al.). But at least one post was negative, arguing that Crow perpetuates “the myths of fear released by the press” and that “...[T]he evidence clearly shows a move to more acceptance of disabilities of all kinds”-(Stephen Social Work, 08/08/09, Artichoke et. al.). Others called this man a

'fool', provided examples of discrimination (John McG aka Wheelzuk, 11/08/09, qtd. Artichoke et. al.; Alan Summers, 12/08/09, Artichoke et. al.), and told him his response "perfectly supports Pastor Niemöeller's words that if you ignore history you are condemned to repeat it" (Kai, 17/08/09, Artichoke et. al.). This new performance, then, was about whether disabled people are still excluded – and, as with Marcalo's work, naysayers felt the problem was with the artist's perception not with the actuality of their disability.

In her works – which include public space performances like *Assisted Passage* where she asked passersby to sign a petition to help get her to Zurich where assisted suicide is legal, as well as mock suicide messages on YouTube (called things like *Suicide Interview*, *Suicide Message on Valentines Day* and *Suicide Haircut*) – Katherine Araniello also addresses UK debate about assisted suicide. Araneillo's work is more guerrilla than Marcalo's or Crow's, blurring the bounds actual life and activist art strategy. Accordingly, people mistake it as real, and begin by telling Araniello not to do it. Others point out that it is art. "Of course she's not going to do it... It's satire" (imatroll5, Suicide Interview), as one put it,. "I gotta tell you, you had me going for a minute" another said, "...then....it hit me" (Cbaz2, SMOVD). "[T]his is deliciously subversive and I hope you inspire others to rethink their lives before doing something very very foolish" (knightyknight, SMOVD) another . In comments on Araniello's work, there's less debate about deploying a real disability as art, and more about personal and social issues. Some said there may be reasons for suicide "People want to die for MORE than just their hair being a mess..." one said. "I've been suicidal in the past because my parents hat[e] me, [and] my dad has abused me ...Look deeper, it's not about the lifestyle – its about the life that they've been dealt" (TheBrokenSoul101, WDYWTD). Some said, even if Araniello isn't serious, its "maybe its not fair to joke about something like suicide, when there are people hurting from it? I don't know. I joke about suicide all the time, but that's just a way of coping with staying alive." (Suikoden26, WDYWTD). They then went further, saying suicide isn't always irrational, in Araniello's situation, or other situations where people seem functional but don't have much to live for. "I've been suicidal and people told me my feelings were irrational and that I have things to live for," one said, but "[t]hat's only because I look normal and look like I should be able to function properly and keep myself alive" (Suikoden26, OTTD). "Seeing people being treated badly/abused/degraded by nursing staff and carers," her interlocutor said, "if I couldn't do anything to get out of that situation then I'd want to die" (Suikoden26, OTTD). Here, again, there's this idea that it's logical for incurables to want to die – totally unquestioned, maybe because Araneillo is more visibly different than the other artists.

In online responses to *Cast Offs*, a Channel 4 mock-u-mentary by Jack Thorne about disabled people coping Survivor-style on an Island, and starring well-known artists such as Mat Fraser, Sophie Woolley, Victoria Wright and Peter Mitchell, similarly conflicted

responses emerge. Here too silly stories and moments show this is satire. But comments still seem to begin with debate about whether the series is real. Some say it is. "Its a documentary of how they all can work together and cope out in the out doors with out any aid except for relying on each others help and support" (New European Tigress Cast Offs: Dan's Story), or "It's not documentary but it is based on real disabled people" (dervish2173 Cast Offs: Dan's Story). Others say "It's a comedy drama. It is not real. The way you can tell is when the credits at the end display the actors real names." (Toobecks Cast Offs: Dan's Story). People applaud the series for showing disabled people trying to act normal, but, ironically, by calling other posters "retarded". A number say "better" non-disabled actors should've been used. "I know a lot of people think it's un-PC to have able bodied actors playing disabled parts," one poster says, "but I'd much rather have seen that than genuine disabled people who can't act" (thelovepigeon Cast Offs: Dan's Story). Again, others counter, saying the disabled actors are good role models. "I have actually met the man which dervish2173 is being prejudiced against," one says, "and he is a great person in real life. Someone who is a great role model and disability advocate" (fraserkatie Cast Offs). "Having met the actress in real life, I have to say that she is very nice," another says. "That you would such a thing implies that you are a despicable human being" (nashertheatheist Cast Offs). Still others say the program offensive regardless of whether it is real, or use real actors. "Its not fun and games nor should it be played out to be. (masterchiefx2 hide Cast Offs: Dan's Story), as one puts it.

Although responses to these media releases, reviews and clips differ, there are commonalities. In each case, social media becomes a place not just for recording memories of an original performance (which posters may not have seen) but for a new performance, which goes well beyond re-membering or re-mediating the original. In each case, the posters perform a debate about disability politics. And there's a surprisingly common dramaturgical structure. Posters start with a claims about their authenticity, knowledge and authority to perform, linked to disclosure of personal experiences or memories of disability - I have this condition, I know somebody who has this condition, etc. This is followed by clarification of the parameters of the original act. Posters debate whether it is authentic, whether it is art, and even – with *Involuntary Dances* and *Cast Offs* – whether it is authentic enough and/or too authentic to be art. Posters ask whether real lives, real traumas, and real people's predicaments should ever be seen as art. Some say making disability into art – subversive, satirical, live art, which is comic or confrontational – denies its seriousness. In some cases, posters claim disgust, insult or offense because the work trivialises their own identity. In others, because it shows some disabled people simply won't follow doctors' orders, take advantage of cures and inclusivity, to 'overcome' their problems. In others, because they think such problems have been 'overcome' in contemporary, politically correct society. The debate about how people should deal with

disability embodies prejudice as posters label those with contrary views “retards”, or tell them they’re projecting their personal psychological problems, or judge in terms of very conventional definitions of theatre and talent. Others offer counter-claims, confirming the validity of the views, and the comic or cultural efficacy of the work. There is, in the more cohesive communities, acknowledgement that the typically “private sphere” status of an issue being debated in public is bound to make emotions run high, and that the work has at least got us talking.

How productive is this talk performance? Is it, as scholars like Peggy Phelan (1993) might suggest, an example of how performance draws us into ethical encounters? The talk does capture something of the phenomenon Helena Grehan calls ambivalence – a dynamic physical, emotional or intellectual engagement with and estrangement from something that leave spectators wondering how to respond, and thus “keeps the spectator engaged with the other, with the work, and with responsibility and therefore an ethical process long after they have left the performance space” (2009, 22). But, though there is dialogue, and debate about different cultural logics, I’m ambivalent too, because I’m struck by how often it operates at the level of facts, and proofs, and positively verifiable examples, without broaching the more insidious ideological beliefs that underpin any argument based on facts. There’s ambivalence, if not fully-fledged reflection, here – but there’s also recuperation, as these encounters at the interstices of performance, memory, habit, public and private history and technology reinforce existing ideas. Looking at the comments, the balance between contest and recuperation seems to relate to the nature of community in the social media platform. Some lend themselves to monologic state-my-opinion and go talks performances, others to more dialogic talk performances, and the later seem to hold more potential for change of perception. In the debate about Marcalo’s piece on Disability Arts Online, for example, one poster concluded a scathing comment with “Please continue talking” (Richard Johnson, DAO, 14/12/2009). Here – the level of the debate, dialogue and change notwithstanding – there is a desire to continue performing, continue negotiating. Indicating that, if nothing else, for some posters, these online performances – not just re-mediating an original but a new citation of contested cultural logics – at least offer a platform and an opportunity to perform, to participate in interpretative culture labour, that is – even if challenges to habitual views are discomforting for these spectators-become-performers – valued and appreciated.

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