

McKelvey, P. (2024) *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation*. NYU Press.

Review by Julie Assouly

A 1958 *Life* magazine spread on “astonishingly bright” nightclub acts closes on an image that is easy to miss: Bernard Bragg, a deaf schoolteacher, masked and miming life on a San Francisco cable car. Through that single image, *Disability Works* by Patrick McKelvey reconceptualizes the postwar American settlement linking disability, theatre, and work. This combination of public pedagogy, theatrical labor and disability aesthetics is a significant achievement.

Rather than viewing performance as a reflection of social policy, the book demonstrates that vocational rehabilitation unfolded as a performance in itself: “the ability to compete in the labor market by undergoing physical and psychological transformation with the temporary, limited support of the state.” (p. 5) Scripts, rehearsals, tours, management protocols, training curricula, and publicity campaigns redefined disabled citizenship as competitive employment. Naming this repertoire “disability works,” the author reconstructs the consolidation of “disability arts” during the period shaped by the rise of disability rights activism (1960s-1990s).

The study’s methodological approach is infrastructural. It shifts focus from individual events to the underlying structures — funders, unions, contracts, schools and benefit rules — that bring aesthetic forms and labor regimes together. Through a great range of detailed case studies, the book puts forward the idea that the same stages that normalized rehabilitation’s common sense also provided techniques for disabled people to reject the system and create alternative futures. The cases studied include Plays for Living, the National Theatre of the Deaf, Ron Whyte’s administrative experiments, the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped, and Alvin Ailey’s New Visions Dance Project.

The opening chapter traces how Mary E. Switzer’s Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR, established in 1950) transformed theatre into a policy infrastructure. Following President Eisenhower’s 1953 directive to establish vocational rehabilitation as the “cornerstone” of domestic welfare and deliver hundreds of thousands of successful rehabilitations, Switzer combined statecraft with stagecraft (p. 35). Her early training at Radcliffe’s 47 Workshop and her proximity to elite theatrical networks help explain why demonstration clinics (live performances of instruction), the Functional Home (a staged model of ideal domestic life), and the circulation of success stories became performative instruments of persuasion (p. 39). Within this context, OVR commissioned Plays for Living (1961–1965), a series of reproducible one-act plays designed to convey the story of rehabilitation to civic groups, schools and employers.

The chapter’s most notable analytical term, “functional imitation,” describes the plays’ austere realism: bare living rooms, armless chairs, imaginary props and a narrator who encourages identification and directs discussion. This aesthetic minimalism exposes policy minimalism and an unethical labor economy. Equity actors performed in the plays for small fees, rehearsals were unpaid, and the scripts excluded disabled performers through simulation and narration.

Theatre was used to find employment for disabled people elsewhere, rather than to employ them onstage.

Founded in 1967 with a significant federal grant channeled through the O'Neill Center, the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) initially appears to be a response to Plays for Living: a professional company of deaf performers paid to showcase deaf culture. Chapter 2 convincingly reframes NTD as a rehabilitation instrument whose aesthetic form — “sign-mime,” developed through the correspondence between Bernard Bragg, a Deaf actor and director, and David Hays, a hearing Broadway set designer — served Cold War cultural diplomacy (p. 90). By fusing American Sign Language with pantomime to promise transnational legibility, NTD embraced a style of universality accessible to hearing audiences at home and abroad. The company toured as a U.S. answer to the Soviet Union’s Theatre of Sign and Gesture (1963); its representational labor folded Deaf employment into a script of American benevolence (p. 76). This universality was racially structured. Early companies recruited almost exclusively from Gallaudet College (p. 74), and Black Deaf actors only joined later.

The third chapter is the historiographic keystone of the book. “After rehabilitation” does not refer to a period that follows vocational rehabilitation, but to an infrastructural afterlife in which overlapping eligibility regimes — such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (504), the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), and independent-living centers — synchronize rather than supersede one another. The figure who anchors this analysis is the playwright and administrator Ron Whyte (one of the figures to whom the book is dedicated).

Through CETA stipends and a modest salary, Whyte created the time and space to develop projects in which disabled artists could flourish without having to prove their employability. The administrative imagination became the avant-garde. The analysis of Whyte’s \$10,000-a-year CETA income shifts the question from ‘How did disabled artists get work?’ to ‘How did they design work worlds?’ (p. 109) The chapter’s interpretation of Whyte’s “Super-Market” (p. 132), where goods circulate outside of profit, shows a staging of an economic system based on sharing and collective access, right in the heart of New York, a city defined by profit-driven capitalism.

The fourth chapter identifies “bureaucratic drag” as both a temporal condition and a performance idiom. Waiting rooms, intake forms, benefit caps and appeals processes are not merely settings; they provide the framework through which disabled artists can express themselves and become visible. Apartments functioned as postal nodes and documents stand in for bodies that are constantly required to act as documents. Although this is not mail art as a formal movement, it is a disabled performance culture in which paper is both a weapon and a prosthesis. The “drag” is durational harm: a prolonged experience of bureaucratic or social harm that disabled artists had to live through, not merely perform. In the 1970s, the avant-garde of disability performance emerged from administrative settings.

Chapter 5 emphasizes the historically rich and ideologically complex nature of the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped (NTWH). Seatedness, promoted as a neutral, professional stage presence, becomes the sign through which disability becomes visible and manageable, aligning with the static figure of realist theatre and the hegemony of the wheelchair icon. The system’s prejudice against physical differences — such as spasms being seen as a loss of control or a ‘crippling’ distraction — mutates into a useful resource when

authenticity can be commodified. The rise of management consultants, the uneven enforcement of the 504 Act, and airline deregulation mean that 'communication skills' have become the portable currency of self-reliance. Curry's advice to "leave three hours earlier" (p. 190) reframes access as a matter of personal time management, with predictable racialized outcomes across New York's transport networks. The chapter's central argument is clear: NTWH created the concept of 'employability' without actual employment, helping to translate disability into human capital, a resource that could be developed, managed, and marketed within capitalist frameworks.

The last chapter, and the most synthetic, traces the history of the New Visions Dance Project, which was founded under the guidance of Black choreographer Alvin Ailey in collaboration with the Lighthouse for the Blind (p. 210). Rather than presenting a neat moral narrative, the chapter brings together two genealogies: a Lighthouse lineage that reflects the austerity era of vocational rehabilitation, and a Dunham/Ailey tradition in which Black modern dance served as a form of rehabilitation for communities that had been structurally weakened by racial capitalism. While the project's emphasis on self-esteem reflected 1980s ideas about the economic value of personal growth, the author explains that its movement techniques, rooted in Afro-diasporic rhythm and the mobility of the pelvis and spine, drew on a Black modernist tradition that transcended the logic of work and productivity. This point is illustrated by the example of Suleiman Rifai, a blind Tanzanian immigrant who was integrated into the Ailey School. Rifai's repeated 'failed' laterals are not viewed as a therapeutic deficit, but as an aesthetic choice that embodies a refusal of exactitude, reflecting race, disability and migration (p. 245). Once again, the chapter's conceptual payoff is significant. Rehabilitation is framed as a multifaceted concept with an ever-present afterlife, and Black modern dance is presented as both a vehicle for and an interruption to neoliberal rehabilitative individualism.

In the epilogue, the author reinterprets the public celebrations surrounding the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as theatrical performances that perpetuate, rather than challenge, the logic of rehabilitation. They depict access as a branded, feel-good spectacle rather than a structural change. In opposition to this vision, the author unexpectedly turns to popular culture. Indeed, the sitcom *Roseanne* offers an alternative perspective, portraying disability as a common consequence of working in the service industry rather than an exceptional condition. Roseanne's sister Jackie's post-injury pension and community theatre role, as well as Roseanne's rejection of the "deep acting" (p. 259) demanded of customer-facing service industry workers point towards a different disability politics — one based on the right not to work, or to work differently.

Reviewer Bio:

Julie Assouly is an Associate Professor of American Studies specializing in cinema at Université d'Artois (Arras, France). She is director of the Praxis et Esthétique des Arts research group (Textes et Cultures laboratory UR4028), and the author of several books and edited volumes on US cinema, including *Wes Anderson: Cinéaste Transatlantique* (CNRS 2024). Her current focus of interest is the representation of the working class in US films and TV series set in the Rust Belt.