Seeing, imaging and imagining the other

Slimy monsters. Medical specimens. Cripples. Charity cases. Inspirations. Though they differ across times, cultures and contexts, there can be no doubting that such personae – and the historical, social and symbolic meanings such personae are invested with – have a strong impact on a disabled person’s status, identity and sense of self. What interests the artists I study in this book is the way acts of spectatorship – acts of seeing, imaging and imagining the disabled body on stage, on the street, in social and medical institutions, and in the media – attach such personae to their supposedly all-too-suitable bodies.

The fact that these personae are produced by spectators not by biology is, for disability scholars, activists and artists, demonstrated by the plethora of imagery spectators and societies have attached to their bodies over time.

In the United States, United Kingdom, Europe and their colonies, imaginings of the disabled body have historically been dominated by a teratological impulse, which reached the height of its power in the fairs, sideshows, freakshows, cabinets of curiosity and museums in circulation in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The importance of these practices has been recognized in the publication of at least a half-dozen books that consider the part freakshows play in defining, categorizing and controlling the disabled body in the past three decades. These include Robert Bogdan’s *Freakshow* (1988), Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) and her edited collection *Freakery* (1996), Rachel Adams’s *Sideshow USA* (2001), and Michael Chemers’s *Staging Stigma* (2008), together with chapters and articles by Elizabeth Grosz (1996), Petra Kuppers (2004), Elizabeth Stephens (2006), Collette Conroy (2008) and others. In fairs, sideshows and freakshows, these authors argue, the biological fact of being shorter, fatter, hairier or in some other sense differently configured was subjected to specific teratological scopic mechanisms that turned bodies with these idiosyncrasies into freaks. Spectators were titillated, excited and educated by the sight of what they were not, and would not want to be, in the fleshy form of the fat lady, freak, geek, dwarf or monster. With the advent of new technologies, media and touring circuits in the late nineteenth century, the freakshow’s motley cast of characters made
their way into mainstream theatre, literature and cinema, offering an ever-expanding audience a warning of what can happen when the human body goes awry.

In the twentieth century, the exploitative imagery of the freakshow started to slip from the centre, if not the wings, of the cultural stage. In the welfare states emerging in supposed civilized, cultured nations at this time, spectators and society were taught to be tolerant of the less fortunate, including people with disabilities, the uneducated, the unemployed, women, children and other not-quite-citizens. The emergence of the welfare state brought with it a medical model of disability. In this model, as Michel Foucault says in The Birth of the Clinic (1976), bodily differences and idiosyncrasies become surveillable, controllable and sometimes even curable in an objective, scientific schema of biology. From Jean Martin Charcot’s spectacles to the contemporary reality TV of shows like The Doctors, Embarrassing Bodies and My Amazing Story, as Petra Kuppers puts it, ‘[t]he medical theater is a place of public performance: a body performs its materiality and meaning to a doctor who is empowered to read hidden histories and signs (Foucault 1994)’ (2004: 39). Doctors, and the public who come to understand things through their definitions, see the disabled body in terms of mutations, accidents, compliance or non-compliance with medical advice, and ‘amazing’ tales of overcoming or cure. The disabled body is no longer an extraordinary, powerful or provocative example of the limits of the human body, it is simply an example of human misfortune to be examined, categorized and cared for by medical experts. Disability, disease and illness are seen as embarrassing personal problems, conditions to be cured, tolerated or accommodated, examples of what happens when people fail to follow medical advice, or, in extreme cases, examples of the plight of poor unfortunates who probably need to be put out of their misery.

On the surface, the role of the patient may seem rather more liveable than that of the monster, mutant or freak. It is, though, still part of what David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000) characterize as a culturally constructed ‘script’ that limits the roles, personae and identity positions available to people with disabilities. It is simply that the freak has been replaced with new, and in some ways more problematic, roles – from the corrupt individual whose physical flaws are a sign of personality flaws, to the charity case, the stoic sufferer, and the ‘supercrip’ who overcomes their challenges and can even
display superior insight into the world around them. This script, replayed again and again in dramatic, literary and cinematic cannons as well as in daily life, influences the way sufferers and spectators alike respond to disability in daily life. A medical model TV show like *Embarrassing Bodies* may tell us, ‘there’s no shame we’re all the same’, but this is, in fact, an injunction to survey, compare and take steps to control anything about one’s own body that is not the same as other people’s bodies.

Disability may be a common experience, one that many if not most people will face as they move through illness, injury or aging, but it is still a challenge to comforting narratives about the unity, universality and above all, usefulness of the conventional human form that needs to be dealt with. Disability still needs to be cured, concealed, closeted or otherwise controlled. Failure to do this is treated with derision by doctors, social spectators and society. This is particularly so in Western welfare systems such as those that operate in some parts of Europe, in the United Kingdom, and in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other commonwealth countries, where taxpayers support the medical and disability care systems. In these societies, people are supposed to want to be normal, productive, contributing citizens who do not unnecessarily bother or burden others with their problems. Accordingly, there is no room for any suggestion that disability might be a natural, normal or even positive aspect of human experience that people might want to live with, or, indeed, valorize as a characteristic a certain community of people share. To be happy with one’s disabled self, happy to have a body that is deficient, difficult, idiosyncratic and thus less useful than an able body, can, as Tobin Siebers says, be seen as a sign of a psychological problem, or, at the least, of being a malingerer (2010: 11).

When it comes to dominant ways of imagining the disabled body, the one thing almost all scholars, activists and artists emphasize in their analyses of these and other images, motifs and metaphors is the part they play in defining not just the disabled body, but the non-disabled body. Although the teratological, diagnostic and therapeutic imaginings of disability that dominate in Western culture present disability as a mistake, or a warning of what happens when bodies go wrong, disability is, in fact, central to the continuing cultural labour of defining the productive, useful, unified citizen’s body. The disabled body is the extreme edge or margin that allows the non-disabled body to define itself in relation to what it is not (Hadley, 2008).
Herein lies the ‘paradox’ (Kuppers, 2004) at the heart of those modes of seeing, imaging and imagining disability that encourage us to see it as a source of fear, shame, stigma or pity. On the one hand, these discourses position the disabled body as a very visible part of the host of spectacles, stories and philosophies about what it means to be human that permeate all aspects of the public sphere. On the other hand, though, these discourses see the disabled body only in terms of the personae projected onto it, not on its own terms, and thus position it as very invisible. By using disability as the axial image or metaphor for all that is Other, these discourses prevent us understanding the material realities of human beings who have disabilities, and take some potentially potent symbolism away from the very people who might want to make use of it to shift public perceptions of themselves (Davidson, 2008; Davis, 1995; Hadley, 2008; Kuppers, 2004; Siebers, 2008; Warren, 1988).

For those with a real, material stake in the matter, this paradoxical positioning of the disabled body is a personal, political and ethical issue not just for themselves, but for their spectators and for society at large. According to ethical philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1996a: 7), the encounter with the other always automatically compels us to recognize, respond to and take responsibility for the other at a pre-ontological level. However, in an effort to understand, we impose our own culturally determined codes, categories and labels on the other – an imposition that occurs in the ontological realm, and is influenced by the social, institutional and symbolic practices that prevail in a particular culture at a particular time. This is what teratological, medical and therapeutic models of disability do. They equip spectators with ready-made readings and responses that save them from having to truly encounter the other, or take responsibility for their relation to the other, in the street or on the stage. They subject the other to what Lévinas (1996a: 9) calls the violence of recognition, categorization and comprehension. The daily/dramatic spectator’s process ‘does not invoke these beings but only names them’, Lévinas says,

thus accomplishing a violence and a negation. A partial negation which is violence. This partiality is indicated by the fact that, without disappearing, those beings are within my power. Partial negation, which is violence, denies the independence of a being; it belongs to me.

(1996a: 9, original emphasis)
The circumstances of the daily/dramatic encounter transport bodies with disabilities into what Lévinas calls ‘the horizon of knowledge’ (1996b: 12). Their radical, unreadable alterity is reduced, and they are transformed into something that serves the dominant cultural logic. The responsibility for the other that characterized the original pre-ontological encounter is lost, together with any possibility of an ethical face-to-face encounter between one and other (Hadley, 2008; cf. Grehan, 2009).

Whether wielded by sideshow spectators, medical specialists or modern day Good Samaritans doing their bit to help the less fortunate, the teratological or diagnostic gaze thus does violence to people with disabilities. It does more than attach a label. It defines their identity, and influences the treatment they receive in all facets of life as a result of that identity. It thus has real effects not just on their agency and ability to access status, social institutions and services, but on their most basic understanding of who they are and how they fit in or fail to fit in to the world. This gaze that turns them into monsters, cripples, sufferers or charity cases is, for most of these unwitting social performers, in many ways more disabling than any pain, impairment or physical difficulties that might be associated with their medical, mobility or sensory conditions.

Disability, performance and performative interventions in public space

Attempts to address the paradoxical position in which spectators and society put people with disabilities have, since the 1980s, led to a rise in countermoves and counter-imaginings from scholars, activists and artists who identify as disabled. These scholarly, activist and artistic practices have, according to Kirsty Johnston, become mutually informative elements in a disability movement active in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and elsewhere (2012: 6, 9–10). What unites those involved in or influenced by this movement is a tendency to see disability as a minority experience that is marginalized by the images, discourses, institutions and architecture of the mainstream. A tendency, that is, to work with a social model of disability which sees society not biology as the most ‘disabling’ problem for people with corporeal or cognitive differences. Almost all take account of awkward moments in which people ask them to perform a role that
aligns with the dominant perception of what it means to be disabled as the point of departure for their work. In some cases, the call to perform is a mere annoyance. In other cases, it is a threat not just to the person’s agency but to their very survival, as he or she is confronted with the fact that many people think a life with a significant disability is not worth living, leading them to consciously or unconsciously support euthanasia, eugenics and other practices with the potential to rid the world of people with disabilities. Those working in disability studies, disability law, disability rights activism and disability arts look for ways to agitate for a more inclusive public sphere, in which, though pain and impairment may remain a reality, this typically unconscious performance of prejudice against a person whose life society sees as not worth living is no longer a prevailing reality. This can be through storytelling to alert people to the problems people with disabilities encounter in their everyday lives, analyses of specific situations and struggles, texts, performances or protests that try to tackle these problems head on, or, in some cases, texts that imagine alternative public spheres in which such problems no longer exist.

Although the politically charged practices of performers marked by gender, race or ethnicity have been the subject of much debate, it is only with this recent upsurge in the disability rights movement that scholars have seriously begun to consider the practices – and, as a result, the distinctive aesthetic and political agendas – of performers with disabilities. To date, texts about these practices number in the tens rather than in the hundreds or the thousands. The task performers with disabilities set themselves is 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. The work of these performers, and of those who analyse these performers, displays the same diversity of approach, aesthetic, style and interest seen in the disability movement as a whole, and, of course, in most political movements. It is a fascinating and at times fraught field that is growing both in scope and in scope of influence. Even the most cursory survey of this field indicates that when people with disabilities turn to performance as a political practice, they tend to avoid natural, autobiographical narratives about diagnosis, crisis, overcoming and cure. Though popular on the main stage, these are, it seems, the stories others would tell about disabled people, not the preferred mode when they work as instigators of their own
performances rather than interpreters of other people’s well-made plays about them. This caution about conventional theatre has roots that are not at all difficult to identify. In Western culture, as Carrie Sandahl says, the dominant discourse insists on configuring disability as an individual problem detached from the sphere of identity politics (2004: 598–9). It casts illness, disease and disability as a private catastrophe a person needs to deal with. This, regrettably, makes it all too easy for spectators to see an account of disability on the realist stage as a portrait of the way a person learns to deal with their problems that is not connected to broader political concerns in the same way that a portrait of gender, race, ethnicity or class might be. The story, though tragic, fails to register as part of the political negotiations that characterize and change the configurations of the public sphere. This, as Kuppers (2009) notes, may be why it is not uncommon to find attention wandering when we hear a straightforward, logical, linear account of pain, suffering, coping or cure. For many spectators, such a story, though sad, is simply a metaphor or moral lesson about how people might cope with any one of a number of different problems or traumas they might encounter over the course of their life.

Instead of working with well-made plays, performers with disabilities tend to be much more interested in working with contemporary comic, theatrical, performance or choreographic practices. Examples, for instance, might include the stand-up comedy of performers such as Steady Eddy (Australia), Liz Carr (United Kingdom) or Zach Anner (United States), the inclusive dance of companies such as Rawcus Theatre (Australia), Graeae Theatre (United Kingdom), or Axis Dance Company (United States), the remobilization of freakshow motifs by modern-day performers such as Mat Fraser (United Kingdom) or Jennifer Miller (United States), or the conceptual, confrontational and at times almost guerrilla performance practices of A Different Light (New Zealand), Ju Gosling (United Kingdom) or Bill Shannon (United States).

Accompanying this diverse body of practices is a body of scholarly texts that has begun to identify, document and describe their most salient and interesting aspects. There are books that look at work that takes place in theatres, turning the victim, villain or hero roles people with disabilities are assigned in traditional theatre on their heads through a diverse range of multi-character plays written,
performed and produced by people with disabilities, representing their own perspectives rather than those of the doctor, social worker or do-gooder. This, for example, is the focus of Kirsty Johnston’s *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre* (2012) and Victoria Lewis’s collection *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights* (2006). There are also books that look beyond plays and theatre pieces to contemporary performance, cross-cultural and community performance, and, of course, politicized performance practices in theatre or in day-to-day life – work that has, as even Lewis and Johnston acknowledge, been the area in which disabled performers have been most prolific in recent years.

There are books that consider work within a specific community of affinity. In *Hearing Difference: The Third Ear in Experimental, Deaf and Multicultural Theater* (2006), for example, Kanta Kochhar Lindgren considers the way deaf, community and multi-cultural theatres experiment with new staging practices to show and shift the cultural construction of deafness.

There are also texts that consider the work of many artists and communities in different countries, contexts and forms. This diversity is a characteristic of Petra Kuppers’s texts, including *Disability and Performance: Bodies on Edge* (2004) and *Disability Culture and Community Performance* (2011), which capture the way people with disabilities create stories, connections with spectators, and more inclusive forms of community. This diversity is also characteristic of Carrie Sandahl and Phillip Auslander’s *Bodies in Commotion* (2004) and Bruce Henderson and Noam Ostrander’s *Understanding Disability Studies and Performance Studies* (2010). Although both collections speak primarily from US, UK and European perspectives, they include articles on everything from the daily self-performance of artists, academics, mendicants or other types of people, to dramatic performances in dance, theatre, film or television, to contemporary, community and politicized performance practices.

Still other books look more broadly again at forms that do not necessarily fit the definition of theatre. In *Unimaginable Bodies: Intellectual Disability, Performance and Becomings*, (2009), Anna Hickey Moody analyses the way dancers with intellectual disabilities deter- ritorialize diagnostic, medical and social discourses of disability to make new meanings and social imaginings possible. In *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (2008), Michael
Davidson considers prose, poetry, and photography as well as performance art in a study of how deaf and disabled artists harness the aesthetics of pain, impairment and oppression to challenge the position they are assigned in society, and, again, make new meanings possible.

There are also books on disability in visual arts, such as Ann Millett Gallant’s *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (2010) and Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd and Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum* (2010). Some literary and cultural theorists also touch, however briefly, on performative practices in their analyses of how people are working to create a culture of, or more inclusive of, disability. Mitchell and Snyder (2000, 2001, 2006), Garland Thomson (1996, 1997, 2009) and Siebers (2008, 2010) all analyse the way disabled people are represented in theatre, film, literature and the visual arts, unpacking the ways in which the disabled body has been used as a ‘prosthetic’ in Mitchell and Snyder’s terms, to prop up dominant ideas about body, identity and Otherness in Western cultures. In the course of these studies, each has also written about self-representations by performance artists like Mary Duffy and Cheryl Wade. Recently, Garland Thomson (2009) has also written about the way disabled people become master manipulators of the stare, shifting the starer–staree relations that have defined and could potentially redefine disabled people in daily practices in public spaces. In this sense, though cultural theorists do not necessarily foreground theatre per se in their studies, they are interested in film, freakshows, autobiographical performances, and the work of artists at the far end of the ‘theatrical’ spectrum in performance art, even if their interest is in the symbolism instead of the specifically theatrical strategies the performers use to interrupt the stereotyping they are subject to.

The performance artists I bring together in this book all sit at this far end of the ‘theatrical’ spectrum. They are interested not just in illustrating, but in literally intervening in the discrimination they are subject to in daily life, and this takes them beyond theatre in any traditional sense of the word into a disability inflected form of live art, performance art, or social intervention as art. These artists take the moments in day-to-day life in which they most commonly feel compelled to act out a limited and limiting cultural script – the moments in which the doctor, do-gooder or bystander’s stare...
turns them into a monster, medical specimen, cripple or charity case that consciously or unconsciously connects them with cultural assumptions about disabled bodies – as the starting point for their practice. These moments include being diagnosed, being put in a special school, hospital, home or seating area in public spaces, being overlooked, chastised or barred access to a shop, a street or a service, being told their life is not worth living, being told how brave they are, or simply being the one that has to accommodate the awkwardness and embarrassment of others in social situations. The choice depends on the cultural context the artist works in, and, of course, the access to status, services and public spaces the artist is commonly allowed in this context. In the United States and United Kingdom, for example, continuing debate and court cases about euthanasia make this the compelling choice it would not be, say, in Australia, where access to medical care, education and career are (as we at last move to a National Disability Insurance Scheme that catches us up with some of the legislative and medico-legal progress made in the United States and United Kingdom over the past three decades) much more prominent in public discussions of disability. Whatever the moment, the artists restage it, and the stares, readings and responses they draw in it. Aaron Williamson and his collaborator Katherine Araniello, as I have said, started a petition in a public square in London to prompt passers-by to consider their assumption that the most caring response to Araniello’s supposedly unliveable life in a wheelchair with care workers responsible for the routines of her day-to-day life might be to ask the government to allow her to fly to Switzerland to take advantage of their assisted suicide laws. Liz Crow places herself atop the fourth plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square, in a Nazi uniform, in her wheelchair, to prompt passers-by to consider eugenics, euthanasia, the supposedly unliveable life of people with disabilities, and just how far some states will go to solve this problem for sufferers and society at large. James Cunningham re-enacts the effect of the mirror-box medical specialists employed to create the illusion of movement in his paralysed arm, asking spectators to put themselves in a similar position, and, in the process, consider their attachment to a whole, able body.

Though not part of a named practice or movement per se, these works all deploy a number of common strategies when they remobilize the images, moments and meetings the artists experience.
in the public sphere, and in public space, to try to intervene in how the public sphere operates. Though the moments in focus differ as a result of the different ideologies that drive the looks and comments the artists receive in public spaces in their cultural context, the artists all re-engage, re-enact and attempt to re-envision the tragic, terror-inducing roles people with disabilities are forced to perform in public spaces and places. They replay these stereotypes across their own bodies, with different degrees of amplification, exaggeration, counter-position or critical commentary, in the very public spaces and places where this stereotyping typically plays out, or, at least, outside conventional theatrical spaces. This stress on installation, intervention or interruption of the smooth flow of life on the street, or in medical, social or aesthetic institutions, or in the media, is what links these practices with what scholars in the United Kingdom typically call live art and what scholars in the United States typically call performance art (cf. Hadley, Winter and Trace, 2010; cf. Keidan, 2007; cf. LADA, 2008). Like most exponents of live art, these artists deconstruct or do away with the stories, characters and staging elements traditional realist theatre employs to prevent the potentially disruptive intrusion of real life into the closed fictional world unfolding before spectators (Lehmann, 2006: 30–1). They work not in a theatre, where darkness, stillness, silence and separate seating protect spectators from direct contact with the action unfolding before them, but, instead, in productively live spaces such as galleries, pubs, shops, streets or cyberspace. In doing so, these practices blur the boundaries between stage and social process. They position spectators – whether they are there to see a performance (as in Cunningham’s installations) or simply passing by (as in Williamson, Araniello, or Crow’s interventions) – as active witnesses, participants or co-performers in a conscious repetition of the usually unconscious social drama of disability, and, therefore, responsible for the encounter, and the effects of the encounter (Hadley, Trace and Winter, 2010; Schaefer, 2003: 5–6).

In effect, each of these artists takes the more-than-theoretical link between disability, performance, spectatorship and the meanings spectators make as the point of departure in their activist politics and performance. They firmly believe it is not just usually unconscious acts of performance, but usually unconscious acts of spectatorship that bring the sometimes unfortunate realities of disability into
being. Both, therefore, need to be differentially repeated, disrupted and transformed if there is to be any chance of creating a change in how disability and disabled people are figured in the public sphere. These artists hijack popular display platforms, places and spaces, and highlight the sort of responses disabled people draw in these spaces, by having spectators replay their own habitual responses to disabled people in that space. The hope, of course, is to draw spectators’ attention to how their habitual ways of seeing, imaging and imagining disability are complicit in the Western cultural compulsion to define the disabled body as an object of curiosity, discomfort, fear, pity, stigma, shame or embarrassment, by and large excluded from the public sphere. Will spectators see the disabled body as monster, mutant or freak? Will spectators feel discomforted by disruptions to their own sense of being a whole, able person? Will spectators feel the desire to help the supposedly less whole, able person that is so pivotal to the current culture of disability in welfare state countries? What will the spectator do if this causes awkwardness, embarrassment or any other slip in the standard dramaturgy of the social encounter? What if helping, in fact, means helping a disabled person to terminate their supposedly too-difficult-to-live life? What would he or she do if the position were – as it so readily can be via accident, disease or aging – reversed? The emphasis on spectators’ reactions, spectators’ performances of spectatorship, played out in front of performers, fellow spectators and society at large, raises the stakes of these practices above those of either standard social performances or standard theatrical performances. There is, as a result, a chance – though not a certainty – that spectators will start to reflect, reconsider the scripts that underpin their social interactions, and, potentially, come to a change of perception they can then carry through into future dealings with disabled people.

What these practices try to create, above all, is a method of intervening in the cultural construction of disability. This work, like most live art, engages what Hans Thies Lehmann (2006: 134) calls ‘an experience of the real’ – real lives and real traumas, in real spaces, places and social situations. It does not, however, attempt to show spectators a real, essential identity, and it does not attempt to spell out a specific counter-position to the current cultural logic of disability identity. Instead, it tries to unravel the mechanisms of oppression from within, whilst, at the same time, acknowledging the
real impact of pain, impairment and oppression in disabled people’s lives. The politics, then, is aligned not just with a social model of disability, but with a ‘realist’ model of disability that acknowledges that culturally constructed identities come to have real effects, and thus, for theorists like Tobin Siebers, Tom Shakespeare and others, has much more potential to create a concrete transformation in our relation to corporeal differences and idiosyncrasies (Siebers, 2008: 82; Siebers, 2001). These artists use installation, public space intervention and performance to encourage spectators to consider the real implications and consequences of current discourses about disability. They create the conditions of possibility for a political encounter, an ethical encounter, and a change of perception amongst spectators, even if – as the artists themselves acknowledge – it will be the spectator and society that determine if, and if so how, this change flows through into concrete outcomes in the public sphere.

In the last few years, director of the Live Art Development Agency (LADA) Lois Keidan, LADA itself, and other auspices such as the National Review of Live Arts in the United Kingdom have done a lot to assist the increasing number of artists with disabilities who find this approach apposite to their political agendas. The affinity between disability and live art has been the subject of a recent seminar series at LADA (2011); a recent festival called Access All Areas hosted by LADA in London (2011), at which artists like Mat Fraser, Bobby Baker, Noemi Lakmaier, Katherine Araniello, Aaron Williamson and others performed; and a book called Access All Areas: Live Art and Disability (2012) which documents the Access All Areas events, and conversations that emerged during it, in still and moving images. Reviews of disability inflected live art at Access Arts and Disability and Deaf Arts festivals in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia have acknowledged the fact that artists with disabilities ‘who work with Live Art have engaged with, represented and problematized issues of disability in innovative and radical ways’ (Paterson, 2011; cf. LADA, 2012: 55). With this sort of interest, moving beyond showcasing of this sort of practice into a full-scale scholarly analysis of why artists see it as appealing, what strategies they use, what success they have, and what personal, political and ethical issues they encounter, is clearly worthwhile. Critical attention to these practices answers the call of scholars such as Davidson (2008: 2) to consider not just the thematic or therapeutic agendas.
of disability performance, but also, its aesthetic strategies, structure and style, and the link between its aesthetic strategies and its activist agendas. It also has the potential to tell us a lot about the efficacy of a remobilization of once offensive motifs of Otherness in activist performance practice, about spectatorship, and about the politics and ethics of spectatorship, topics currently of interest not just in disability performance, but in performance practice more broadly at the present moment.

Protesters, pranksters or pity seekers? – the motivations and conundrums of interventionalist performance

If the spectrum of disability performance is so diverse, what is it about an interventionalist, at times almost ‘pranksterish’ style of performance in public space – a style that, in fact, puts responsibility for meaning-making and for any potential change of mind beyond the hands of the performers themselves – such an appealing choice for the artists I study in this book? Why would they want to replay the problematic roles Western culture assigns them not in a theatre where they have some level of control over what happens, but rather in a public institution, shopping mall, street or in social spaces where the work’s reception will be so much more uncertain than almost any other style of practice in circulation in the field of disability performance today?

Although the motivations are complex, and vary from artist to artist, there are at least three motivators above and beyond the aesthetic and philosophical underpinnings of this style of practice that make it appealing to the artists I study here. These are motivators that in many cases apply regardless of whether the artists choose to create this sort of work instead of, or in combination with, one or more of the many other types of in-theatre practices people with disabilities contribute to the contemporary performance scene. Some, such as Aaron Williamson and Liz Crow, are, after all, also highly proficient in other forms of practice and have moved towards live art after work in other forms.

These three motivators relate to the practicalities – and, of course, the philosophies – of theatre production, development and funding today. It is all very well to say that restaging a stereotype lifted from everyday life can be an effective way of using the theatrical
stage as a space to speak back to systemic discrimination against specific sorts of people. It is, after all, a strategy that has been used with success in many forms of autobiographical performance for years now, even if these performances are also still more likely to be presented on independent, alternative or cabaret-style stages rather than on mainstream stages (cf. Heddon, 2008). For many disabled performers, however, there is an additional challenge in accessing the theatre stage, subsidy or training required to create these sorts of performances. This, of course, is the fact that they do not have the same physical, social or financial access to a stage on which to speak back to stereotypes that performers marked by gender, race or class do. A long legacy of discrimination makes it difficult for disabled performers to access a legitimate theatre stage, subsidy or training school — or, at least, a legitimate theatre stage, subsidy or training school that is not already overwritten with so many unwanted discourses about disability as to make the whole process difficult and disheartening. Architecturally, theatres can be inaccessible, and it is only in the last decade or so that arts agencies have begun to fund the sort of refits required to address this problem for disabled spectators if not for disabled actors, directors, designers and producers.

This literal issue of access is, though, in some ways the least of the problems. To this day, dominant discourses about disability place unwanted interpretative limits on people with disabilities when they try to access stage, subsidy or training.

The first set of difficulties arises when disabled performers try to access the stage. Though we do see characters with disabilities on stage, they are rarely played, let alone written, directed or produced, by people with those same disabilities. Accordingly, if and when people with disabilities do take to the stage, their practice is already overwritten with problematic discourses. In some cases, this is still the traditional theatrical discourse that makes disability a metaphor for personality flaws or problems people have to get past in life that I discussed above in identifying the dominant aesthetic agendas of disability arts. In other cases, though, this is the therapeutic discourse of ‘arts for people with disabilities’, ‘integrated arts’ or ‘amateur arts’. Though therapeutic arts does undoubtedly benefit some people, it also leads to the much-lamented tendency to draw professional theatrical practices by people with disabilities into its ‘helping and healing’ paradigm. This sort of practice is not expected
to be innovative, interesting or even watchable, let alone politically provocative, because it is an instrumentalist practice designed to occupy and develop people with disabilities, not to express their opinions to spectators beyond family, friends and caseworkers. It is something many professional performers with disabilities struggle to dissociate themselves from.

The second, related set of difficulties arises when disabled performers try to access theatre subsidy systems. The majority of the artists I analyse in this study do work in contexts where the performing arts is primarily produced through public subsidy systems, as is the case in the United Kingdom and Australia, although not so much in the United States. It is another hallmark of the modern welfare state, and the methods it uses to develop, manage and maintain good citizens. Here again, though, many artists lament the way disability artists tend to be funded as part of a health, therapy and diversion agenda that, again, draws professional practice by disabled people into a helping and healing paradigm that overlooks the possibility that their work might in fact be about experimentation, innovation and the pursuit of excellence, or, of course, the pursuit of an activist politics, in the same way as seen amongst other artists. The artists I study here are more than willing to take advantage of any funding opportunities for professional disability artist practice in place in their cultural context – in the United Kingdom, this includes new opportunities that have come with the live arts community’s embracing of disability arts, which have brought pools of money for Lakmaier, Williamson, Araniello and some of the other artists discussed here, though in Australia access to arts rather than access-oriented funding remains available only after a long track record of work of the sort Back to Back Theatre can boast. Indeed, those opportunities, which were not available in the United Kingdom a decade ago, are only now slowly starting to emerge in a country like Australia, and are rare in the United States, may be why the majority of the artists in this book, unlike in many books on disability in performance today, are not from the United States. (Although, of course, personal interest in an access to artists and their work has also been a factor in determining the practices discussed in this book – this text, like all texts on disability and performances, represents not only a specific set of artists, but a reading based on an author’s own specific geographical, social, cultural and identity positions, and the places where artists
and author’s positions overlap.) Still, at the same time, these artists are more than willing to create small-scale solo works, where this sort of funding is not available, if it means they can retain their emphasis on work that is aesthetic and political rather than therapeutic in its impacts. Frequently, these artists are supporting themselves through teaching or other ancillary arts practices while they work. Many hold higher degrees in drama, theatre, performance or visual arts, which, in addition to influencing their complex perspective on their position as unconscious performers, opens up the academy as a potentially less hostile space in which to pursue their practice, particularly for the UK live artists like Williamson.

The third set of difficulties arises when disabled performers try to access theatre training schools. In many contexts, professional theatre training opportunities, like professional theatre production, development and funding opportunities, are inaccessible for performing artists with disabilities. This can be because theatre training schools – as distinct from performance and visual studies programmes which deal with contemporary live art practices and the like – cannot see themselves taking on a student for whom the future professional opportunities seem so limited, or, of course, because they cannot or will not cater for corporeal differences in their largely naturalistic training approaches (cf. Sandahl, 2004). This is why contemporary, cross-disciplinary inclusive practices – from storytelling, satire and comic scenes of encounter with social and medical institutions, to plural modes of imaging, moving and corporeally connecting bodies, to public space intervention – still tend to be most serviceable for artists with disabilities who have not had access to conventional theatre training.

Together, these three factors create an ‘inhospitable and sometimes hostile’ (Johnston, 2012: xiv) context for many professional disabled performers that can be a motivator to turn away from the theatre and towards alternative forms of practice. For the artists I study in this book, turning specifically to installation, live art, performance art or public space intervention provides a cheap, convenient, mobile and, at least in some ways, less frustrating form of practice. This form of practice takes the day-to-day reality of disability, performance and spectatorship as the point of departure for real-life interventions in public institutions, shopping malls, streets or cyberspace. In doing so, it bypasses a lot of the problems associated with larger scale, more
labour intensive production practices in traditional theatre spaces that tend to require a lot of time, technique or financial backing. It allows the artists the authority, and autonomy, they need to be able to pursue their own individual agenda in small, most often solo, performances in a range of spaces and places.

There is also one last motivator for many of the artists I study in this book to move into interventionalist performance practices, and it is to do with the audiences for traditional in-theatre practices today. This is a motivator that would, I think, exist even if the issues with representational politics, platforms and funding policies that prevail today were resolved – perhaps via the activism of agencies like LADA and others that do acknowledge the professionalism, politics and activist agendas of all people – and there was no longer any risk that practices in theatres would be drawn into what some of those I discuss here describe as the ‘disability arts ghetto’. It is the fact that interventionalist performance can be done anywhere, anytime, in front of anyone who happens to be using the institution, space or place the performer co-opts for presenting their piece. Interventionalist performance is as mobile as a demonstration or a protest or a flash mob. It can move anywhere, anytime, to connect with any audience, in any gallery, street, shop or website. Accordingly, its audiences are not necessarily limited to traditional theatregoers, or traditional disability theatregoers, as a practice that is more firmly anchored to a traditional theatrical presentation might be. At a time when theatre audiences are not what they once were, and not necessarily representative of the whole of society, this is an important factor in choosing an interventionalist practice with the potential to move beyond the theatre into other institutions, spaces and places.

The combined effect of these motivators makes performative intervention in public spaces a practice that is apposite to the personal, professional and political agendas of artists who are looking to create work that connects – albeit in different ways – with non-disabled audiences, disabled audiences within the artistic community, and, of course, disabled audiences within the wider community. Just as disabled artists find performative intervention in public institutions, spaces and places more real, relevant and accessible than traditional plays, many disabled audience members find such interventions relevant, accessible and of interest to them in one way or another.
Clearly, it is no more possible to generalize about disabled audiences than it is about any other audiences. The disability community, and disability culture, is a broad church that represents many different views, which may be more or less critical of medical, social or other models of disability, more or less critical of the many institutions disabled people encounter in everyday life, and, of course, more or less critical of the beliefs, behaviours and attitudes of the other members of the public they encounter in these institutions. In this sense, although a focus on mundane, daily difficulties and moments of discrimination does make this work readily identifiable and relatable to audiences with disabilities – whether these are the same corporeal, sensory or cognitive disabilities the artist experiences or not – it does not guarantee non-critical acceptance.

The works discussed in this book have often been well received by disabled audiences, if not in the initial interventions (often targeted to non-disabled spectators, participants or co-performers), then, at least, in documentation, performative lectures and performances that recount the results of the intervention in a critical, confrontational or comic way (often targeted to non-disabled and disabled spectators simultaneously). There are, though, instances in which disabled audiences – in particular disabled audience members who are part of the wider community instead of the ‘disability arts crowd’ community – have expressed concern at the extremes of provocative, prankish public space actions the artists will go to. These audience members have aligned themselves with caregivers, experts and doctors, who express more concern about the work and the person who would make such work, than with the artist who expresses interest in its provocations. Views about the need for a change in culture, and the pathways to change in culture, differ depending on the disabled audience member’s history, their experience of the positive and negative aspects of living with this particular identity label, and their different approaches to claiming agency in, or in spite of, this label.

As the chapters in this book will show, however, even in cases where work causes controversy even amongst disabled audiences, there is usually at least an appreciation that the artist has created time, space and interest in negotiating cultural attitudes towards disability in a way that is not always common in the public sphere. It is the choice of live, interactive actions that blur the boundaries between drama and daily life – and, of course, the choice to document and further
discuss these action in shows that do offer accessibility aids such as audio description, signing and so forth – that enable the work to do this, and to make it possible for a wider than usual range of audiences to participate in viewing documentation, discussion and debate in a way that amateur, therapeutic or in-theatre work sometimes cannot.

Ironically, the very things that make this form of practice most appealing – the fact that it can, like a demonstration or a flash mob, confront almost any spectator in any institution, space or place – are also the very things that make it amongst the most challenging of contemporary forms of practice to create, present, or indeed to analyse. This interventionalist approach is, as I have said, based on the assumption that asking a spectator to perform and reperform their part in the daily social drama of disability can prompt them to consider their own ideas about disability. It is about making the usually unconscious call to perform conscious, so that performers, spectators and societies can, together, consider its consequences. But, as I have argued elsewhere, if we accept the poststructuralist suggestion that the meaning of a performance is always partial, provisional and unfinished until the point where a spectator constructs his or her own meanings and conclusions about that performance (Hadley, Trace and Winter, 2010), then, as Lehmann (2006: 85) says, we need to acknowledge the part the spectator’s own position in a complex social field plays in determining the outcome of interventionalist performance practice. It is the spectator, as much as the performer, or, in fact, more so than the performer, who determines how the intervention will be perceived, interpreted and have, or fail to have, a future impact in the public sphere. This means the history, habits and *habitus* of the spectator – the mechanisms by which, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) argues, the world structures spectators and spectators structure the world – are critical to the outcomes of these interventions. Depending on their experience of the world to date, each spectator will have a distinctive *habitus*, which they will, inevitably, bring to the encounter. It will be influenced by their prior experience with disabled people, with theatre, with disabled people in theatre, if any, and innumerable other factors. Each will have what Bourdieu (1977) calls a *doxa*, or suite of ideologies, discourses and assumptions taken for granted to be true. Each will have what Bourdieu (1998) describes as an *illusio*, a socially constructed (via *doxas*) sense of what is right, why, and the way social ‘games’ or interactions should play out. This attitude, approach or
sense of how one should interact with others (and the Other) will not be uninterested or neutral or anywhere near as uniform amongst spectators as it might be in a traditional theatre. The attitudes of an individual, or a class of individuals are, after all, what allow for action, agency and authority in social spaces. Given how difficult it would be to function without automatic answers to the questions day-to-day life poses, it is understandable why they become too stable, naturalized and invisible to individuals and societies to give up. These habits of being impact on the way spectators act, react to and read any attempt by an artist to engage them in a consciousness-raising encounter, and only become more and more impactful as an artist moves further out of a theatrical frame into public spaces and places.

The only certainty here, then, is that the call to recite one’s common response to disability will be different for each and every spectator, depending on his or her position in the social field. What might, for one spectator, seem like an extreme, exaggerated, comic or offensive image of disability might, for another spectator, seem like little more than the reality that literature, film and television has taught them to expect. What might, for one spectator, seem like a condescending call to ‘help’ a ‘poor’, ‘suffering’ disabled person might, for another spectator, seem like a call to tolerance, inclusion and community-mindedness they cannot ignore if they are to retain their position in the social field. And so on. The range of possible interpretations of a subversive restaging of the Other in public space runs from protester, to prankster, to pity seeker, to psychologically unstable person, to simply what a spectator expects of a disabled person. The possible interpretations are much more varied than what would be expected of a restaging of the Other in a standard theatre space. They can even, in a worst case scenario, lead to a performer being berated, assaulted or brought up on charges as the result of an intervention gone wrong. This is because the spectator's ability to read the blend of fact, fiction and fantasy in play in this sort of encounter will differ, if for no other reason than because the performance takes place in installation spaces, shopping malls or streets where a prior history with interpreting disability as disability, or interpreting theatrical acts as theatre, cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, it is precisely these differences in play in social actions and interactions that make negotiating the ideas, ideologies and discourses that come to dominate in the public sphere so difficult. Negotiations that have only become
more messy, self-interested and piecemeal, or in Habermas’s (1989) terms ‘decayed’ in today’s society with the advent of ever-more identity categories, communities and channels by which individuals can communicate, confirm and contest these ideas.

On the one hand, the complexity of spectatorial practices and interpretations is a positive. Negotiation, contestation and uncertainty amongst spectators are only likely to increase the chance that a work can provoke personal, ethical or political questions. On the other hand, it is also a challenge, because this very uncertainty makes it difficult to determine if, and if so how, interventionist performance practices prompt personal, ethical or political responses.

Studying the performativity of spectatorship

Though the idea that theatre’s power comes from its capacity to prompt spectators to think about social life has, as Freshwater says, become an orthodoxy of contemporary theatre practice (2006: 56), there are no ready answers about how to understand, analyse or create in relation to this critical part that spectators play in politicized performance practices. It is still far easier to emphasise what artists do, and what audiences are assumed to make of it, than to acknowledge the range of possible responses or the way these responses prompt individual spectators to reflect on their own social, ethical or political position. There has, therefore, been a historical tendency toward theories of spectatorship that think in terms of blocks of spectators – a singular, somewhat passive ‘audience’ (Freshwater, 2009: 5; Grehan, 2009: 4; Lehmann, 2006: 106) – instead of in terms of a collective of individuals who encounter the work from a variety of perspectives. Authors of articles on specific plays, performances and performance paradigms have often identified the parts of the practice that prompt author, critic or specific spectators to ‘think’, and assumed that all other spectators can or will be prompted to ‘think’ about their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours too. To do this, though, is to ignore the differences of opinion, conflict and confusion that come out in interpretations of performances, and to universalize spectators and spectatorship (Grehan, 2009: 14; Ridout, 2009: 54, 60–6). It is not useful – not in contemporary performances in which clearly interpretable characters, storylines, crises and resolutions are not central features, and certainly not in the interventionist practices I consider here.