

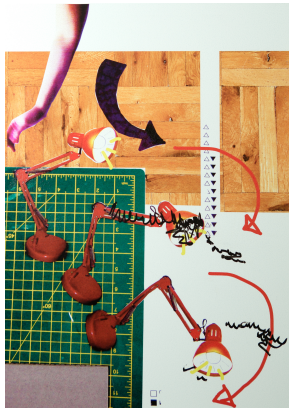
MULTIMEDIA REVIEW**Kate Mahony's Awakening (of Things)**

By Alexandra Kadlec

Kate Mahony is working stuff out—with the help of a pink pillow, desk lamp, and plastic bucket. In conversation, this is how the artist describes her performance for [Art of the Lived Experiment](#), a disability arts exhibition that premiered at [DaDaFest International](#) 2014 in Liverpool, England and made its inaugural and only U.S. appearance in Grand Rapids, Michigan last April.

In a corner gallery space within the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, Mahony employs these and other household objects curiously. She puts them over her head, ties them to her leg, props them on her shoulder, drags them across the concrete floor. Eventually, the objects become characters in their own right, burdening and obstructing the artist, transforming her into what she has proclaimed a “domestic monster.”

While these actions may seem puzzling at first, they are not altogether unpredictable throughout the performance. Mahony is following a set of how to's depicted on several bouncy bright vinyl collages stuck to the wall behind her, and the audience can easily see that. After the artist enacts each instruction, she takes a thick black marker to the collages liberally, leaving a new set of scribbles.



Figures 1 & 2 Collage series by Kate Mahoney for *Art of the Lived Experiment*. Courtesy Kendall College of Art and Design. Photo: Matt Gubancsik

Mahony acknowledges that her performance is bound to confuse, and she's okay with that. After all, she's trying to make sense of things, too. But digging deeper into the concept for this piece, and expanding the lens to Mahony's approach to the medium itself, yields enriching dialogue.

The themes driving *Art of the Lived Experiment* confront the inevitable process of change throughout our lives, and the ways we are required to adapt; in particular, how disability and its differencing affects our interactions with others, the world, and ourselves.

How the art and artists in *Art of the Lived Experiment* address the experience of disability is not immediately evident; and of course neither is disability itself, which may affect our minds or bodies (or both simultaneously). There is Katherine Sherwood's *Olympia* and *Maya*, odalisque figures that challenge ideals of feminine beauty, in one regard by incorporating scans of the artist's brain post-hemorrhage. Laura Swanson's *Uniforms*, a series of 4-foot-tall mannequins clad in various outfits, confronts the objectification of physical difference in a disquieting manner; as someone living with dwarfism, Swanson explores the theatrical spectacle of her body and its marginalization within society.

Similar to Sherwood and Swanson, Mahony's exploration of disability is undeniably personal. Diagnosed with a nonverbal learning disorder and dyslexia in 2012, the artist has been forging a practice through forms that involve the language of movement, absent of words. She likens her performances to creating in a live studio, which naturally invites a certain pressure of expectation and even fuels some awkwardness in her movements.

From 2011 to 2013, Mahony was part of the collective LUPA (Lock Up Performance Art), which she conceived with *Art of the Lived Experiment* curator Aaron Williamson. An artist-run performance platform, LUPA featured a rotating mix of performers in the spirit of experimentation, hosting monthly iterations in a non-descript garage in the Bethnal Green district of London.

Here was a space to try things out, without fear of failure or judgment. LUPA's performances were typically offbeat, often comical, sometimes outrageous. And its varied audiences became active participants, cheering, booing, audibly gasping at the scenes unfolding before them.

Mahony's performance for *Art of the Lived Experiment* carries a similar element of playfulness but with an undertone of deliberation. Her collage series was inspired by the *Mutus Liber*, a 17th century alchemical text containing a set of illustrations for manufacturing the Philosopher's Stone, a substance believed to turn base metals into gold.

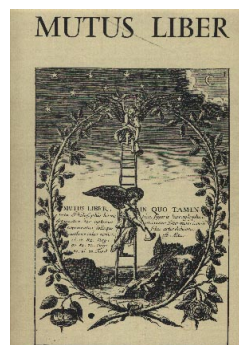


Figure 2 Photograph of the *Mutus Liber*

The collages present a modern-day twist on the indecipherable text; they confront everyday objects from new angles, but without a clear sense of purpose in the context of art. The objects depicted have become disassociated from their conventional functions, visually manipulated and manipulating within the performance.

Mahony describes the making of the ephemeral collages—which must be torn off the wall and recreated—as a process of “walking backwards through [her] own work.” She had to make sense the accompanying performance from a visual, tangible angle first. And yet having concrete instructions was no guarantee of how exactly her movements would unfold from there.

Such an act is significant to the artist’s practice. Averse to the idea of “fixed art”, Mahony prefers to be challenged by works that must be recreated continuously, the kind that are never the same. In this sense, her performances demand vulnerability; in them, she cannot hide behind a clear or comfortable formula.

Although Mahony can never predict how people will react to her work, she admits to being surprised by the silence that enveloped her performance in Grand Rapids for *Art of the Lived Experiment*. (Personally, she finds the piece rather humorous.) But perhaps within the context of a disability arts exhibition there lies a certain hesitation on the part of the observer: of how to interpret, react, respond.

These are choices we all have to make, in fact, on a daily basis, whether in regard to others or ourselves. Mahony has come to view her diagnoses not as limitations but rather “liberations”; she could suddenly claim her view of the world, and her perpetual search to understand it, as fully her own.