

ARTICLES

When Actions Challenge Theories: The Tactical Performances of Sue Austin

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In the following paper, we attempt to highlight the pedagogical level of certain performances through an analysis of Sue Austin's production aesthetic. Austin is a multimedia, performance, and installation artist who transforms her life experience in a wheelchair into dramatic codes. The main hypothesis of our reflection is that her performances become a potential "teaching and educational moment" for the spectator, because they rewrite the meaning of disability by processing, comparing, and deconstructing its social images. In fact, her performative practices could be considered as an occasion, first, to take disability itself as a concept of critical aesthetics (Siebers 2010) and, second, to reflect pedagogically on some of the epistemological categories introduced by the artist in the field of the performing arts.

Additionally, the paper aims to integrate the cultural, political, and sociological perspective offered by Disability Studies with the principal categories of a personalist special pedagogy, which is founded on the Jewish-Christian concept of *person*. The singularity and uniqueness that distinguishes this notion is key for an educational action (both personal and relational). This kind of pedagogy, therefore, looks at the personal, unique, and substantial identity expressed, differently, in each of us.¹ Following this philosophical and pedagogical tradition, we would like to identify all the semantic and axiological richness that accompanies the theoretical definition of the concept of the human person and all the educational practices that follow.

The case of Sue Austin is most interesting in this regard because she is the artistic director of *Freenheeling*, a large-scale ongoing performance project aimed at addressing and challenging different public perceptions of disability through public encounters with spectators. Her aesthetic reflection becomes an occasion to reconsider the concept of "disability," not as a personal problem, as Disability Studies has already underlined,² but as a meeting ground to rethink the entire network of relationships in which the disabled person lives. Furthermore, we think this artist draws increased attention to the social model dominant in many disability theories and encourages scholars to give more attention to the body's creative potential.³

The social model, prevalent in Anglo-American criticism (Oliver 1983; Shakespeare 1994; Crow, 1996; Morris, 1996; Barton, 1996; Shakespeare and Watson 2002), derives its arguments from social constructionism⁴ and is a powerful alternative to the medical model of disability. The latter situates disability exclusively in individual bodies and strives to cure them by particular treatment. In contrast, the social model reads disability as the effect of a hostile environment. In particular, the social model distinguishes impairment from disability, considering the first as an individual condition and the latter as a social creation. However, many scholars have pointed out that "the social model so strongly disowns individual and medical approaches, that it risks implying that impairment is not a problem" (Shakespeare 2006). Even if it has been an important key from a disability rights perspective, the focus on the social environment rather than the person would suggest that people

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are disabled by society, not by their bodies. As Tobin Siebers argues, the standpoint of social constructionism needs to be expanded:

Constructionism posits that the body does not determine its own representation in any way because the sign precedes the body in the hierarchy of signification. . . . Disability scholars have begun to insist that constructionism either fails to account for the difficult physical realities faced by people with disabilities or presents their body in ways that are conventional, conformist, and unrecognizable to them. (Siebers 2008, 55–57)

In this regard, Austin once again brings our attention to her physical reality and reminds us that the body has the power to challenge social representations. The deconstruction of the commonplaces about disability passes through the displaying of her life experience with the wheelchair.⁵ With the title of our paper, “When Actions Challenge Theories,” we would like to suggest that Austin’s actions cannot be explained through a univocal perspective or addressed to specific theories; rather, they require the simultaneous combination of approaches and arguments. After all, “crossbreeding” is also the main trait of her aesthetics. Using different media, like single-channel video, installation, and photography, she moves across and between artistic fields. Combining live action with various modes of presentation (festival, museum, gallery, Internet), she exceeds fixed areas of performing arts and displaces her body in a multi-spatial and multi-temporal dimension. Focusing her attention on destabilizing the common images of the wheelchair, she proposes a fluid image of the body that is a mix between flesh, prosthesis, and the surrounding landscapes. Her performances set her work in a liminal and unstable space in which all borders seem to blur with each other. In this sense, the borders of any prescribed category in relation to disability also reveal themselves as a *fantasy* (Samuels 2014). We have divided our analysis into two parts: Austin’s artistic research; and the theories that it calls into question.

The Art to Be Free

Sue Austin’s art practice⁶ begins from an analytical study of the terminology and images used to describe disability. In particular, she focuses on the linguistic modalities used to describe the relationship between disabled people and their wheelchairs. Sue Austin writes: “I found that people’s responses to me changed. When I asked people their associations with the wheelchair, they used words like ‘limitation,’ ‘fear,’ ‘pity’ and ‘restriction.’ . . . I knew that I needed to make my own stories about this experience” (Austin 2012). The first step for Austin follows the path already traced by social constructionism, that is, an analytical reflection “on the linguistic model that describes representation itself as a primary ideological force” (Siebers 2008, 55). As Simi Linton underlines:

the phrases *wheelchair bound* or *confined to a wheelchair* frequently appear in newspapers and magazines, or conversation, but disabled people are more likely to say that someone uses a wheelchair. The latter phrase not only indicates the active nature of the user and the positive way that wheelchairs increase mobility and activity, but recognizes that people get in and out of wheelchairs for different activities. (Linton 2006, 163)

To challenge these kinds of preconceptions, in 2009 Austin started her first series of performances, called *Traces from a Wheelchair*. For this work, the artist used her chair as a paintbrush throughout the

city. The aim of the traces was to make a gap visible, underlining the presence of the wheelchair that socio-cultural concepts often translate into absence. The artist states: “When I first used an electric wheelchair, I felt an amazing sense of exhilaration at being free to speed through the streets, mobile again. Even though I had this newfound joy and freedom, people’s reaction completely changed towards me. It was as if they couldn’t see me anymore, as if an invisibility cloak had descended” (Austin 2012). Since the first action, Austin’s aim has been to negotiate between her feelings and people’s reactions. She started from the need to balance her personal experience of the wheelchair and the common image of this device, an image that limited her sense of freedom. She says: “I was working to transform these internalized responses, to transform the preconceptions that had so shaped my identity when I started using a wheelchair, by creating unexpected images. The wheelchair became an object to paint and play with” (Austin 2012).

The spectator is a prior and essential part for Sue Austin’s works because he/she is like a mirror for her identity: “When I literally started leaving traces of my joy and freedom, it was exciting to see the interested and surprised responses from people. It seemed to open up new perspectives and therein lay the paradigm shift. It showed that an arts practice can remake one’s identity and transform preconceptions by revisioning the familiar” (Austin 2012). In 2010, with a grant from the Arts Council of England’s Impact Program,⁷ she began building an underwater wheelchair for a work she called *Testing the Water*, which has since become the *Creating the Spectacle!* Project. With *Creating the Spectacle!* and the more extended *Freenheeling* project, Austin takes to the extreme the reconfiguration of public space, jumping into the Red Sea with her underwater wheelchair. In this perspective, she completely overturns the ordinary image of the chair, highlighting more the possibilities that this tool offers than its limitations on movement. *Creating the Spectacle!* emphasizes this feeling of freedom and surprise to the spectator, with unexpected and often antithetical juxtapositions for the collective consciousness. As well, the spectator’s reaction is the enlivening agent of her production. She states: “And the incredibly unexpected thing is that other people seem to see and feel that too. Their eyes literally light up, and they say things like, ‘I want one of those,’ or, ‘If you can do that, I can do something’” (Austin 2012).

Thus, on one hand, Austin rewrites on her skin the meanings inscribed in a long tradition of images of the disabled body, and on the other she invites other artists to enrich her scenario with personal and surreal re-presentations of disability equipment to facilitate new ways of seeing, being, and knowing. *Freenheeling* is a call to express individually and creatively the experience of being in a wheelchair, to create a collaborative artwork maintaining an emphasis on academic research and the status of disabled artists within the cultural sector of the contemporary arts. As Austin has underlined:

It’s because in that moment of them seeing an object they (the spectators) have no frame of reference for, or so transcends the frames of reference they have with the wheelchair, they have to think in a completely new way. And I think that moment of completely new thought perhaps creates a freedom that spreads to the rest of other people’s lives. (Austin 2012)

Creating the Spectacle! is always in progress and consists of live performances, video works and installations. The first performances of the series took place in Dorset in the UK in 2012, when Austin dove into the water of the Fleet. During this performance, a sinuous red line appeared on the surface of the water as a trace of the “hidden” activity occurring below. When it was performed again at dusk, the traces were made by lights attached to the wheelchair. In both repetitions the

involvement of the Dorset community was crucial. The first time, the audience interacted with a celebratory procession of dancing across the bridge. During the second dive, the audience illuminated the perimeter of the Fleet, making it visible from miles around. One of the participants has reported on the dramatic atmosphere and unexpected emotions felt during this performance:

We waited and watched the tide; a companionable silence of unknowing settled into the mist. . . . The crowd that had amassed to wave farewell were encouraged to cross the bridge and collect on the opposite side, eager to encourage and welcome the chairborne aquanaut back to dry land. The underwater wheelchair disappeared underwater—rapidly. The red marker balloon and three heads bobbed clear of the surface and the little party began to move in the water—but sideways. The people disappeared under the surface, and we focused on the bright red symbol. . . . We waited, we scanned the surface for bubbles, a cloud of red carnations bled out into the Fleet and a small voice echoed over the water: where is she? The underwater wheelchair had been grabbed by the strong tide, and dramatically, the rescue boat swept in to assist both chair and divers to their destination. Relief smiled on our faces as the red carnations disappeared into the breaking mist. Sue and the underwater wheelchair crossed the Fleet Lagoon. . . . The crowd dispersed with the “brave” word bobbing through departing conversations. (Gini 2012)

After this first experience on the Dorset coast, Austin has increased the project's reach, exploring the Red Sea. This latter performance was documented with footage by Trish Wheatley. Here Austin augmented the Dorset performance by introducing the use of a 360° filmic digital media format, a robust system of integrated 360° recording, editing, and display technologies, which offers the audience an immersive experience while seeing the underwater wheelchair flying free above their heads. Since 2012, Austin has been creating different mediations on the concepts explored in the live performances, moving her project from one art field to another. For example, *Creating the Spectacle!* has become an installation, exhibited with the name *360 Degrees—A New Angle on Access* at Salisbury Arts Centre in the UK, as well as a single-channel online video called *Finding Freedom*.

In her most recent experiment, from 2014, Austin has found another surprising way to de-construct the image of the wheelchair: flying during her performance *Flying Free*. This performance is also a documentary commissioned by a digital art website, The Space, and the Unlimited Festival.⁸ Building on this current direction of her research practice, the artist is currently training to fly in a flexwing microlight aircraft with the Flying for Freedom Team, who are mounting a daring expedition to the South Pole to highlight how flying can help injured service personnel in making a successful transition back into civilian life.⁹

The various forms that Austin's *Freenbeeling Project* assumes work to expand on many levels in the perception of disability. The first is the level of language. As Simi Linton writes, “Disabled people are frequently described as *suffering from* or *afflicted with* certain conditions. Saying that someone is *suffering from* a condition implies that there is a perpetual state of suffering, uninterrupted by pleasurable moments or satisfactions” (Linton 2006, 167). At the level of language, Austin makes a *détournement*¹⁰ in the semantic sense because she alters and subverts images produced by society with unexpected angles to reveal the inner meanings that we accept by tacit agreement. Austin's work also operates on an iconic level, providing another image of the wheelchair: she simultaneously re-casts its position within the collective imagination. The stunning footage of a wheelchair soaring high in the air or floating on the water shows how something perceived as limiting can express beauty.

Finally, the last level is Austin's visceral engagement of the viewer, which makes the audience an active producer of the wheelchair's meanings. As Austin has stressed, she is concerned with

enhancing narratives around the physicality of the wheelchair through the creation of surreal juxtapositions that work on both an immediate visceral level while at the same time operating on many other visual, conceptual and theoretical levels. These levels ('portals'/multiple entrances) are developed within the artwork so that, rather than being didactic, the viewer is able to derive their own understanding(s) from the different experiences they are exposed to. (Austin "Creating")

Traces from a Body

According to Petra Kuppers,

In the area of disability, the late twentieth century has witnessed a local (mostly Anglo-American) discourse change, partly brought about by history's current attention to non-dominant voices and partly through local intervention by disabled activists. Our knowledge of "what disability means" is changing. That change of perception . . . has implications for art-practice, and for the way that we teach and learn about the social world. (Kuppers 2000, 120)

Building on Kuppers, we can thus talk about *disability as performance* across a wide range of practices and meanings: disability as a performance of everyday life, as a metaphor in dramatic literature, and as the work produced by disabled performing artists (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 1).

In her performance practice, Austin introduces a powerful teaching moment in our understanding of disability by, first and foremost, overturning the ordinary image of the wheelchair. In fact, recalling the meaning of the Latin word *dispositus* (something that is placed against), the chair is usually considered a "device" that concerns those realities, objects, situations that impose themselves on a person, which she withstands passively and by which she is initiated. Austin, however, chooses to turn her chair into a "device for freedom." In this choice lies the pedagogical value of her art practice: everyone is influenced by cultural, social, economical, artificial, and biological factors but, since the body is alive, this means that it is capable of influencing and transforming social representations, just as it is capable of being influenced and transformed by the same representations (Siebers 2008, 180). We always have the opportunity to determine our being within society. Through her art, Austin shows herself as a free person who, as subject, decides to change herself by inverting the conventional wisdom that sees the disabled body as an impediment to mobility. In doing so, she invites the spectator with the same situation to find a personal way to transform her condition and the spectator who does not have the same situation to extend her imagination concerning disability.

Following the social model of disability, Austin believes that the common social representation of disability requires change: she can live her experience with that chair completely freely because the main limit that she feels is the reaction of society. But, in a certain sense, her performances go beyond the social model approach that, in opposition to the medical model's labelling of disability as an individual problem, considers disability to be the result of the dominant ideas, attitudes, and customs of society. The "strategy" adopted by Austin seems to approximate more closely what Tobin Siebers calls *complex embodiment theory*.

Complex embodiment theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative. Social representations obviously affect the experience of the body, but the body possesses the ability to determine its social representation as well. As a living entity, the body is vital and chaotic, possessing complexity in equal share to that claimed today by critical and cultural theorists for linguistic systems. (Siebers 2008, 290)

Like Siebers, Austin feels the need to adjust the worldview that does not take into account the particular and always personal experience to live in a disabled body.

It is clear that what is changing within Austin's revolutionary aesthetics is not only the image of the chair, but also that of the body. As Petra Koppers (2000) underlines, when a disabled performer enters into the field characterized by fights with physicality, her alignment with a "trapped body" disrupts the conventional extension of bodies and adds to culture new ways of conceptualizing them.¹¹ Johnson Cheu points out that "the disabled performance artist holds a double-edged sword. On one hand, the artist is exhibiting the body as corporal object; on the other, the body serves as metaphor, as a representation system that denotes a set of experiences, a way of being, as I term it, which revolves not around impairment" (Cheu 2005, 137). Without neglecting that the body is shaped by social forces, Austin's performances reveal that the body has its own resources through which to create a representational system. The sinuousness of Austin's movements underwater, the waves of her hair, the interaction between the propellers of the wheelchair and the fishes' fins, together create a sense of levity that overwrites the heaviness that commonly marks a body in a wheelchair.

Thus, Austin's performances become an opportunity to learn both for the performer—in relation to this decision to transform her device into a resource—and for the spectator—connected to a pleasure that is at once ethical and aesthetical, recalling the Aristotelian meaning of catharsis. In this sense, pedagogically, the personal transformation of the performer becomes, for the spectator, an experience of realized witnessing, which according to a personalist pedagogy allows for an idea of education as both a personal and relational experience.

As a performer, Austin has the occasion to know herself and to claim for herself the affirmation of a subjectivity without borders. As she has said, "For me, the wheelchair becomes a vehicle for transformation. In fact, I now call the underwater wheelchair 'Portal', because it's literally pushed me through into a new way of being, into new dimensions and into a new level of consciousness" (Austin 2012). Embracing complex embodiment theory, which challenges established habits of thought about "having" a body,¹² the artist presents her disability as a means to think about a new and different picture of *identity*. Through this kind of performance art, her personal identity can show itself renewed in its *exemplum* of individuality and uniqueness.¹³

Very often one's "identity" is mistreated on account of judgment (and prejudice) and the weight of the gaze of others. However, Austin dwells upon this "difference," letting us recognize it as a specific ontological condition of the person, a substantial not just empirical difference (Seifert 1989). Hence, it is no longer a matter of placing each person's individual case within a standard, a law, a scientific theory that explains it. Nor is it a matter of possessing the "power of techniques and technologies" to successfully fill this "lack" caused by disability. On the contrary, it is necessary to think exactly the opposite: we should consider in what ways and why each person is different, how the idea of the "individual" goes beyond standards and available scientific theories that can explain

and technically treat the “problems” that an individual manifests. It is a matter of understanding the unique and unrepeatable “substance” and essence of everyone, without levelling it to the “norm” (Guardini 1997). In this regard, according to Siebers, we could state that disability enlarges our vision of human variation (Siebers 2010, 3) and this variation is an ontological characteristic of the person and her personal, unique, and substantial identity. Every social and cultural label (superabled, disabled, spastic, normal, psychotic, manic-depressive, schizophrenic, etc.) “betrays the contents of the cans” because people are always unpredictable and can never determined by an impossible condition.

Likewise, putting into question the value of these social and cultural labels can be a “pedagogical” moment for the spectator. Austin’s art and actions contribute to design this new imaginary and, with this, a new perception of disability for those who assist her performance and, maybe, for the people who live her same condition. This “education for a new gaze” could be considered as one of the nuances of that political and educational function recognized by poetic art since the Greeks (Aristotle 1998). In this sense, the aesthetic experience offered by Austin could be considered for the spectator a kind of “witnessing” and, at the same time, a “transformation.” As we will subsequently illustrate, thanks to this transformation, Austin’s performances are intrinsically educative, as they transform themselves into a space for education.

Against the modern subjectivist theories that identify the end of education in the ideal of individual autonomy, this transformation, according to the perspective presented in this essay, may be read as a circular movement between the pedagogical process (personal and reflective) and its effects in everyday life. It is not a matter of teaching (from Latin *insignāre*, “fixing, embedding signs in the mind”) but of learning (“to grasp with the senses and intellect”) what is proposed, of internalizing it and of taking it on. So, the performance does not just teach something or convey instrumentally contents and knowledge. Rather, it transforms itself into an occasion for learning and, therefore, into an educational process in which the spectator is called to be a co-producer of the sense of the performance (Müller 1977). For instance, regarding the installation *360 Degrees—A New Angle on Access*, presented at Salisbury Arts Centre in the UK, Austin explains: “That’s about creating multiple routes of engagement, and moving away from being didactic, and instead trying to create a thinking space. I think it’s very important for the artwork to exist in many ways, on many levels; so people have an opportunity to re-engage, so the work keeps living” (Muehleemann 2014) From the point of view of the spectator, this educational model is based on *relational*, *reflective* and *ethical* considerations. Let us take each in order.

Concerning the first aspect mentioned, when we take part in a performance as spectators, we necessarily build some relationships with it (and with the performer) that are affected by social, cultural, political, and emotional dynamics. Such relationships are constitutive of the spectator as a person. In fact, following a personalist pedagogy, one’s relational nature is not something that is added to the person from the outside (such that “the person has relations”); rather, the person is relational. For this reason, we have to look at that reciprocity, essential in any educational relationship, which constantly involves an “I-You” relationship. From this perspective, the person becomes “I” only in contact with “You” (Buber 1937), and it is thanks to this relationship with “You” that the world-mastering process begins. Furthermore, this relationship is always an *encounter* of two active subjects and, following Guardini’s thought, such an encounter (considered as *novum*) represents the moment in which the person (opened to the encounter with “You”) is invited to access the various dimensions of reality and to confront herself with particular events and circumstances (Guardini 1997); in the case of Austin’s performance, one of those events would be a

new image of disability. For this reason, we could assert that the aesthetic experience of the performance can hold together the two dimensions of “educating someone else” and “educating yourself.” This represents a way of reaching the inseparable synthesis (expressed in the etymological meaning of the word “education”) of *educare* (as arise, grow, taking care) and *educere* (to lead or guide a person to be independent; to be able to respond in the first person to the insights coming from the outside and make them one’s own) (Bertagna 2010). This second moment of *educere* (often overlooked by many educational theories) is inextricably bound with the first. It is important for the spectator who has the opportunity to know herself and the surrounding world to do so through her actions and those of the performer.

In this learning process, understood as assumption and appropriation, the reflective moment is also crucial. This second aspect of the education model concerns a critical examination operated by the spectator that happens *during* and *after* the performance. In this moment of reflexivity, the person has the occasion to involve her constant, reiterative and serious personal considerations (Dewey 1910); this is because any learning process does not *happen to* the subject, but, on the contrary, requires an active personal consciousness that guarantees the opportunity to realize it. This occasion is essential in order to transform the circumstances into a grounded experience and the recording of data into meaningful learning. The performer—in this case, Austin—accompanies the spectator along this path in which the reflection occurs, a path that can be conceived as follows: *ex ante* (to have a synthetic, but also analytical, outlook on this lived experience, contextualizing one’s desires, needs, skills, abilities, etc., and also registering data that comes from past experiences); *in action* (in order to focus or refocus the performative action while it takes place); and, finally, *ex-post* (for a critical interpretation of that experience).

What is crucial in the case of Austin’s work is that it rejects being read as an inspirational narrative that evokes sympathy and concern from the audience or “promotes the idea of the ‘supercrip’ who, against all odds, overcomes the burdens of disability in the face of pervasive adversity” (Chrisman 2011). The comedian and journalist Stella J. Young refers to these kinds of narratives as “inspiration porn.” She points out that the whole idea of inspiration is grounded in the “assumption that people have terrible lives, and that it takes some extra kind of pluck or courage to live them” (Young 2014). Austin does not require identification, admiration, or pity; instead, she proposes to the spectator new images in order to re-posit the spectator’s representation of disability. It is exactly through this re-assumption that the spectator spontaneously adheres to the values, norms, and codes of conduct expressed by that specific context. It is not something that is (or could be) imposed from the outside, but arises from a voluntary and intentional choice, made with freedom and responsibility (Mounier 1946). As the journalist Obi Chiejina has written, in reviewing *Creating The Spectacle*,

the viewer is encouraged to look at this performance from two interrelated perspectives—namely artistic and cultural. From an artistic perspective Austin positions herself as a contemporary artist by combining performance, movement, video installation with the aquatic disciplines of diving and swimming. Adopting such a flexible position gives Austin the freedom to explore the water metaphor to ask questions related to culture and self-identity. Returning to the changing nature of the self-propelling wheelchair why do humans continue to use self-limiting cultural labels? (Chiejina 2012)

During such moments of deliberation, the spectator can achieve the maximum fulfilment of the *transformative process* that was mentioned earlier. However, following the lead of *transformative learning*

theorist Jack Mezirow, we assert that not all learning is transformative: transformative learning does not concern only adding more knowledge to our meaning schemes or applying these schemes to an experience; on the contrary, it always involves the reflective transformation of our beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, emotions, opinions, etc. This reflective transformation aims to bring the learner to identify and critically examine the epistemological, social, cultural, and psychological assumptions underpinning her beliefs, feelings, and actions through a reflective dialogue (Mezirow 1991). Such learning involves, inevitably, the transition to action to fully implement the indications produced by this critical dialogue (and reflection). In this sense, the purpose of education is not just functional and adaptive (responding to stimulus and engaging in effective solutions for problems coming from a given context). Rather, it is a matter of equipping the spirit of the person with a living and ordered knowledge that allows her to achieve wisdom (Maritain 1955).

When viewed this way, education is not about “normalizing” or “standardizing” (getting into a norm or a standard); it becomes a question of starting from everyone’s personal skills and creating the educational conditions to enable a person to reach, through exercise, strain, dedication and satisfaction, her personal competences. After all, the term “competence” is derived from the Latin verb *competerere*, composed by *cum* (with) and *petere* (to head, to move in an oriented sense). That means, pedagogically, the sum of good potential capabilities is actually the best accomplishment in given situations (Bertagna 2004, 42). This idea aligns with Martha Nussbaum’s *capability approach* (Nussbaum 2011) to pedagogical value in terms of human “educability” and personal development as self-fulfilment. This approach, elaborated with Amartya Sen, states that personal wellbeing is not measured by economic progress, usually rated through the Gross National Product (GNP). Rather, it depends on the level of quality of (social) life (Nussbaum 2010). Hence, “capability” does not concern the mere ability of a person to fulfil a task performatively; it takes into account the real conditions of possibility for real persons.

In this sense, the capability approach recognizes that every person has the ability to imagine and wish for something that has not yet happened, to create something new, and to discursively re-build strategies for action that express the freedom of personal achievement. Addressing the issue of competence in the context of a capability perspective means moving from considering the appropriate action as a mere finalization centred on the means (productivity/income) to a purpose (agency/substantial freedom) that individuals seek to achieve, converting resources in projects of “operations” in terms of one’s own life. In other words, according to a personalist pedagogy, “competence” is not only about an *object*—something accomplished—but also about a *subject*—a person who has this “something.” It represents the demonstration of the unbreakable bond between *theoria*, *téchne*, and *phrónesis*, because competence, recalling the Aristotelian concept of *dynamis*, is the result of an exercise that is at once *theoretical* (related to knowledge), *poietic* (aimed at the realization of a task or a work), and *practical* (oriented to the virtue or perfection) (Berti 2010, 31–44). These concepts are not transversal, but their versatility lies in each person’s opportunity to transform insights into action, theories into practice, and ideas into operations.

Sue Austin’s competence is surely the capability to integrate a sensory spectacle with cultural and social aims, leaving the spectator free, as much as she feels herself to be free, to put into question social labels and meanings, and to provide her own answer. To conclude by way of Chiejina: “Now we must ask ourselves is Austin mimicking the swaying motion of the fish? The self-propelling wheelchair is no longer an unwelcome guest but a member of this natural marine world. Or was the inherent beauty of Austin and the wheelchair obscured by the dullness of the spectator’s imagination? The questions and possibilities are endless” (Chiejina 2012).

Notes

1. In Europe, the theme of the Person, based on Stoic thought and the theological reflections of the Middle Ages, reemerged in France in the 1930s through the philosophical concept of *personalism*, as developed Emmanuel Mounier and of those connected with the magazine *Esprit*. In his book, *Personalism* (1934), Mounier offers a “new” pedagogical model far from the European tradition of his time. During the 1950s and 60s, some Italian scholars, influenced by the educational culture of French Personalism and by Neo-Thomism and Italian Neo-Scholasticism, translated into pedagogical terms the metaphysical and religious implications of the concept of the person in order to propose an idea of education that embraced a universe of practical, moral, and political attitudes to rebuild, after the Second World War, a new society. In the early 70s, however, we witnessed what Giorgio Chiosso, one of the most important historians of pedagogy in Italy, defines as the second phase of personalism (broader and more articulated than the first) (Chiosso, 2010, *Appendix*). This second phase does not represent the unitary expression of Italian Christian pedagogy, but a plurality of different positions. Between these various lines of thought, we follow the pedagogical group based in Brescia, which aimed to clarify in education—and in the context of a society in which were emerging the first instances of post-Christian secularism—the centrality of the person, illuminated by the force of a humanizing culture, critical reflection, a sense of proximity, and the conception of pedagogy as an expression of a culture far from any methodological reductionism (see Chiosso, 2001, 2010). The educational perspective embraced in this paper follows the implications of this particular cultural climate.
2. Scholars working in Disability Studies have mostly agreed to examine the meaning, nature, and consequences of disability as a historical and social construct. See Clare (2009); Lennard (2006); Johnstone (2001); Withers (2012); Garland Thomason (1997); Stiker (2000); and Koppers (2007). For an interdisciplinary reading of this movement in light of its possible connections with Performance Studies, see Sandahl and Auslander (2005).
3. In 1983, the English academic Mike Oliver coined the phrase “social model of disability.” As the scholar Tom Shakespeare wrote, historically “the social model emerged from the intellectual and political arguments of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). This network had been formed after Paul Hunt proposed the creation of a group of disabled for the subsequent development of the British disability movement, and of disability studies in Britain. According to their policy statement (adopted December 1974), the aim of UPIAS was to replace segregated facilities with opportunities for people with impairments to participate fully in society, to live independently, to undertake productive work and to have full control over their own lives” (Shakespeare 2006). This British model has been a starting point for many other perspectives in studying disability, even if it presents different weaknesses concerning the neglect of the impairment as an important aspect of the understanding of disability.
4. Social constructionist theory has its origins in sociology and has been associated with the postmodern era in qualitative research. Proponents share the goal of understanding the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live in it. They are concerned with the nature and construction of knowledge: how it emerges and how it comes to have significance for society. A major focus of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. It involves looking at the ways social phenomena are created, institutionalized, and made known by humans (Andrews 2012).
5. In order to understand how representation and disability have operated, particularly in the US context, and to situate Austin’s performances within a broader cultural, social, and political framework, see Clare (2009).
6. Austin has been a wheelchair user since 1996, after contracting ME (chronic fatigue syndrome). In 2012, she was asked to be a part of the Cultural Olympiad in Britain, a celebration of the arts leading up to the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The work she created for the event, called “Creating the Spectacle,” is a groundbreaking series of live art and video works of an underwater wheelchair. For more information, see Austin’s artist website, <http://www.wearefreewheeling.org.uk/>.

7. Arts Council England “champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people’s lives”; see Arts Council England.

8. The launch of the documentary coincided with the start of the third Unlimited Festival, which took place at Southbank Centre (2–7 September 2014). Since 2012, the festival has celebrated the artistic vision and originality of disabled artists; see the festival’s website (Unlimited). To watch the documentary, see Austin, “Creating.”

9. For more information about the “Flying for Freedom” project, see: <http://www.flyingforfreedom.org>.

10. A *détournement* is a technique developed in the 1950s by the Letterist International and later adapted by the Situationist International. It can be explained as a method that reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of cultural meanings of the capitalist system, and turning this system’s media culture against itself.

11. This way of conceiving the body goes in the same direction of one of the peculiar characteristics traced by Hans-Thies Lehmann concerning the new role of the actor within the performing art scenario in the second half of the twentieth century. Lehmann writes about a shift in the perception of the body on the post-dramatic scene, that is, a theatre in which the dramatic text is no more the central aspect of the spectacle, but just one code in a multi-modal language. In what Lehmann calls post-dramatic theatre, the actor deconstructs the traditional psychological approach to character, exposing her own experience and the materiality of her body: “In the dramatic theater the body is a sign which is meaningful. In the post-dramatic theater the central theatrical sign, the actor’s body, refuses to serve signification. Post-dramatic theater often presents itself as an auto-sufficient physicality, which is exhibited in its intensity, gestic potential, auratic ‘presence’” (Lehmann 2006, 95).

12. Starting from this idea, some scholars have introduced, for example, the concept of *temporarily-able bodied*, inviting us to consider different sorts of vulnerability in which there is no guarantee that any of us will escape disabling encounters with the world. See, among others, Clare (2015) and Breckenridge and Vogler (2001).

13. Compared to *exemplar* (“object”), the Latin word *exemplum* recalls “a more complex assessment” because it cannot be reduced to something “sensitive,” but involves “a moral and intellectual meaning” (Agamben 2008). It evokes, in short, something very different: it concerns an open and dynamic subject that is never completely predictable, countable, and crystallizable. In this sense, according to Mounier, endorsing the notion of *exemplum* and applying it to the concept of human person reminds us of the need for an education that never betrays the (constitutive and inexhaustible) “opening” of the person.

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