

BOOK REVIEW:

Patrick McKelvey, *Disability Works: Performance after Rehabilitation*. New York University Press, 2024. 344 pages. ISBN 978-1479824878.

Patrick McKelvey's *Disability Works* provides a cultural history of disability performance that interrogates the close but often ambivalent relationship between disabled artistic labor and vocational rehabilitation (VR). VR was the dominant paradigm for US disability policy in the postwar period. It emphasized employability as a pathway to normative success, typified by the independent white, heterosexual subject whose eventual employment "repays" the government assistance required for his rehabilitation. Proponents of rehabilitation claimed that it would make it possible "for disabled Americans to trade their dependency on public assistance for the rewards and privileges of productive citizenship" (10). To explore the relationship between VR programs and disability performance, McKelvey focuses on what he calls "disability works": "the performance institutions and practices that promulgated labor as either an aspiration for or a problem within disability policy and activism" (17–18). The book explores how "work" became a central preoccupation for both those artists that collaborated with government rehabilitation programs and those who had to grapple with rehabilitation's legacies. It proceeds chronologically from the implementation of the rehabilitation paradigm in the postwar period through its decline and afterlife in the 1970s and 80s. But it also explores how rehabilitative emphasis on productive citizenship was embraced and rejected by disabled artists in ways that do not neatly map onto typical histories of progress, in which a rights-based disability policy displaced vocational rehabilitation.

Chapters 1 and 2 chart the direct connections between the political and economic project of rehabilitation and disability theatre of the 1960s. In Chapter 1, McKelvey examines work by the New York City-based theatre organization Plays for Living (P/L), which was commissioned by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) to create a series of plays promoting rehabilitation to the wider public. McKelvey shows how P/L constructed the ideal rehabilitated subject: one that achieves economic independence as the state withdraws its support. McKelvey connects this political project to the aesthetics of the plays, coining the term "functional imitation" to describe their "austere realism," in which nondisabled actors performed the roles of the rehabilitants in front of sparse sets with minimal props (41). The functional imitation at work in these plays links two "modes of abandonment": vocational rehabilitation's goal of the "withdrawal of state support" and the material and aesthetic constraints of "the austere stage," which abandons realism's traditional wealth of detail in favor of a spartan production design (55). Chapter 2, meanwhile, examines the collaboration between the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) and the US Vocational Rehabilitation Administration (VRA). While the NTD supported the goals of the VRA by seeking to "put deaf Americans to work," it also served as a cultural ambassador for American rehabilitation policies abroad (71). The chapter focuses on the development of the NTD's "sign-mime" technique, a synthesis of sign language and mime that was aimed at making the performances "universally"

legible (i.e., legible to a hearing audience), which McKelvey connects to vocational rehabilitation's goal of internationalizing the capitalist American rehabilitation system. Rather than simply placing the NTD in the context of Cold War politics, McKelvey demonstrates how the broader conflict between the American rehabilitation system and a Soviet model of state care shaped and was shaped by the NTD's artistic trajectory.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the work of queer, disabled artist Ron Whyte in the 1970s, during a period in which the rehabilitative paradigm was supposedly in decline. Chapter 3 analyzes Whyte's creation of the National Task Force for Disability and the Arts (NTFDA), an advocacy organization that he imagined would help disabled artists "enter the mainstream" of arts and culture (126). Although the NTFDA never achieved what Whyte hoped it would, McKelvey reads the aspirations and unrealized potential of this "impossible enterprise" as a valuable example of how rehabilitation and its afterlife shaped the horizons of disabled art (124). Chapter 4 focuses on Whyte's collaboration with his friend and neighbor Gregory Battcock in an extended "epistolary performance" (140). McKelvey describes this exchange, in which Whyte, Battcock, and others sent letters and memos to each other (often on stolen or sometimes pornographic stationary) while posing as various institutional figures, as "bureaucratic drag." This concept plays on the multiple valences of the word "drag," capturing both the delays associated with bureaucratic paperwork (significant for those like Whyte, who had to confront the administrative paperwork required for the meager government support he received) and the camp performance of institutional legitimacy the collaborators enjoyed via their "stationary performance" (140). Both chapters are set in the context of the rise of disability activism in the 1970s, allowing McKelvey to explore how the "impossible enterprise" of Whyte's NTFDA and the "bureaucratic drag" of his and Battcock's epistolary

performances "appropriated and refused economic independence as a crip political aspiration" (7).

Chapters 5 and 6 explore programs that existed in the 1970s and 80s, when disability arts were cohering as a distinct aesthetic and political field that existed in opposition to rehabilitative politics and poetics. McKelvey explores how these programs, while temporally located after the decline of the rehabilitation paradigm, still had explicitly rehabilitative commitments at their cores. However, he also finds within them emancipatory queer and Black countercurrents that resisted rehabilitation or pursued other rehabilitations. Chapter 5 explores the work of Rick Curry and the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped (NTWH), which is framed as an essentially rehabilitative project, centering employment and economic independence as the key goals for its participants. The ableism of a traditional Stanislavskian approach to acting is also "rehabilitated" via Curry's training program, which insisted that the students' disabilities were key to achieving the authenticity associated with Stanislavsky's methodology. This training would prepare them not just for the professional theatre, but also for the affective labor required by the modern deindustrialized workforce. Chapter 6 then turns to the multiple "rehabilitations" at play in Alvin Ailey's New Visions Dance Project (NVDP), which provided dance training for blind students in the 1980s. For McKelvey, NVDP's focus on developing disabled students' "self-esteem" complied with a Reaganite focus on training disabled subjects to be independent entrepreneurs. By emphasizing self-esteem as a response to the withdrawal of accessibility and material support from the government, "NVDP registers the rehabilitative relocation of freedom from the realm of the material to the realm of the affective" (234). However, McKelvey also finds emancipatory possibilities in NVDP, in its inheritance of the legacy of "rehabilitative redress" that was central to Black modern

dance. This “rehabilitative redress” addressed both the literal and the representational debilitations of Black populations by centering Black health and resisting racialized and normative frameworks for physical and mental health.

Throughout, *Disability Works* is marked by a rigorous engagement with archival sources, providing a vital perspective on an understudied period of disability performance and suggesting productive avenues for future study. However, some of the most compelling moments occur when McKelvey plays at the limits of the archive to find moments of resistance against both the normalizing force of the rehabilitative paradigm and the typical scholarly focus on the “successful” performance event. For example, Chapter 3 analyzes Whyte’s never-realized plans for his SUPER-MARKET, an ambitious dream for a flexible performance, art, and market space for disabled artists. Chapter 4 supplements McKelvey’s analysis of Whyte and Battcock’s epistolary performance with an imagined scene in which Whyte moves from the administrative paperwork keeping him in a state of economic precarity to the more pleasurable and artistically generative correspondence with Battcock. Chapter 5 ends with a reading of a short sketch from a NTWH benefit performance, a camp parody of *All About Eve*, that exists only as a memory recounted by its author. These moments challenge McKelvey’s readers to expand their definitions of the proper object/subject of performance studies and insist on the fruitfulness of bringing a theatrical imagination to bear on archival traces. At times, these readings shine as an almost artistic collaboration between McKelvey’s scholarly imagination and the work of the original artists.

Disability Works is an engaging work of disability history and performance theory that pushes the boundaries of both. Positioned at the intersection of disability history, performance studies, and crip critiques of work, the book insists on the importance of each to an understanding of

all. It presents a convincing case for the importance of theatre to a history of disability and labor in the US, as well as the importance of an understanding of labor (both able and disabled) for an understanding of theatre and performance institutions. Throughout, McKelvey shows how disabled artists and their labor were central to how America imagined (and reimaged) rehabilitation as first a national aspiration, and then as a sign and symptom of capitalism’s constraints.

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