

It's wonderful to be here to talk about my journey, to talk about the wheelchair and the freedom it has bought me. I started using a wheelchair 16 years ago when an extended illness changed the way I could access the world. When I started using the wheelchair, it was a tremendous new freedom after the changes in my physicality led to the loss of my mobility it was such fun. I'd seen my life slip away and become restricted. It was like having an enormous new toy. I could whiz around and feel the wind in my face again. Just being out on the street was exhilarating. But 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. They seemed to see me in terms of their assumptions of what it must be like to be in a wheelchair. This dissonance between my actual embodied experience and their responses to me began to intrigue me and as I'd always believed in the healing powers of art, it became the focus of the arts practice and grew out of my need to explore and understand this experience. When I asked people their associations with the wheelchair, they used words like "limitation," "fear," "pity" and "restriction." I realized I'd internalized these responses and it had changed who I was on a core level. There is a dissonance between what I experienced and who I thought I was. A part of me had become alienated from myself. I was seeing myself not from my perspective, but vividly and continuously from the perspective of other people's responses to me. As a result, I knew I needed to make my own stories about this experience, new narratives to reclaim my identity. As a result of that I started making work that aimed to communicate something of the joy and freedom I felt when using a wheelchair -- a power chair -- to negotiate the world. 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 that hoped to excite and inspire people. The wheelchair became an object to paint and play with. When I literally started leaving traces of my joy and freedom, it was exciting to see the interested and surprised responses from people. (and the thing you're missing in that slide, the portrait slide, is there's a whole trace right down across the front of that slide which isn't showing up unfortunately) But 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 reimagining the familiar So when I began to dive, in 2005, I realized scuba gear extends your range of activity in just the same way as a wheelchair does, but the associations attached to scuba gear are ones of excitement and adventure, completely different to people's responses to the wheelchair. So I thought, "I wonder what'll happen if I put the two together?" And the underwater wheelchair that has resulted has taken me on the most amazing journey over the last seven years. A journey of powerful synchronicities that has brought together a skilled team to help me produce creating this spectacle. a series of filmed and live art events that came out of this experience and helped me make it the best it could be. So to give you an idea of what that's like, I'd like to share with you one of the outcomes from creating this spectacle, and show you what an amazing journey it's taken me on. And I'm sure now you've seen the movie, you'll have lots of questions about how and why, but that's the point to create a thinking space that opens up new perspectives. But I'm sure you also understand when I say it is the most amazing experience, beyond most other things I've experienced in life. I literally have the freedom to move in 360 degrees of space and an ecstatic experience of joy and freedom. 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 anything." And I'm thinking, it's because in that moment of them seeing an object they 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. For me, this means that they're seeing the value of difference, the joy it brings when instead of focusing on loss or limitation, we see and discover the power and joy of seeing the world from exciting new perspectives. 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. And the other thing is, that because nobody's seen or heard of an underwater wheelchair before, and creating this spectacle is about creating new ways of seeing, being and knowing, now you have this concept in your mind. You're all part of the artwork too