

**Review: Walker, P.K. (2005). *Moving over the edge: artists with disabilities take the leap*. Davis, CA: MH Media, Inc., 2005. 243 pgs. ISBN: 0-9771505-2-6. \$25.00.**

Reviewed by: [Ann Millett](#)

Millett, A. (2006) Review: Walker, Pamela K., *Moving Over the Edge: Artists with Disabilities Take the Leap*. Davis, CA: MH Media, Inc., 2005. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 26 n. 3 (Summer).

**Made available courtesy of University of Hawaii at Manoa, Center on Disability Studies:**  
<http://www.cds.hawaii.edu/>

**\*\*\*Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from University of Hawaii at Manoa, Center on Disability Studies. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.\*\*\***

### **Article:**

*Moving over the edge* captures the dynamism of the Berkeley/San Francisco Bay area during the disability rights and arts movements of the 1970s — 1990s, in which Pamela Kay Walker has played multiple roles, as activist, educator, radio host, performing artist, talent agent, video producer, administrative leader, poet, and most recently, historian. The book contextualizes many events informatively, chronicling the Independent Living movement, key laws leading up to ADA, and the formations of Axis Dance Company, Wry Crips theater group, and the Superfest Film Festival. Walker profiles key artists whose work has transformed representations of disability, extended definitions of art, and showcased performance as a survival strategy that transcends the stage. By providing such background and current information, Walker produces a vital resource book of visual, literary, and performing artists.

The book is part memoir, as Walker's life experiences set the stage for impassioned social critiques. Walker describes her childhood polio, mobility impairments, and social exclusions, particularly from the arts, which were not deemed necessary for her "special" education. Many readers may relate to her struggles growing up disabled in a non-disabled world, internalizing stereotypes, particularly surrounding sexuality, resisting and later coming to terms with her identity as disabled, and negotiating group identification with the vastly varied and, as she argues, often internally exclusive disability community. Walker describes how she discovered her voice, following college and a brief, failed marriage; disillusioned, dislocated, and destitute, she demands her rights to services and finds herself as a skilled advocate for others, launching her discovery of the repressed activist and artist within.

Walker has consistently fought for progressive representation of disability in the media and arts, as means to revise the problematic, restrictive social images of disabled people that hinder their full emancipation. She has also maintained rights for the disabled to make art, despite the many obstacles, for arts offer endless means to portray one's disability — to perform and invent the self — and serve as forms of political protest. Impairment and disability, in Walker's words, can both impede and feed creative production. Walker encourages artists to express multiple dimensions of their identities.

Walker's critique of the often condescending platforms of arts organizations and disability service programs (many run exclusively by non-disabled people) is candidly revealing about the status of disability in society, as well as that of art itself, a rich theme that emerges throughout the book; Walker describes how a disabled artist is twice marginalized in society, struggling to receive mainstream attention and respect for their work, as well as stable income, especially when disability service programs thwart independence and creativity. She presents an eye opening expose of the paternalistic Social Security Administration, which perpetuates dependency on insufficient public aid, maintains class systems, and keeps people who need the medical benefits in poverty and unemployment. Walker's journalistic entries throughout the book chronicle the challenges of an artist producing a text, as she fights to maintain her financial security. Walker raises many additional issues that have specific

relevance to, yet transcend the disability community in social importance: ranging from inadequate healthcare service and coverage, contemporary racism, and the oppressive class system to sexuality and sexual expression, censorship, and the role of art in social change.

The most fascinating chapters document the Moving Over the Edge (MOE) shows of the late 1980s, to which the title refers. These multimedia, vaudevillian talent shows were composed of part scripted, part improvised performances by singers, musicians, performance artists, comedians, poets, storytellers, and dancers. Walker's firsthand recordings of MOE and its trailblazing performers, a valuable archive, serve as a centerpiece for the text, as they help thematize otherwise disjointed qualities. Suddenly the book's narrative, composed of many small chapters that skip around in focus and are at times distractingly conversational in tone, takes on the form of a performance, from historical basis, backstage production, cast playbill, curtain rising, to epilogue.

In conclusion, Walker explains how she wrote the book over several years by using voice-to-text software, which explains why the prose takes on qualities of oral storytelling or, when more formal in subject, lecturing. Each chapter ends with a response by an individual previously mentioned by Walker; these additional voices and Walker's pervasive one compose a heavily congratulatory and sentimental chorus, at times to a fault. Some of the richest moments are Walker's critiques of her work and others, acknowledging their contextual importance and flaws. Walker closes with advice for disabled artists, such as continued activism and improvement of one's craft, all in efforts to build bridges within and outside of the disability community and enter the mainstream. Her book attempts to take part in these acts, by addressing a general audience, and one wonders if it, like much of the art it describes, can breach the disabled/mainstream art divide. Yet it makes strong strides over this edge.