

“Always Wear Your Pearls”: Responding to Galloway’s Responders

Bruce Henderson

A few years ago, when a group of scholars, health care professionals, and artists pitched a possible exhibition of disability arts to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, they included videotaped performances as part of their presentation. By all accounts, the one performance that gave the potential decision-makers (the “deciders”) the most discomfort and pause was Terry Galloway’s “Etiquette of Suicide.” This event occurred in the wake of the national debate over Terry Schiavo (which Sandahl also alludes to in her response), the Oregon amendment, and physician assisted suicide (a debate which remains far from over). While Galloway had been performing this piece for some years previous to this, the performance took on an added political and cultural resonance. By the way, there were a number of other performers included on the sample tape, so it was not simply the case that the audience had never seen a disabled performer before. But perhaps what made Galloway’s performance so disturbing to the audience was its very use of the conventions of decorum to talk about what remains a difficult, boundary-challenging

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issue: the tension between the rights of people to bodily self-determination and the social devaluing of the lives of disabled people. The genius of Galloway’s performances, it seems to me, resides in its wedding of highly aestheticized craft and risky, dangerous content. She is a consciously an outlaw performer—not an “outsider” performer, but someone who knows how to work all the systems of art and makes clear, visible and audible decisions about how to use them transgressively.

It is no wonder, then, that her video performance, “Just the Funny Bits,” an anthology of selections from her longer solo performance, “Out All Night and Lost My Shoes,” should inspire/provoke such disparate responses as those provided by Joanne Gilbert, Jill Taft-Kaufman, and Carrie Sandahl, all of whom bring both scholarly and personal voices to their discussions of the video: Gilbert, the scholar and practitioner of feminist comedy; Taft-Kaufman, both the scholar/artist of traditional Western literature and the partner of a person living with a chronic illness/disability; and Sandahl, the colleague, collaborator, self-identified disabled scholar-performer. Because we have a clearly gendered situation here—I am a male critic responding not only to a female artist but to three female critics—it is probably appropriate to offer my own set of identity intersectionalities as a context to my responses to the responses: I am a gay male, whose own relationship to disability identity is a complicated one—I am obese (which may or may not qualify as a disability), diabetic (ditto), and live with chronic depression (ditto again, depending on who is doing the “counting”). These life conditions are not irrelevant to my own responses to Galloway’s work and, more relevant to this forum, my responses to Gilbert, Taft-Kaufman, and Sandahl. But enough about me, as the narcissist might say—what do *I* have to say about the responses?

Gilbert on Galloway: Disability Performances as Funhouse Mirror

Joanne Gilbert situates Galloway’s work in a long tradition of what she terms “marginal humorous performance,” which she traces back to the “physically deformed ‘fools’ of ancient times” (par. 2). As she

is quick to point out, the fool's traditional role has been one of Bakhtinian inversion, the grotesque as the clearest expression of "truth." While the fool has typically held a protected place in the court, the only subject permitted to make mockery of the king, it is important to remember that the position can easily become a precarious one—as Lear's beloved fool demonstrates all too poignantly. Gilbert argues that Galloway's "focus on both mental and physical difference is new territory for many audiences." I think this is not quite accurate, as one only need think of such disparate performers as Robin Williams, who performed his own (often substance-fueled) "neurodiversity" (to use the current technical term for what might have been called "lunacy" in another, less politically-fraught era), Lily Tomlin, whose bag lady in *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the University* is clearly a forerunner of some of Galloway's gallery of outspoken women-on-the-edge, and Whoopi Goldberg's woman with cerebral palsy, whose monologue was one of the highlights of her Broadway show.

Where I think Gilbert's point is useful is that Galloway positions herself somewhat differently from these three performers in their relationship to physical and psychiatric disability. While Williams performs essentially in his own voice, his manic shifting from one character to another has only recently been situated by the artist as symptomatic of an enduring psychological disability—in earlier years, he seemed to suggest that his artistry was simply a constructed mask and one—wink, wink—intensified by his use of the party drugs that made him part of the "insider" crowd of the 80s and 90s. So, the sense of an individual whose unstable sense of self has overtaken the socially normative has only in the past decade or so (and most memorably in the past year again) been placed in the public eye in terms disability culture might understand. Everyone went into rehab twenty years ago, it seemed, but, like Susan Hayward in "I'll Cry Tomorrow," succeeded in turning their lives around. The Williams of today seems someone whose performances now form a continuous narrative in which impairment and style are inextricable: rather than performing an artificially self-imposed disability, today, like Galloway, Williams might be seen as performing in a more authentically autobiographical disability mode.

Tomlin and Goldberg, on the other hand, have used dramatic personae as voices through which to speak as the fool or the outsider. In the case of Tomlin, Tess, her bag lady, pushing her shopping cart to the ends of the universe, has clearly been cast out of society and, in her seemingly random speeches, articulates wisdom among the rantings. Goldberg’s unnamed woman is in conception even more radical an intervention than Tomlin’s, as she is depicted as highly intelligent, quite mentally articulate, speech and mobility impeded by CP, but not her mind. Where Goldberg falters is in her need to place a sentimental closure on her character’s monologue: the marriage of her woman to a man “enlightened” enough to see through her physical impairment to the “real” person within.

Galloway, of course, will have none of such sentimentalization of either mental illness or physical disability, and this is what distinguishes her from the other, better-known comics/performers I have discussed. There is deep and profound emotion in Galloway’s work, always placed within a very thoughtful and witty web of language play. As Gilbert points out, there is not an ounce of self-deprecation in Galloway’s work: she is too busy making her points, getting her laughs, and challenging our assumptions for that (par. 5).

Finally, Gilbert argues that Galloway succeeds in getting her audience both to identify with her performed self/selves and then, by looking at ourselves in this mirror, to feel ashamed for our indifference to “the suffering around us.” While some identification is inescapable when we look at any other human (or so ethnologists would tell us about our primate selves), I don’t experience Galloway’s project in quite this way—rather, for me, it is both the celebration of difference that holds me in her sway, and her testament that the world might be a better place if we could all just learn to be different, together (not unlike the message of John Cameron Mitchell’s recent film, *Shortbus*, in which he suggests that if we could all just find a way to allow ourselves to be fucked by all the other bodies in the world, we might achieve true intersubjectivity). Identification, to remain intellectually viable, it seems to me, must also insist on a space of difference. I don’t experience “shame” at the “pay-off” of Galloway’s monologue of paranoid schizophrenia, “Moments of ... Near Suspense.” I experience recognition of the similarities and differences

at play as we make our way through the world, and a simultaneous discomfort and pleasure in the crowded, sometimes smothering multitudes Galloway asks us to confront within our-selves.

Taft-Kaufman: Disability Performance and the Tragicomic Vision

Jill Taft-Kaufman's response to Galloway's performance is situated within the always-present, but not always acknowledged double-levels of the personal and the public. Taft-Kaufman writes, as she has throughout her distinguished career, as a critic, scholar, performer, and director; in addition, here she also writes as somehow deeply engaged in a relationship with a disabled person, her husband Steve, and with the acknowledgment that disability never involves in any simple sense the singularity of the person with the disability, but because we are social beings, implicates many people in the experience of disability. For me as a young scholar entering the field of performance studies (then, interpretation) in the early 1980s, Taft-Kaufman was an important figure for those engaged in questions of literary performance and aesthetics. In addition, she has remained a warm, welcoming, and supportive colleague-friend.

I preface my remarks with this characterization of Taft-Kaufman as a way of contextualizing my own complicated, in some respects over-determined response to her response to Galloway's performance. I admire and greatly respect her willingness to confront honestly and openly the ways in which her and Steve's experience of disability color her own responses to Galloway's disability-centered performances. At the same time, what also emerges is a view of disability that is authentic and grounded, but might be seen as at odds with some current theory and rhetoric within disability studies itself. For example, Taft-Kaufman asserts that "Terry's story is ultimately a narrative of overcoming" (par. 5). The overcoming narrative is one of the most vilified within what might be viewed as the radical disability community of scholars, artists, and activists (categories that are often overlapping and inextricable). Indeed, the notion of "overcoming" is itself antithetical to the dominant disability rhetoric that argues that

disability is itself not a condition or experience to be overcome, but simply one that has its own inherent value and quality.

Let me hasten to add that Taft-Kaufman makes it clear that she is not devaluing the lives of disabled people in her use of the word “overcoming”; rather, it seems to me that she is speaking as much about her and Steve’s own journey in confronting and living with his brain tumor and attendant conditions as she is about the nature and quality of Galloway’s performances. But the invoking of the “overcoming” narrative does summon up what disability scholars refer to as the medical model of disability as, in a sense, an individual tragedy. Galloway’s performance implicates its audience in ways that preclude the comfort of distance from the tragic other we/they might otherwise maintain.

Taft-Kaufman also suggests that “Terry’s performance underscores the idea that disability transforms our definitions of normalcy” (par. 4). This seems to me to be the powerful point of Taft-Kaufman’s response. Through her highly crafted and disciplined art, Galloway not only “transforms our definitions of normalcy,” she challenges us to consider whether the word might simply be banished from our lexicon, through her dismantling of normalcy by way of humor, parody, and critique. An important distinction between Galloway’s and Taft-Kaufman’s texts of disability performance may lie within what is also acknowledged in disability studies as a critical point of genesis and entry into disability experience: whether a disability is congenital or acquired early in life during the first period(s) of identity development or whether it is acquired in adulthood, after an individual has passed through the first of what Erikson described as “identity crises.” While Galloway’s sense of a disabled self has been complicated in fascinating ways by her own liminal state between Deafness and being “hard of hearing,” as well as by her own experience of psychiatric impairment/disability, there is a sense in which performance makes it clear that disability, whether called by that name or not, has been a part of how Galloway has experienced the world and herself within it throughout most of her life. For Jill and Steve, the acquisition of disability and its sense of ebb and flow in their shared lives has been a very different kind of

experience, the performance of which Taft-Kaufman's essay testifies to powerfully.

Within disability studies, there was a period, beginning in the 1980s, in which discussion of the embodied experience of impairment (i.e. the actual corporeal and cognitive/psychological differences from social norms) was discouraged and even repressed, in some respects to avoid a rhetoric of individual tragedy. Recent critiques of the binary of social and medical models of disability have been vocal and vigorous and ongoing and, to the surprise of no one, feminists and queer scholars have been at the forefront of such critiques: in some ways, the taboo about giving voice to pain and to bodily experience of all kinds has been a masculinist enterprise, a kind of "compulsory" forbidding of the narrating of experiences that certain parts of society would translate into "weakness." Here, readers may find the work of such theorists as Susan Wendell and Martha Nussbaum in feminist theory and Robert McRuer in queer theory of use, as well as the work of emerging scholars such as Chris Bell who force "us" to confront the whiteness of disability studies.

That disability identity may not indeed be nonnormative at all is what Taft-Kaufman reminds us so well to take from Galloway's performances—and Galloway's performances may in this respect be a corollary to Lennard Davis's recent theorizing of "dismodernity" as the closest thing to a universal identity position—that we are all, in a sense, either now or will be disabled. Davis' own work is controversial, for some a kind of homogenizing of what makes disability its own authentic and different sphere of experience; nonetheless, what Galloway's performance speaks to—and what Taft-Kaufman's response reminds us to attend to with the usual care and meticulousness Taft-Kaufman brings to her scholarship—is the necessary tension between/simultaneity of the particular and the theoretical. What Taft-Kaufman's eloquent, deeply "bodied" response to Galloway's work—and her juxtaposition of it with her (and Steve's) own experience of disability reminds us of how much performance studies can teach disability studies, and vice-versa. Body may not simply trump theory—body may *be* theory.

Sandahl: Fellow Traveler on the Disabled Road

If I devote less space to Carrie Sandahl’s response to Galloway’s video, it is simply because Sandahl’s own reflections speak with such articulate and insightful self-analysis, as a disabled performer and a scholar of queer performance herself. What I find fascinating as a reader is that the experience of reading Taft-Kaufman’s response and Sandahl’s response in succession (I have responded to the three pieces in the order in which I serendipitously read them—Gilbert, Taft-Kaufman, and Sandahl) provides a kind of useful dialogue, in which Taft-Kaufman’s own movement between performance critic and person deeply involved in disability experience is mirrored by a parallel, if by no means identical tension within Sandahl between critic and collaborative disability performer (indeed, I have seen Sandahl as a performer in videos produced by Galloway, Donna Nudd, and the rest of the Mickee Faust collective). Thus, what Sandahl generously reveals to us is the exciting dynamic that occurs when performance is re-contextualized in different media (live vs. video), for different audiences (the Intro to Theatre class, the disability community conferences), and in different “textualities” (i.e. as part of the whole “Out All Night” performance or as excerpted “bits”).

Thus, for Sandahl, while there is both continuity and contiguity in her experience of these performances, there is always newness and discovery. Sandahl finds her own sense of disability hierarchy in the emphasis she has previously placed on the introductory monologue, often to the exclusion of the other bits. In her description of the disabled audience’s experience of “Sherrie Loose” as an offensive (to some) reinscription of stereotypes of madness, she reminds us that the constitution of a text in performance cannot be commanded even within a single setting: the incompleteness of some of the audience members’ knowledge of Galloway’s personal history as it provides a context for the layers of parody and critique—an incompleteness that is, in a sense, inevitable and always the condition of being both performer and audience—reinforces the fact that disability is in itself not a monolithic experience (par. 5). As disability theorists continue to try to define and describe disability culture, Galloway’s work and

Sandahl's discussion of her own response and the response of others to it suggests that we must always think in terms of multiple, intersecting cultures. And that to be offensive can be productive, liberating, *beautiful*—that there is an aesthetic to such messiness, as well as a method to its madness.

After all, Sheri Lewis herself, when asked if she ever ordered lamp chops when at a restaurant, responded, "Whenever possible," and then roared with laughter. And I suspect she would roar with laughter and weep with the pleasure of the trickster at Galloway's de(con)struction of that polymorphously perverse puppet (may I confess that I own two Lamb Chops of my own, one in her more familiar tuxedo drag, the other in a mauve-pink tutu, and that I have dreams of having them star in a production of one of Bette Davis's identical twin melodramas sometime?). "Mr. Hand Chop" makes me think of such disparate images of disability as Mr. Garrison's strange imaginary twig-friend-lover Mr. Hat on *South Park* and the immense literature in occupational therapy on the hand, some of it technical, some of it poetic, such as Gary Kielhofner's "A Meditation on the Use of Hands." The chaining out of associations, personal, public, idiosyncratic, intervening, inviting threatens to expand to an excess even cyberspace may need to limit.

Sandahl's response to Galloway continues their dialogic relationship and invites us to join them on this journey—a journey they, along with Gilbert and Taft-Kaufman, have begun and which, one can only hope, has no ending. Who wouldn't want to go with them?