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## Disability Performance in the Streets

### Art Actions in Post-Quake Christchurch

#### Petra Kupperts

I am in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand, visiting and collaborating with performance friends. On 22 February 2014, the three-year anniversary of the big Christchurch quake, I became part of a walk organized by the City Mission—a Christian organization with a Missioner at the helm. Not my usual companions. But a friend's partner, a Quaker, was the organizer of the walk, which incorporated many people with histories of mental health difference, in an active relationship to substance abuse, or in recovery. It is a disability culture scene, and I am staying in the organizer's home, so of course I come along, steering my yellow power wheelchair.

Taking you on a walk through the streets makes deep sense as a performance scene in this city of fallen down buildings and gaps. With many theatres in Christchurch seriously damaged by the September 2010 and February 2011 quakes, a lot of performance actions in the city took to the streets. Some of the most

well known of these, like Gap Filler, emerged as a social practice/performance series that specifically dealt with the changed and shaken scene. As Sharon Mazer writes:

For many artists and activists (and artist-activists)—notably Gap Filler and Arts Voice—the collapse of the city's buildings has opened up a liminal space for ongoing experimentation with and debate about the potential of theatre and performance to create new ideas about community and citizenship. (Mazer et al. 2013:70)

So I am walking in this Christchurch pilgrimage as a performance scholar thinking bodily about community and citizenship.

A vaguely penitentiary, sacrificial quality infused my participation in the walk, as it reminded me of my own Catholic background, of long, forced, childhood pilgrimages to Kevelaer, Germany's Chapel of Grace,

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praying for release from pain and disability. My Christchurch walk became, at times and in small glimpses, a walk of passion, the strange intertwining of sacrifice and pain, pleasure and intensity, the kind of “passion” that marks so much Christian ritual.

I also saw the kiwi stiff upper lip and delight in physical prowess all around me: I participated in that day’s 22km walk, of which I wheeled the last 8—about the range of my wheelchair in heavy terrain. The temperature was in the 90s (Fahrenheit) and the sun beating through the thin ozone layer was grueling. The walkers set a harsh pace, and our field of about 30 walkers was well spread out. Twice I had to suggest to people I was walking with that they might want to go onto the buses that our helpers were driving; one walker seemed about ready to vomit by the time she finally accepted a ride. A third person, with a painful cramp in her upper thigh, point-blank refused to take a break and go ride for a bit. What was this persistence about?

The walk wasn’t a pilgrimage, it wasn’t holy, or in silence. But it held meaning for us, clearly, and to be survivors of it seemed very important to my co-walkers. I found myself caught up in their determination: my wheelchair made navigating the terrain nearly impossible, but I persisted, increasingly aware of how hard the uneven ground must have been on the walkers’ knees, too. The wheelchair slalom, bouncing over the broken streets that were signs of the city’s rupture—and were ubiquitous even three years on—made me near seasick. As my world was reduced to climbing yet another mini street mount, I meditated on how the chair’s low point of gravity made me experience something akin to a quake, shaken and rattled about: not a re-creation, of course, but a strange taste of the event. Endurance as a memorial.

An hour into this, I had moved into durational performance mode, a way of witnessing myself in distress that attained an artful qual-

ity and allowed me to see my fellow walkers in the same light. I was walking near a blind woman, and she and I had initially spoken a little bit about disaster preparations and disability, and about how she was involved in sharing what has been learned in Christchurch with other international organizations involved with assisting disabled people, in particular blind people. I also caught glimpses of some of the challenges, as she paid constant attention to her guide dog’s well-being, thinking about where the pavement was too hot for too long a time for her helper’s paws, or gravel too sharp. But our highly rational and goal-focused discussion quickly fragmented, as we were all, humans and non-humans, challenged by the terrain and its demands. I didn’t get to interview her about how it felt to live in a changed city with a non-normative sensory apparatus, although we did talk a bit about how, for instance, purely visual “change sidewalk” signs where sidewalks had ruptured didn’t address the needs of people like her, or her guide dog’s ability to keep her safe. We didn’t speak much more, just walked in each other’s company for three hours.

I brought the City Mission up again the next day, in the studio with my performance collaborators. I was there to visit with A Different Light, a well-known company that creates disability performance work in the context of cognitive difference, complex and layered work related to the practices of Back to Back Theatre (Geelong, Australia), Mind the Gap (Leeds, UK), l’Oiseau-Mouche (Roubaix, France), Maatwerk (Rotterdam, Netherlands), Theater HORA (Zürich, Switzerland), and others.<sup>1</sup>

One of the performers attended meetings at the Mission as part of their women’s group for mental health system survivors. She really valued the Mission and its quiet work, done without fanfare, without the self-congratulation that can be part of service provision.

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1. I have written in this journal about another part of my recent international disability culture meanderings, and about watching work by Back to Back and HORA (Kuppers 2014). See also Leon Hilton in another *Critical Acts* essay, also on HORA (2014). Our work is intersected and interdependent, and much of these writings emerge from intense discussions with other disability arts scholars and practitioners like Tony McCaffery, Bree Hadley, Yvonne Schmidt, from other Aotearoan researchers like Sharon Mazer and Nancy Higgins, and the Disability Performance working group at the International Federation for Theatre Research.

And indeed, the walk with its 30 participants, without a single press photo, had a private quality. And as we walked, we saw many others involved in quieter rituals. We passed a few tables set up by the River of Flowers Project. These tables held cards one could sign and then tie to trees standing by the Avon River, in neighborhoods much affected by the quakes and riddled with red-zoned buildings—buildings deemed uninhabitable. At 12:51 P.M., the time of the February quakes, the volunteers at the tables and people coming to the river kept silent and threw flowers into the waters.

The City Mission walk ended with a sausage sizzle at the mission, and a *waiata*, a prayer song sung by the crowd in te reo Māori. Sunburned, exhausted, and in the main looking a bit footsore, everybody dispersed. I wheeled back, not ready to climb onto a bus. Instead, I went back to the river and ambled along its banks, at my own slow pace. It was filled with flowers, floating petals lusciously strewn over the surface, ducks bobbing between them. Families and neighborhood groups had grill-outs going, quiet scenes of *whenua* (te reo for “land” and “placenta”): family and earth. There might have been bigger, more official scenes of nationwide recovery going on elsewhere, but I didn’t see them as I was gladly and bodily caught up in the scenes of the minor, the local, the performative gesture of sadness and hope. The only time I heard the national anthem was the next day, at A Different Light’s Sunday rehearsal meeting, where Andrew Dever, someone deemed to have a cognitive disability, sang it for us. He had gotten engaged on the 22nd, he told his fellow performers. We whooped and applauded, celebrating his very direct evocation of *whenua*’s continuity.

Everybody in the circle shared what they had been up to that Saturday. Some had also been at the River of Flowers event, some at grill-outs, and one just at home, sleeping. Tony, the director of the troupe, had been at work, writing in his office with his wife. He shared that, having personally known some of those who had died in the quakes, he didn’t need communal minutes of silence to remember. But many among the troupe had been at a small-scale event somewhere and no one had cho-

sen to go to the big official memorial event in Hagley Gardens, where the politicians spoke and the cameras flashed.

In the black box studio meeting space, quite a few talked about where they had been when the quakes happened. One performer shared how he still went to counseling groups to help him deal with the anxiety and stress of it all, information up to that point unknown to the others—the stiff upper lip at work yet again. The moments in the round were quiet, but real; people sharing themselves. And then here was Andrew, rousing everybody to sing Aotearoa/New Zealand’s anthem. And we all sang it, first in te reo, then in English.

In all these moments, from pilgrimages to the troupe meeting, from flower memorials to anthems, refiguration and contact become my reading lenses. Disability configures itself anew, as it always does when I am on the road on my disability culture journeys. Here, moments of difference, health, healing, and survivance created a vision of disability as luscious growth in a garden of many flowers. There were many connections: between the company director’s ongoing struggle with the social institutions that surround disability, his logistic attempts to wrestle his performers out of their McDonald’s work schedules or group homes, and my friends’ organization of the march in the sun—ensuring water, a ride for a tired dog, a schedule of buses to accompany walkers—all the quiet repeated steps across broken terrain.

The many messages tied to trees speak of frustration with insurance companies, loss of livelihood, and the dramas of rented housing. They speak of disorientation in a city that has changed shape, where many buildings have gone down and where “go left at the place where that pub used to be” has a new ring now.

Memories and space, bodies in space: traversing the city of Christchurch on 22 February 2014 makes me experience settlerhood and resilience, not (in that moment) in an oppositional place to indigeneity, but in an embodied relation to a young earth, ready to shake and remind people of their bindings, of chosen and other familial relations.

## A Christchurch Masquerade

A Different Light Company consists of performers deemed to have developmental disabilities, people who make use of psychiatric services, and others. They have been in existence since 2004, under the directorship of Tony McCaffrey, and operate out of the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, with access to the resources of the theatre department. They are sometimes folded into the activities of the Free Theatre, an experimental research-focused company associated with the University of Canterbury. On-site theatre is a familiar working method for the performers.

In our work together in February 2014, we expanded upon this vocabulary in performance workshops that incorporated invisible theatre, costuming, and the camera as a staging device. Our first performance workshop took place in the company's regular rehearsal space, the black box theatre where we had sung anthems earlier. As a preparation for going out in public, we used a photo shoot to work with masquerade and display in the privacy of the theatre. The photo shoot shows experienced performers, comfortable with display, able to project presence and to be vulnerable in front of the camera. We had raided the costume store and everybody chose their own costume and decided how to present themselves—to me, the photographer, and ultimately to the public. In these photos, the performers play in subtle ways with issues of sexuality and mythology, a process that formulates their own commentary on their position in a society that often excludes and devalues them. Power dynamics around personal appearance and narrative are revealed through the sophisticated ways in which they address me, asking me to place myself in relation to them in particular ways. We reviewed the images together, eventually agreeing on one photo from each performer to share in public.

For our public engagement, A Different Light met me in the Re:START mall. The Re:START mall, built on the site of the destroyed City Mall, clusters itself around cafes as anchor points, has food trucks and public art areas, and is always busy and lively. Its liveliness does not quite cover up the trauma

of having the heart ripped out of a city, and one performer commented on the alienness of this neoliberal “by the bootstraps” response and the hip establishments where op shops (second-hand shops, including one run by the City Mission) used to be.

We met in the Hummingbird Café and agreed on little performance sequences to enact as we moved through urban space. Christchurch post-quake, surrounded by ruins and anti-EQC signs, is always already a set for political performance. (EQC is the Earth Quake Commission, a notoriously slow and overwhelmed arm of governmental assistance.) As Richard Schechner wrote a long time ago about Washington, DC, that city's scene was politicized and aestheticized by the 1963 march on Washington: “The streets were no longer places which one used to get from here to there. They were public arenas,



Figure 1. Studio Performance Workshop with A Different Light Theatre Company. Performer: Josie Noble. (Photo by Petra Kuppers)



Figure 2. Street Performance Workshop with A Different Light Theatre Company. Performer: Louise Payne. (Photo by Petra Kupperts)



Figure 3. Street Performance Workshop with A Different Light Theatre Company. Guest Artist: Liv Worsnop. (Photo by Petra Kupperts)

testing grounds, stages for morality plays” (1968:55). It’s this heritage we are stepping into in the Re:START mall, riffing on and playing against and with public scripts of revitalization and survivance.

The performers brought clothes to change into, ready to transform themselves into new public beings. I was interested in acts of mas-

querade and carrying one’s shell on one’s body, and was using this notion as an impetus for performance. Everybody was game, had plenty of ideas, and off we went. The first mini-performance took place outside a youth-oriented shop selling fancy clothes. Ben engaged in an elaborate performance of tying a necktie—large swooping gestures, getting ready to go out in style. Next, Tony chose to act in front of a building site, an ordinary site at this half-emerging mall, and told the story of his jacket, bought in Toronto, Canada, and the complications of zipping things up. Louise found an empty store, a sign of the economic instability of the much-celebrated mall, and modeled her jacket, telling a family story about channeling anger into consumption and gifting practices.

Liv, a local visual artist who creates growing installations with plants in rubble sites, took us to one of her planting sites, showed us where she had placed healing plants of sage, thyme, and lavender, and then performed wearing a dress gifted to her by Louise. Liv moved among the rubble of the site, and picked up stones. She pulled these under her dress, as if to imprint them in the dress’s fabric memory, and held the cloth near to the lavender, as if drying it or infusing it with scent.

This first section of our performance walk articulated complex feelings about being in the destroyed center, and our progress was quite pensive though still play-

ful. The atmosphere shifted with the emergence of the first prop, something we had brought in from the weekend’s costume photo shoot: a joker’s hat, giant and animalistic, multiple horns extending into space, sprayed silver and with thistles growing from it. A strange sculptural object, not quite carnival, not quite animal, but a border thing. It became what-

ever we wanted as we worked with it. At one point, Ben donned the hat and moved through a large area of weeds and rubble in front of one of the newly commissioned murals that adorn the rebuilt Christchurch—sanctioned street art—esque work on the tax payer’s dime. Ben became a mythical creature, seeking a way out (I read him like a Minotaur, and he later shared that he thought of himself as an underwater creature). Ben took his time, really entering into the performance space, traversing this rubble site, crawling in it, making it his own.

We all played with the head, and with the meditative space we settled into when we donned it. Many of us commented on the peacefulness of the heavy object resting on our shoulders, anchoring us down.

We walked triumphantly back through the mall, shouting at passersby, making jokes like “earthquake stress did it to him,” and “driven mad by the EQC” in response to the many strange looks our gear attracted.

Then we took a final photo with the security guard of the mall, a Ngai Puhi man in a theatrical uniform complete with great coat and epaulettes—our group taking control even in the face of the last bastion, the police. Even talking with the guard and finding out about his ancestral connections was a big step for some of us in the group who usually have highly antagonistic relationships with enforcers of normality. Louise commented after our joker-head experiments that, for the first time since the quake, she felt at home in the city center again.

## Therapy and the City

That evening, in a performance workshop I lead for PhD students and members of the Free Theatre, we talked about therapy and performance. What are the ameliorative effects of this minor-key performance work? What homeopathy, medicine, theory of influence underpins why we are doing what we are doing?



Figure 4. Street Performance Workshop with A Different Light Theatre Company. Performer: Ben Morris. (Photo by Petra Kuppers)



Figure 5. A Different Light Theatre Company performers Louise Payne and Ben Morris, wearing his sculptural hat, posing with the mall guard. (Photo by Petra Kuppers)

Theorists of activism and emotion, Gavin Brown and Jenny Pickerill, address directly the means we used for our Christchurch masquerade and put these art-framed acts into contact with the energetic shifts of activism.

Activists employ tactics that seek to change the emotional resonance of certain places and political messages. Thus, just as ‘negative’ emotions such as hate and disgust can reconfigure social and bodily space, so too can the use of humour (Ahmed, 2004). Street theatre is used to transcend activist boundaries and create common ground between activists and audiences which “allows activists to release emotions such as rage and frustration, while at the same time providing positive, enjoyable experiences for audiences” (Branagan, 2007, 470). This performativity and embodiment of protest can also serve as sustaining emotional experiences for activists. Expressing opposition through performance (such as the use of puppets during protest, dancing in costume, or more simply, by acting with one’s body during direct action) enables activists to intensely feel and express their protest, perhaps more pow-

erfully than through instrumental mobilisations (such as the more formal street march with placards) (Eyerman, 2005; Wettergren, 2009). (Brown and Pickerill 2009:28)

In our masquerade actions, we were both audience and participants, even though other Christchurch people and tourists certainly took note of us. We were also activists, recharging ourselves through our performance actions, giving ourselves much needed energy, grounding, and a sense of precarious *communitas*.

In *Mapa Corpo* (2007), one of Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s Border Collective performances, the actors use acupuncture needles to point to national borderlines and their shifting. Participating in the per-

formance, I was invited to place needles in a performer’s body (with another performer’s assistance). Our actions in Christchurch reminded me of the energetics of acupuncture. We pressed where it hurts, in the destroyed city, right in the memory spaces that had become empty and diffuse and laden with negative energy as people dealt with the Earth Quake Commission, insurance companies, and the many problems of resurrecting a city that did not seem to be recognizable or hospitable to all of its citizens. Donning costumes and shifting energies became an act of citizenship, of a performative re-engagement with shifted space.

Of course, these acts of theatre can always already be reincorporated into business as usual, with disabled actors seen as nonperforming guarantors of authenticity, sans sarcasm. Tony McCaffrey has written about the Different Light performers who participated in a Free Theatre production, *The Earthquake in Chile*, which took place in St. Mary’s Anglican Church, Addington, Christchurch. The show is based on Heinrich von Kleist’s short story about an earthquake catastrophe followed by a man-made catastrophe, a lynching in a cathedral. The play was directed by Peter

Falkenberg and created in collaboration with Richard Gough, the artistic director of the Wales-based Center for Performance Research, and celebrity chef Richard Till. The Different Light actors were part of the scene:

[T]heir presence was resonant within the performance, giving a sense of the city's new-found precariousness coming into contact with the more longstanding precariousness of the social, legal, medical, and economic positioning of people with disabilities. The performers were, again, both highly visible and in a way invisible. One reviewer mentioned the Different Light performers: "and then mentally and physically handicapped people from the Addington community walked up the aisle" (Phillips, 2011) as if they were not performers. Presumably he did not associate the performers in the church (who had by then shed their high-visibility clothing) with the guides of San Precario who were so clearly marked both in their clothing and their disability and assumed that in the church these people he saw must have been "playing themselves," even though he got it wrong about who they were playing. Interestingly he saw in the people he thought he saw the guarantee that this performance was local and indicative of community. (McCaffrey 2014)

For the reviewer, Jock Phillips, disability becomes the site of the non-artful, the "real" or ordinary of the local, and hence the guarantee of "community." This danger is a highly familiar mechanism in disability performance work.

Is there more juice or less juice in placing ourselves into the registers of the street, much more closely aligned with non-art-framed activist actions? Fewer people take note, certainly, but the potential for a double-take at the sight of disability seems worth the effort. And remember Louise's comment about the performance making her feel at home again in her own city, allowing her access to a cityscape that normally just makes her angry about welfare cuts and regulation. Performance is for all of us, performers *and* witnesses. Reshaping our public spaces, shaking them up again, is a dura-

tional task, one we engage in again and again when we navigate how people look at our faces, our wheelchairs, our rags, our choices in how we self-present in public.

Later in the week following the memorial festivities, we met in the swimming pool of Jellie Park: a riotous group of disabled people out for a lark, taking photos of each other and having a great time in the water. There was no masquerade, barring the faces and bodies of difference we always present to the world. We are always already in masquerade, in a public assertion of space and in our insistence to be together, hard won from institutions and their health and safety regulations, and even from lifeguards and their rules for using lifts to lower us into the pool.

We can rehearse in the black box studio, and we can put it all out there, in masque, or stripped down, in swimming gear, inviting the public to see us as citizens of this world.

In the evening performance workshop with the Free Theatre members, the fact that so much of my work was within disability frameworks, quiet and often near "invisible" in public, led people to ask about whether the work is not "just therapy," with "therapy" being negatively connoted. I lobbed the question back, asking what kind of healing might be needed in what kind of spaces, and who is providing it for whom.

In the context of our Christchurch experiments, issues of healing, intervention, and therapy were pressing concerns. Everything felt like an intervention, an act of ritual, whether in the ruptured streets, on a pilgrimage, or participating in more consciously art-framed actions; or in the swimming pool, watching people care for each other with tenderness and play. After the earth has shaken, and after lives have been destroyed, and with multiple attempts to make it better, the healing and critiquing aspects of performance work seem necessary, both supporting and questioning new publics.

With A Different Light, I witnessed the ability of socially engaged art in a minor key to shake things up, to shake up concepts of disability, concepts of healing performance, of being alive and present in public. Listening to the performers of A Different Light and

witnessing their artful play in the city, I saw how we can recharge ourselves through the energies of performance. We can learn to swim among the riotous beauty of the weeds.

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## Turbulent Communisms

### Raqs Media Collective's *The Last International*

#### Ethan Philbrick

Walking into the Raqs Media Collective's *The Last International* on 23 November 2013 was like walking into a party already underway. (Or perhaps it was a meeting? Or a carnival for leftist intellectuals?) There was a chaotic polyphony of voices, objects, bodies, and media in the Performa-commissioned piece: screens with disjunctive images on a loop, a grove of potted lemon trees, a stack of white plastic lawn chairs arranged with what seemed like careful disorganization, and a balcony that was home to a raucous dinner party of actors sitting around a fully set table drinking wine and

having a meal of words—notecards with conversation prompts and quotes on their dinner plates rather than food. There was a sense of indeterminate abundance in the air at the reconfigured Connelly Theater on Manhattan's East 4th Street. Audience members wandered around the theatre and its adjoining rooms and hallways aimlessly, looking and tuning-in to what we wanted to see and hear. It was a spectatorship that felt a bit like reading a Tumblr feed—jumping around on the page, no apparatus to force your undivided attention in any one location. There weren't predetermined

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