

# MY CHAIR WITHOUT ME

PERFORMATIVE 'GAZING' AT THE DISABLED PERFORMER

DEAFHOOD



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PLYMOUTH

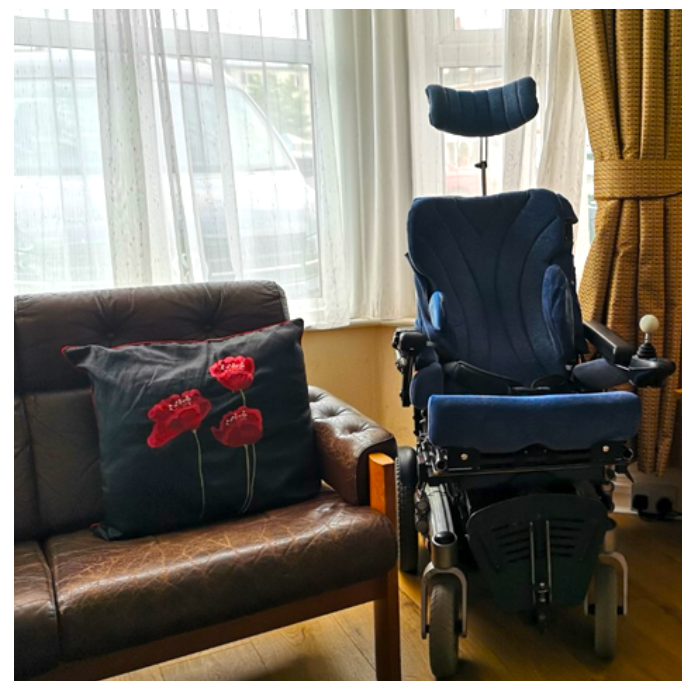
The outdated, yet still prevalent, Medical Model states that disability is something to be 'fixed'. During the last 40 years there has been protest from the disabled community; activists; scholars and performers, to create a more progressive model of disability. However, the Medical Model is still realised in the 'disability gaze'. which promotes hegemonic ideals in the form of a series of visual cues directed at the disabled body. The disabled performers' body is a lens through which to understand not only the negative impact of the 'gaze', but how this oppression can be subverted. How can performance of the disabled body disrupt 'failing' discourses? How can an examination of objects upset understandings of hegemonic disability? Hugh Malyon is a BA(Hons) Theatre and Performance graduate with an interest in the representation of Disabled performances and performers, the 'disability gaze', and questioning the narratives of 'normative' bodies.

**The 'I':** I understand my body as disabled, not disabling. As such I am in control of my body, yet my body cannot always do the things I ask of it. This fact draws the attention of those around me, often leading to two scenarios: being ignored or creating fascination. The fascination often leads to a world subject to the disability 'Gaze'.

I find both comfort and oppression in knowing this. Sandahl and Auslander further unpick the term by referring to the 'Gaze' as *staring*. They comment that '[s]taring says, "What is wrong with you?" [...] starers become doctors by visually probing people with disabilities' (2005: 32). This sentiment is something I witness through the public sphere, navigating other bodies that do not move in the same way I do. My wheelchair is my best expression of movement - I can, of course, move without this support in my own way through space, but within the chair I can 'access'. But can my wheelchair only best express itself with me as its support?

**The Wheelchair:** *Psalms* (1997) is an art piece with an automated wheelchair, designed by Donald Rodney, which when exhibited, follows a pre-programmed route of a figure of eight through space. This art piece does not require a physical body: the absence of the performer's body is a vital element in how the piece is read. As Jane Bilton observes: 'the empty wheelchair courses through its various trajectories on a sad and lonely journey of life, a journey to nowhere. Its movements repeat, like an ever-recurring memory, a memory of another life and another journey' (in Chambers, 1998: 54)

When not placed in galleries, *Psalms* sits in a corner of a small office, within this institution. I have only seen clips of *Psalms'* movement, but have talked with Professor Mike Phillips (fellow collaborator / friend of Rodney) in the same space as *Psalms*. The art piece relies on Phillips to maintain and 'care' for it - when I observed *Psalms*, the chair was missing a tyre, but there was still a power and presence emanating



from it: *Psalms* is not an ordinary chair, and even not in full motion asks important questions about the way disability is viewed and 'gazed' upon.

## Absent Bodies / Objects

I wonder what narratives my wheelchair 'weaves' when I am absent from it. Few have experienced my chair, without me, (or at least my body near the chair ready to take its support again). It is only really at night my wheelchair sits alone, without a body occupying the same space. I am intensely aware that when my chair cannot be maintained (because parts are obsolete), it will be scrapped and a new one will be ordered, but as the replacement arrives the essence of my present chair will be absent.



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