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Bodies in Commotion

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*Edited by Carrie Sandahl
& Philip Auslander*

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Dares to Stares

Disabled Women Performance Artists & the Dynamics of Staring

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We fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live. . . . And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength.

—Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

Everyone knows that you are not supposed to stare. Yet everyone does. Both furtive and compelling, the staring encounter generates discomfort and provokes anxiety. So potent is staring that the Western imagination has persistently seized upon this formidable interchange as a source of vivid narrative. Medusa, for example, turned men to stone with her stare, and her severed head was a fount of power for those who appropriated it. The traditional curse of the evil eye pervades, as well, all European cultures, even into modernity.¹

Staring is an urgent effort to explain the unexpected, to make sense of the unanticipated and inexplicable visual experience. A more emphatic form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, surveying, gazing, and other forms of casual or disinterested looking, staring starkly registers the perception of strangeness and endows it with meaning. Staring witnesses an intrusive interest on the part of the starrer and thrusts uneasy attention on

the object of the stare. At once transgressive and intimate, staring breaches the conventionalized anonymity governing visual relations among strangers in modernity. Staring is thus a kind of potent social choreography that marks bodies by enacting a dynamic visual exchange between a spectator and a spectacle. Staring, then, enacts a drama about the people involved.

The strongest staring prohibition surrounds people who are considered different, who are the most unexpected. Perhaps the most censured form of staring is looking at people with disabilities. Every mother at some point admonishes her child not to stare in an effort to minimize the rawness of astonishing visual confrontations. Yet, as anyone with a visible disability knows, persistent stares are one of the informing experiences of being considered disabled. If staring attempts to make sense of the unexpected, the disabled body is the paradigmatic form in modernity of the unforeseen. Modern culture's erasure of mortality and its harbinger, corporeal vulnerability, have rendered the disabled body extraordinary rather than familiar, anomalous instead of mundane—even though the transformations of bodily form and function that we think of as disability are so common to the human condition as to be the ultimate effect of living. Nevertheless, the disabled body is novelty writ large for the captivated starrer, prompting persistent curiosity and launching a troubling tangle of identification and differentiation. For the person with disabilities, staring is an unwelcome exposure, a clumsy trespass into realms casual social relations forbid, and a tedious challenge to one's relational management skills.² Thus, encounters between the disabled and nondisabled are exemplary social dramas in which the contradictions and complexities of staring most vividly play out. Despite the ubiquitous admonitions not to stare, even children learn very early that disability is a potent form of embodied difference that warrants looking, even prohibited looking. Indeed, the stare is the dominant mode of looking at disability in this culture.

Staring thus enlists curiosity to telescope looking toward diagnosing impairment, creating an awkward partnership that estranges and discomforts both viewer and viewed. Starkers gawk with ambivalence or abandon at the prosthetic hook, the empty sleeve, the scarred flesh, the unfocused eye, the twitching limb, seeking a narrative that puts their disrupted world back in order. Even "invisible" disabilities always threaten to disclose some inexplicable stigma, however subtle, that undoes the social order by its presence and attenuates the human bond based on the assumption of corporeal similarity. Because staring at disability is illicit looking, the disabled body is at once the to-be-looked-at and not-to-be-looked-at, further dramatizing the staring encounter by tending to make viewers stealthy and the viewed defensive. In this way, staring constitutes disability identity by visually articulating the subject positions of "disabled" and "able-bodied."

Many cultural critics have noted that modernity is ocularcentric. Although Western gaze theory is too complex to be adequately addressed here, three general, interrelated strands of critical analysis predominate the attempt to illuminate the workings of this hypervisuality. They can be classified as the psychoanalytic, the materialist, and the ethnographic models, all of which are sustained or shaped by Michel Foucault's formulation of the politics of surveillance.³ The psychoanalytic underpins much of the robust theory on the patriarchal gaze that emerged from feminist film theory, but has roots as well in the work of such philosophers as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, for example. Feminist gaze theory has articulated not only the normative heterosexual male gaze, but examined the complex identificatory tangle of how the female, Black, and lesbian gazes operate in patriarchal society.⁴ Materialist theories of looking draw heavily as well from continental philosophy, tend toward historiography, and are often driven by a critique of consumer capitalism, as in the work of Guy Debord and Fredric Jameson.⁵ Theories of the ethnographic or pathologizing gaze, extrapolated by critics such as Michel Foucault, E. Ann Kaplan, and Sander Gilman, examine the epistemological problematics of the colonizing gaze, whether it takes place in the imperialist, medical, or aesthetic arenas. Although my examination of staring is in dialogue with these theoretical registers, it approaches staring from a distinctly social model.⁶

If—as critics such as John Berger and Laura Mulvey have suggested—gazing is the dominant controlling and defining visual relation in patriarchy between male spectators and female objects of their gazes, staring is the visual practice that materializes the disabled in social relations.⁷ The male gaze produces female subjects; the normative stare constructs the disabled. While both are forms of visual marking, gazing trades on a sexual register and staring traffics in medical discourse. Both visual exchanges prompt narrative. Gazing says, “You are mine.” Staring says, “What is wrong with you?” Gazers become men by looking at women, and starers become doctors by visually probing people with disabilities.

This essay looks at—to use an appropriate metaphor—three disabled women who the appropriate power of the stare in their live art performances. Cheryl Marie Wade, Mary Duffy, and Carrie Sandahl purposively enlist and manipulate the staring dynamic to mount a critique of dominant cultural narratives about disability.⁸ By boldly inviting the stare in their performances, they violate the cultural proscription against staring, at once exposing their impairments and the oppressive narratives about disability that the prohibition against staring attempts to politely silence. Staring unfolds in their work as a charged social exchange between active agents, not simply a form of exploitation or surveillance perpetrated by starers on victimized starees. In their sharp challenge to the prevailing ways of under-

standing disability, the disabled body becomes a critical aesthetic medium, rather than the object of charity, medical diagnosis, scientific evidence, or sideshow entertainment—the dominant discourses that frame disability in the Western tradition. Their performances thus unleash and realign the power inherent in the social transgression that is staring. Wade, Duffy, and Sandahl perform what Rebecca Schneider calls “the explicit body” as a form of cultural criticism that uses the body to explicate the bodies in social relations.⁹

Wade, Duffy, and Sandahl engage staring both as an oppressive social mechanism and as a visual interaction they seize to protest and to redefine disability. Each of these women's performances enlists a familiar visual genre and inflects its conventions with the stare by flaunting their extraordinary bodies to forge a fresh narrative of disabled female subjectivity. The artistic genre of performance lends itself especially well to the project of renarrating disability because the body is the artistic medium of performance. Thus, in these women's art, the body that performs disability in the social realm is the same body that is the instrument of artistic performance.

One might ask why these women who have bodies that so disrupt the expectations of the complacently normal would deliberately invite the stare in a public setting. Duffy, an Irishwoman who presents herself nude in performance, is armless, with delicate hands attached directly to her shoulders. Wade, an American, gesticulates from her wheelchair emphatically with hands that she describes as “gnarly.” Sandahl, who uses a cane, fractures her own anonymity by going through her days in a costume that demands staring, foregrounding the impairment that polite interactions obscure. Each woman would be characterized as “severely disabled” by the standards of what my colleague Paul Longmore calls with great irony the “severely able-bodied.”¹⁰ The answer, of course, is that such performances are forums for profoundly liberating assertions and representations of the self in which the artist controls the terms of the encounter. These women's artistic engagement with self-display is a medium for social critique and positive identity politics. Simultaneously, these performances renarrate the scripts of both disability and femininity. They stage a dramatic encounter by inviting the staring that objectifies their bodies and then orchestrating that performance so as to create the image they intend to project. It is the task that all disabled people face writ large. Wade, Duffy, and Sandahl make serious art from the quotidian stuff of the daily stigma management all people with disabilities must master in order to survive and counter the oppressive assumptions about life with a disability.

The disability and gender systems inextricably intertwine in the performances of Wade, Duffy, and Sandahl. The staring relation is always gen-

dered—as well as inflected by race and class, identity registers that the scope of this essay prevents me from addressing fully here. The perception of disability transforms the male gaze into the stare, thus altering the sexual dynamic of looking. The male gaze enacts normative heterosexual desire and constitutes a normalized feminine subject from a female body that is understood to be unimpaired. When the female spectacle is a disabled one, however, male heterosexual desire is no longer imagined as normative, but rather it becomes pathologized as deviant. Devoteeism, the term for heterosexual desire that issues from staring at the disabled female body, is almost universally considered to be pathological, often even by the women who participate in the sex work that capitalizes on this sexual practice. Almost all studies of or responses to devoteeism center on uncovering the etiology of what is assumed to be a pathological attraction to people with disabilities. Masculine fetishizing of female amputated limbs is taken as abnormal, while male fetishizing of female breasts seems completely unremarkable. The point is that the impaired female body is not imagined as the proper object of the male gaze. Wade, Duffy, and Sandahl exploit this transgressive potential in disabled female sexuality in order to renarrate a version of sexual subjectivity that is neither pathological, nor victimized, nor passive.

Cheryl Marie Wade's Hands

Wade works in the familiar genre of the poetry reading, in which the poet's body is a neutral instrument, an unremarkable and unmarked vehicle for the spoken poetic word the genre foregrounds. Wade's body, however, dominates her poetry readings. Capturing the cultural assumption that impairment is an inappropriate aesthetic sight, Wade enlists the power of the unexpected, the transgressive, by demanding that her audience look at what they have been taught is not to be seen outside the clinic. She appropriates the allure of the tawdry sideshow and the sentimental investment of the telethon, placing those urges to stare in the completely unexpected context of the poetry reading—one of the privileged rituals of high aesthetic culture.

Word and flesh, the aural and the visual, thus fuse in the poetic drama she stages. Her performance, like the body that enacts it, is an affront to social expectations. She forces her viewers to violate the staring taboo, refusing them the escape of furtive staring or visual avoidance that so often characterizes nondisabled looking. In "My Hands," for example, Wade periodically puts on the monster role she has been assigned, grabbing its potency and taunting her starers with it, hurling back the dominant cul-

ture's words for her body. Her performance foregrounds the particularity of her disabled body. From her wheelchair, she brandishes the hands that are usually hidden in polite society, their shape and function a bold affront to the delicate hands femininity fetishizes.

Mine are the hands of your bad dreams.
Booga booga from behind the black curtain.
Claw hands.
The ivory girl's hands after a decade of roughing it.
Crinkled, puckered, sweaty, scarred,
a young woman's dwarf knobby hands
that ache for moonlight—that tremble, that struggle.
Hands that make your eyes tear.
My hands. My hands. My hands
that could grace your brow, your thigh.
My hands! Yeah!

With her invocation of "your bad dreams" and her truculent "Booga booga," Wade mocks her position as monster by conjuring up popular culture's formidable anxiety-turned-fear response to bodies like hers that has traditionally thrilled and titillated the nondisabled. The shockingly naked and visually unexpected hands she invokes verbally, she at the same time emphatically shoves in the audience's faces as she speaks, breaching both social and physiological rules.

Here, however, Wade controls the terms of the encounter. No victimized object of rude, intrusive, curious stares, Wade simultaneously rewrites the cultural narratives of the pathetic cripple and the pretty little lady. Instead, she claims empowerment, agency, and sexuality—the three aspects of personhood that have been denied the disabled subject. She overrides the normative ideal of the "ivory girl's hands," that commercialized image of feminine beauty, with a string of descriptors for her own hands that trounce its authority. Hers are "claw hands" that are defiantly "[c]rinkled, puckered, sweaty, scarred . . . dwarf knobby hands." Wade's hands do not look beautiful, indeed they are a sight so evocative as to "make your eyes tear," perhaps with shock, repugnance, or sympathy. Opposed to the soft static beauty of the "ivory girl's," these hands are the agents of Wade's subjectivity: they "ache," "tremble," and "struggle," exhibiting not loveliness but the evidence of a life of "roughing it." Moreover, these hands are sexual, not in the normatively feminine way of attracting and pleasing the male gaze, but rather as sexual agents. Wade's hands "could grace your brow, your thigh." *Could* here functions ambiguously as a proposition both threatening and tender, at once an offer of gentle love and a menacing "booga, booga" to the squeamish who imagine that the only legitimate caress might come

from hands like the “ivory girl’s.” Wade avows a version of her hands as active rather than passive with her final line, “My hands! Yeah!” as she gazes admiringly and lovingly at her own hands with a sign of satisfaction reminiscent of sexual release. Here she reclaims the stare from her audience and transforms it into the look of love, a self-love here that is not narcissism but rather the affirmation of her own body as whole and right.

Mary Duffy, the Tableau Vivant Venus

Like Wade, Mary Duffy undertakes a project of redefinition, offering counternarratives to the prevailing cultural images of the disabled body. Whereas Wade enlists the genre of poetry reading to invoke the stare, Duffy appropriates the conventions of museum exhibition in her performances. The armless Duffy presents herself in the pose of the classical female nude, a startling tableau vivant of the *Venus de Milo*. Her performance exchanges the fleshly disabled body that has been hidden or sensationally displayed with the familiar marble body that is the icon of female beauty in the Western tradition. Such an ironic juxtaposition both shocks and compels her viewers. By making herself into an art object, she shifts the visual display of her body from the medical or freak-show context to the discourse of aesthetics. This is not the medicalized body stripped naked for diagnosis before the clinical gaze, nor is this the tawdry sideshow or dime museum exhibit hawked by barkers and gawked at by starers. Rather, this is a radical tableau vivant, a living, in-your-face Venus ready to provocatively challenge dominant notions about how we look—in both senses of the phrase.

Duffy’s performance dramatically manipulates visibility by using light and darkness. Her exhibition begins with total darkness, the denial of visual gratification. After an uncomfortable time, enigmatic images and a rhythmic sound float up from the darkness. The visual and aural images soon clarify into a cluster of smooth stones that keep increasing in number, accompanied by a chugging sound. The suggestion of embryonic development and fetal heartbeat eventually emerge from this perplexing prolegomenon. Suddenly, the form of Mary Duffy appears out of the darkness, spotlighted from the front against a black background. The scene dramatically obliterates all visual alternatives except Duffy’s ultrawhite form, forcing the audience to look at her completely naked body, posed as the Venus. Springing—like the mythological Venus—full-blown, full-breasted, and voluptuous, this living, armless Venus silently demands that the audience stare at her. Such arresting choreography hyperbolically fuses two opposing visual discourses: staring at the freakishly different body and gazing at the female body as a sexualized aesthetic object.

This image elicits a confusing combination of the rapt gaze and the intrusive stare, at once compelling and illicit, forcing her audience to stare, to violate the rules of proper bourgeois looking. Hers is simultaneously the sensationally different body glimpsed furtively in the tabloids, the pathological deviation from the norm sequestered in the asylum or the medical text, and the classical icon of beauty. This sideshow Venus invokes at once the degraded and the exalted bodies, the hidden and the canonical images, of Western visual culture. The understandings culture has supplied her audience are inadequate to this incarnate paradox. This art transforms consciousness, grants a new way of seeing the known world.

Having manipulated staring to upset any simple notion of disability identity, this work of art speaks, transforming from silent object of the stare to a speaking subject by narrating her own exhibition. Duffy’s soliloquy flings the words, the questions, and the stares back at her lookers, rebuking the aggregate “you” who cast her as pathological specimen, freak of nature, or quintessential lack. “You have words to describe me that I find frightening,” she accuses. Staring out at the starers she’s created, she upbraids them for their intrusive “staring eyes and gaping mouths” and their questions about being “born like that” that made her feel “ashamed.” Dismissing dominant perceptions of her body, she insists upon her own self-definition, asserting that “words” such as “congenital malformation” do not accurately describe her experience of herself. Her moves from exorcizing the oppressive language that defines her to voicing her own version of herself as “being whole, complete and functional.”

Duffy’s soliloquy repudiates the pathological narrative while her image insists on an aesthetic interpretation of her body. She refuses the reconstructed body completed by prosthetics that testify to the inventiveness of technology to standardize body. She asserts instead her wholeness, the beauty of her bodily particularities. Her Venus persona thus radically renarrates her supposed lack.

Carrie Sandahl’s Medical Records & Daily Rounds

Both Wade and Duffy invoke the conventions of aesthetic genres—the poetry reading and the museum exhibit, respectively—to renarrate disability. Each seeks to move human corporeal variation out of the overdetermined discourses of the pathological, the sideshow, or the sentimental charity poster child, where disability almost exclusively abides, into a representational context where fresh meanings can be conferred. Following this pattern, Carrie Sandahl’s performance invokes the interactive conventions of street theater and body art to stage her challenge to traditional under-

standings of disability. Sandahl's performance brings theatrical conventions such as costuming, props, roles, audience, and staging to her daily life activities, defamiliarizing these everyday encounters by disrupting the smooth social surface that subdues her disability status. Like Wade and Duffy, Sandahl un.masks the operations of disability identity formation and stigmatization that polite social prohibitions obscure in day-to-day social encounters.

Sandahl's performance materializes the objectification of her body by medical discourse. Her costume is a white suit upon which is traced the discourse of pathology that defines her particular body. Her scars, internal structures, such as her spine and pelvis, as well as clinical diagnoses and medical information about her private aspects such as bladder function and sexuality appear in red words on the white lab coat and form-fitting pants of her costume. Like Duffy and Wade, Sandahl's performance foregrounds the differences of her body. Her cane, her uneven gait, and her short stature shift from unmentionable to remarkable, loosing a dialogue both visual and verbal that social conventions usually proscribe. Words appear on parts of her body that are usually outfitted to deflect attention. She hands out prescription slips and medical definitions of her "condition," converting daily life into a theatrical space, passers-by and acquaintances into an audience, and herself into a living clinical text. Such theatrical conventions render her a tableau vivant X-ray and medical record. Whereas Duffy frames herself as a aesthetic object, inviting the gaze of the museum spectator, Sandahl frames her body as a hybrid of the patient, the doctor, the diagnosis, and the empirical evidence. She becomes an embodied, fugitive case study escaped from the clinic, loosed in public sphere from which medicalization has banished the disabled body. By performing in public the identity that is privatized and stigmatized by the discourse of what Michel Foucault calls "the case," Sandahl violates the norms of anonymous public encounters. She trespasses the cultural mandate of what William Ian Miller terms "disattendability," creating a relational space where the social codes and regulations dissolve. She makes, in short, a productive spectacle of her role as a specimen.¹¹

Sandahl's performance thus authorizes any viewer to literally read her body. But where Wade and Duffy work in a formal theater space that restricts interaction between viewer and viewed, Sandahl must gather her own audience and transform the quotidian into the theatrical. The result is spontaneity rather than script, chaos rather than control. She transfers disability from the private, hidden, rationalized, impersonal discursive spaces of the clinic into the public realm of her daily life as a teacher, student, colleague, and anonymous citizen, conflating the mutually exclusive arenas of

the clinic and the street by taking her medicalized body on the road, so to speak. Sandahl's performance allows her to engage the stares by confronting her starers with her own knowledge of what they think they know about her body, reversing the assumption that nondisabled people know something about people with disabilities by staring at them. Such an invitation to ask the inappropriate and to look at the forbidden creates a scandal and unleashes a torrent of attention that is unmonitored by the usual restrictions surrounding stigmatized identities. It undoes the skillful management by people with disabilities of discomfort surrounding conventional civility about disability that is so characteristic of Western culture. "Don't stare; don't ask; don't tell" breaks down, creating a transgressive space where conventional rules and relations are upset and subject to realignment. This space that Sandahl's performance opens up is neither inherently positive or negative, and once initiated, is no longer within her control, which produces a good deal of chaos, anxiety, and uncertainty. Whereas Duffy and Wade completely control the terms of the encounter between themselves and their audiences by creating one-way, one-woman shows, Sandahl performs a much more complex and risky act. The genie is out of the bottle; the staring encounter she's unleashed leads where it will.

Manipulating the Staring Dynamic

Drawing from varying established genres of performance art, Wade, Duffy, and Sandahl forge an autobiographical form of feminist disability performance art that unsettles cultural presumptions about humanity, femaleness, disability, and self. Wade's performance alludes to the Black Power movement of 1960s positive identity politics; Duffy's rendering of herself from a freak to a Venus draws on the 1970s deconstruction of high and low culture; Sandahl's choreographing of interactive theater space deepens the current art form of the installation. By merging the visual and the narrative, body and word signify together in an act of self-making that witnesses the liberatory potential of disability performance art.

These women make art from the daily experience shared by all disabled people of managing, deflecting, resisting, or renouncing stares. By manipulating the staring ritual so fundamental to disability experience, these performances mount a critique of the politics of appearance, the medicalization of human variation, the rationalization of the body in modernity, and the assumption that disability is embodied inferiority. Moreover, their performances unmask the dynamic of staring by forcing the audience to become starers, to violate the social proscription against being captivated

by the desire to stare. If gazing exercises the privilege of disappearing as a marked body, staring marks the starrer as the social transgressor. In short, these women cast the evil eye upon their audiences.

Disability, these performances assert, is to be expected. Indeed, the cultural narrative that imagines disability as unexpected, the hidden, the uncanny, is part of the oppression of the ability system. Wide human variation is the norm rather than the exception. It is the ideology of ableism that tells us we should all look the same.

Notes

1. Tobin Siebers, *The Mirror of Medusa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).
2. Ann Cupolo Carrillo, Katherine Corbett, and Victoria Lewis, *No More Stares* (Berkeley: The Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, 1982); Kenny Fries, ed., *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out* (New York: Plume, 1997); Fred Davis, "Deviance Disavowal: The Management of Strained Interaction by the Visibly Handicapped," *Social Problems* 9 (1961): 120-32.
3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Vintage, 1979).
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956). On feminist gaze theory, see Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988); Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientation in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
5. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1973); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).
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7. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972), chap. 3; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
8. Wade, Duffy, and Sandahl's performances are available in video on *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back*, directed and produced by David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, Brace Yourself Productions, 1996. I have seen Duffy's and Wade's performances live; my readings of all these performances are influenced by the editing and thematic framing of Mitchell and Snyder's important film.

9. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
10. Personal conversation.
11. Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*; William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).