

WATCH YOUR BACK, GIRL! THE STORY BEHIND *THE DRESS FOR THE HUNCHBACKED GIRL* BY POETIC DESIGNER KAMILA IŻYKOWICZ

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Product and concept designer, visual artist. Postgraduate MA in Design Products and Future at Royal College of Art in London. Tate Modern: Staged on Screen invitee with video performance art in 2019. Kamila's projects are calls for equality and a commentary on social inequality and perception of disability. Her sensitivity towards this subject stems from her eastern European, post-Communist heritage and lifelong physical impairment. With her multidisciplinary interests in writing and filmmaking, she's a poetic designer with a unique sensibility towards function.

KEYWORDS

Design process, scoliosis awareness, disability, inclusive design, critical thinking, design as a catalyst

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## Watch Your Back, Girl! The Story Behind *The Dress for the Hunchbacked Girl* by Poetic Designer Kamila Iżykiewicz

While I was designing and cutting a classic dress, my tutor asked, “Why aren’t you cutting this straight? You don’t have a hunchback.” Rather than inform her of the multiple operations to correct my scoliosis, I thought, “Well, what if I did?” The Dress is a dialogue with my own disability, an exploration of an alternate present without the corrective procedures that rendered my disability invisible. It was made by draping material on a specially created model using cut-outs from the classic dress.

It’s a design that asks inherently political questions of society’s relationship with disability and beauty standards.



Fig. 1: The Dress for the Hunchbacked Girl. | Image: Irina Grishina & Kamila Iżykiewicz,  
model: Viktoriia Zybina, set: Kamila Iżykiewicz.

“A very special date for all your calendars – save the date!” I just found out that we’re in the middle of International Scoliosis Awareness Month and that there’s a specially dedicated day on 27th June.<sup>1</sup> As instructed, I saved the date. It was surprising to find that I’d never heard of this awareness campaign for my lifelong, agonizing health condition, and even more of a surprise to find its online literature accompanied by an image of a woman holding the face of a young girl, forcing it into a fake smile.



Fig. 2: “International Scoliosis Awareness Day (ISAD) falls on the last Saturday of each June. It’s a very special day for all of your calendars – save the date 27th June 2020”<sup>2</sup> | Image: Scoliosis Association UK.

I spent a long time thinking about what I might have in common with this image, what it represents, and – as an art historian once upon a time – how best to read the message behind this visual representation. Having suffered from severe scoliosis my entire life, a condition which put me through a very special kind of physical and mental hell, why couldn’t I understand what this picture was meant to be saying? Convinced it was some kind of mistake, I began to draft a message to the association promoting the awareness campaign, in a bid to find out what was going on, but finally I couldn’t bring myself to send it.

I guess it was because I secretly knew what the image meant. I just didn’t really want to say it out loud.

When you are ‘disabled,’ there is always someone that you have to lean on, someone who supports you when you can’t walk; who answers your cries for help; who makes you smile while secretly crying behind your back.

I know what it is, because I haven't just been through it myself, I made a dress out of that very feeling. A few years ago, I decided to challenge my own understanding of being 'less able.' I deconstructed the words that officially described me in the three languages I could speak: '*dis-abled*' [English], '*minusválidos*' – 'less capable' [Spanish], '*niepełno-sprawna*' – 'not fully functional' [Polish]. You get the idea. I was challenged by my mentor and tutor of critical design thinking Lucas Tom Verweij to ask what it actually meant to have this kind of condition. What are the questions it poses and how can I, as a designer, actually respond to them?



Fig. 3: Normal: what is standard size and shape? Classic dress analysis: standard, symmetrical model for reference | Image: Irina Grishina & Kamila Iżykiewicz, model: Viktoriia Zybina, set: Kamila Iżykiewicz.





Fig. 4: Process of building the definition of Disability: scoliosis and personal experience as a starting point; what beauty standards mean for a woman and for a designer; aesthetic and ethical issues. Sewing and modelling process: saving cut-outs of the fabric for the next stage; draping on a specially created model from cut-outs from the classic dress | Image: Kamila Iżykiewicz.



Fig. 5: Process of re-shaping a standard mannequin to a deformed and disproportionate state, based on my pre-surgery X-rays | Image: Irina Grishina & Kamila Iżykiewicz, set: Kamila Iżykiewicz.

*My Dress for the Hunchbacked Girl* is about design that asks inherently political questions of society's relationship with disability and mainstream beauty standards. My answer is inconvenient, for both myself and the viewer. Physical impairment is a nuisance to a society in which architectural, educational, and economic adjustments are done as favors – band aids instead of corrective solutions. It's like adding child protection to your adult home. Imagine being that child for your entire life.

Independence for the disabled person is a privilege. Cities, schools, bars, and social relations are sewn just like the classic dress. If you're 'lucky' enough you'll have a cut-out garment, or maybe a pint in an accessible bar. It's not about having less, it's about the obligation to a deeply hidden feeling of gratitude that there are Paralympics and beauty contests organized especially for you, standing apart from their mainstream equivalents and with special care provided. That there is a dedicated seat on the bus or

the tube, made easier to ask for by virtue of the special badge with which you have to brand yourself. A blue badge; your favorite color.

In case you're wondering, I don't wear this dress. It represents a particular feeling under the skin, that you love the people who are keeping your mouth in the shape of a smile and helping you walk, but you hate them at the very same time. Their hands-on care makes you feel obligated to shape your face into that smile. The dress might work, it might form an elegant shape, or prove functionally helpful, but it will never be the same as a 'normal dress.'



Fig. 6: *The Dress for the Hunchbacked Girl* final prototype | Image: Irina Grishina & Kamila Iżykiewicz, model: Viktoriia Zybina, set: Kamila Iżykiewicz.

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> "International Scoliosis Awareness Day 27th June 2020," Scoliosis Association UK, accessed June 15, 2020, <<https://www.sauk.org.uk/get-involved/international-scoliosis-awareness-day>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.