

## **Practices of Sharing & Ways of Knowing. Doing Disability Culture**

Anneka Esch-van Kan

**Abstract:**

Disability Culture and Community Performance. Find a Strange and Twisted Shape builds on the emerging field of art-as-research and contributes to the shaping of scholarly perspectives on the political potential of community performance and its specific role in disability culture. In this, her most recent book, Petra Kuppers brushes the discussion of theory and the analysis of aesthetic strategies into the background. She adopts an experiential perspective which foregrounds processes of working and being together. Disability Culture and Community Performance is an artist's book on various creative journeys through diverse cultural and historical settings, but it is also a careful investigation into the methodical consequences emanating from crossings of theory and practice. Furthermore it is an activist intervention and contribution to the doing of disability culture.

**How to cite:**

Esch-van Kann, Anneka: „Practices of Sharing & Ways of Knowing. Doing Disability Culture [Review on: Kuppers, Petra: Disability Culture and Community Performance. Find a Strange and Twisted Shape. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.]“. In: KULT\_online 36 (2013).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2013.791>

© by the authors and by KULT\_online

## Practices of Sharing & Ways of Knowing. Doing Disability Culture

Anneka Esch-van Kan

Kuppers, Petra: *Disability Culture and Community Performance. Find a Strange and Twisted Shape*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 282 pp., Hardcover, 73.99€, ISBN: 978-0-230-29827-9

Approaches to art-as-research and research-as-art have always been an important element in the creative practice and scholarship of Petra Kuppers, Professor of English and Theatre & Drama at the University of Michigan and a distinctively staple voice in Performance and Disability Studies. Her previous monographs on disability and theatre started from theoretical reflection and critical analysis only to confront, in the end, her scholarly perspective with her experience as a theatre practitioner and artistic director of The Olimpias. In contrast, her most recent book is an exploration of possible crossings of theory and practice from the start. The theoretical framework of Kupper's thought – which is strongly informed by her careful engagements with the philosophy of Benjamin, Deleuze/Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, and others – recedes to the background. What gains centre stage is the account Kuppers gives of her and fellow participants' experiences in and perspectives on various workshops and collaborative artistic encounters.

The methodology of the book is based on strategic choices and willingly questions the standards of academic research as well as the unspoken rules and dominant attributes of the art market. Kuppers aligns her study with the particular styles of (academic) writing by scholars as diverse as Jacques Derrida, Antonin Artaud, Walter Benjamin or Peggy Phelan. Just as they do, Kuppers also uses "memoir, textual arrangement, the juxtaposition of photograph and text, or text and text, [and] poetic signifiers" (11) to force open dominant ways of meaning making. She decidedly writes "from a specifically marked, non-neutral place" (14) and emphasizes the multiplicity of ways of knowing, the role of physicality and the importance and validity of the personal. The intended destabilization of single authorship is most obviously evidenced by passages modeled after conversations or based on the combination of entries to internet blogs, but also shows in the "provisional [and] performative" (4) "use of the words 'we' and 'us'" (ibid.). The appreciation of "interdependency" is a decisive moment in the book's endeavor to contribute to the doing of disability culture. The emphasis on collaboration in creating art and scholarship and the advocacy of its desirability are key aspects of it (29), as are the appreciative agreement with vulnerability and the trusting gesture of sharing, which resurface time and again. Kuppers invites the reader to relate to her text in an "active, engaged and desirous" (5) way and offers "[m]ultiple entry points" (ibid.) that allow one to become

engrossed with sections of the book and skip others. This is also part of what she calls her "access strategy" (5), which allows the book to speak to different audiences in and outside of academia.

Questions of accessibility are also at the heart of the first artistic project introduced: A one-week exploration of ways of inhabiting a corridor and stairwell at The Chisendale Dance Space in London, which builds an obvious barrier for artists with physical disabilities. Just as in other projects of The Olimpias', Landscaping focuses on "[p]rocesses and practices, spatial experiences and communicative acts" (37) that play into "the complex making and unmaking of communality and community" (ibid.). Kuppers describes the work of The Olimpias as "performance research" (homepage), and values the accessibility and alignment with disability culture over attempts to gain the label of "professional" art. Disability Culture and Community Performance draws attention to the ways of working together and the experience of community. Hence, Kuppers does not attempt to develop her descriptions of public sharings beyond schematic notes and instead explores concrete working sessions as well as long-term developmental processes.

Disability Culture and Community Performance starts from a familiar place: by focusing on the accessibility of venues to artists with physical disabilities, it addresses the immediate everyday life of participants and the ways in which they are making "a home" (v) in the Anglo-American art world. One of the greatest contributions of Kuppers' study, however, is her widening of the perspective in the course of "the book's narrative" (xi). She emphasizes that "[d]isability culture is no monoculture" (23) and takes the multiplicity and respective specificity of historical, political, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds into account. The way Maori and Pakeha relate to myth is important to Kuppers' reflections on the relation between self and community. Likewise Butoh dance and philosophy provide key concepts to her understanding of energy and vibration, pain and beauty. The discussion and documentation of the Anarcha-Project, then, extends the focus of Disability Culture and Community Performance further by introducing a historical perspective. The research and performance project is concerned with the gross ill-treatment and genital mutilation of black slave women for medical experimentation in Montgomery, Alabama in the 1840s. It gives an account of the historical case and reflects on the interdependence of categories such as race, class, and gender and their significance in disability history. In the final chapter Kuppers reflects on the role of academics and the specific way that teaching at a university – and even grading – might be transformed or influenced by a decided commitment to disability culture.

Disability Culture and Community Performance develops amongst other things a sound methodical approach accounting for the productive crossing of theory and practice in art-as-research and research-as-art. Despite the fact that the book does not try to develop complicated theoretical arguments, it is also rich with theory that is partly introduced in the main chapters and partly covered in extensive endnotes. Almost in passing Kuppers suggests "a rhizomatic model of disability" which would replace or intervene into the standard distinction between a

medical and a social model of disability. Even though the entire study – the way Kupperts interweaves different voices and diversifies perspectives and the combination of different ways of knowing – provides hints, there is certainly room for further explorations of the concept. Kupperts' strategic methodological decisions, which she at times refers to in a somewhat annoyingly justifying manner, provide criticism with many targets: concepts such as energy and vibration are consciously used without a concrete theoretical grounding, the concept of "sharing" is underdeveloped in the context of performance, the interplay of poetry and scholarly writing might work out better in some cases than in others, the creative arrangement of contents might risk turning into chaos (especially as standard techniques of ordering material, such as the coherent numbering of sub-/chapters, fall by the wayside), and of course, the dominance of the personal voice could be turned against the study. Those who are skeptical of attempts to cross the divide between art and research and who advocate a strict division of activism and scholarship might better spare their money and time. Yet, for all others, it is a great and inspiring read.