

PROJECT UPDATE 2

APRIL 2008

Rethinking Disability Representation

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Rethinking Disability Representation is a large scale, experimental project which is developing new approaches to the interpretation of disability and to the representation of disabled people's lives within museums and galleries. It aims to develop politically aware approaches to interpretation which are informed by the social model of disability.

The project was initiated and is managed by RCMG (the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries in the University of Leicester's Department of Museum Studies) and is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and NESTA (the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), with contributions from the University of Leicester and the nine partner museums involved.

This is the second project update designed to share the progress and learning experiences of *Rethinking Disability Representation* with interested parties – practitioners, policy makers and researchers – working across a number of different areas including museums, heritage and culture, and disability studies and rights. A more detailed account of the project, including reflections on the lessons learned by a range of participants, will be published late summer 2008.

Challenging Perceptions

Rethinking Disability Representation has set out to challenge commonly held perceptions of impairment as limitation and to interrogate disablist attitudes, experiences and barriers, both historically and within contemporary society. Nine museums and galleries across the UK have worked with RCMG and a Think Tank of experts in the disability field (including activists, artists and cultural practitioners) as well as representatives from the museum sector, to develop exhibitions, displays and educational resources which draw on the social model of disability to frame new ways of looking at and understanding disabled peoples' lives, histories and experiences.



Evaluation

A large scale evaluation, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, is currently underway. The focus of this evaluation is an analysis of the ways in which visitors respond to and engage with each of the exhibits, educational sessions and other media on offer at the nine partner museums. In particular, we are interested in finding out how the projects might inform the ways in which visitors think about disability. Researchers at RCMG have conducted a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups at several sites and each of the partner museums has gathered audience responses through comments cards.

All anonymised demographic data from participants has now been entered into SPSS (the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and themes are already emerging from the process of data analysis.

It is too early at this stage to report on the findings from the evaluation but it is already clear that the nine projects have generated considerable discussion amongst visitors and, in many cases, prompted new ways of thinking about disability. Findings from the evaluation will be disseminated through a range of publications later in the year.



The projects

Talking about...Disability and Art

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

From November 2007

<http://www.bmag.org.uk/>

Talking about...Disability and Art interrogates and explores images of disability in paintings from Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery's displays of fine art. Visitors can access a range of interpretations and responses to the paintings from disabled professionals and artists alongside commentaries provided by curators. The result is an innovative and provocative series of interpretations on audio points woven throughout the existing painting galleries which provide new, often challenging, ways of looking at the works on display.

In the 'Objects in Focus' section below, we take a closer look at one of the paintings.



Life Beyond the Label

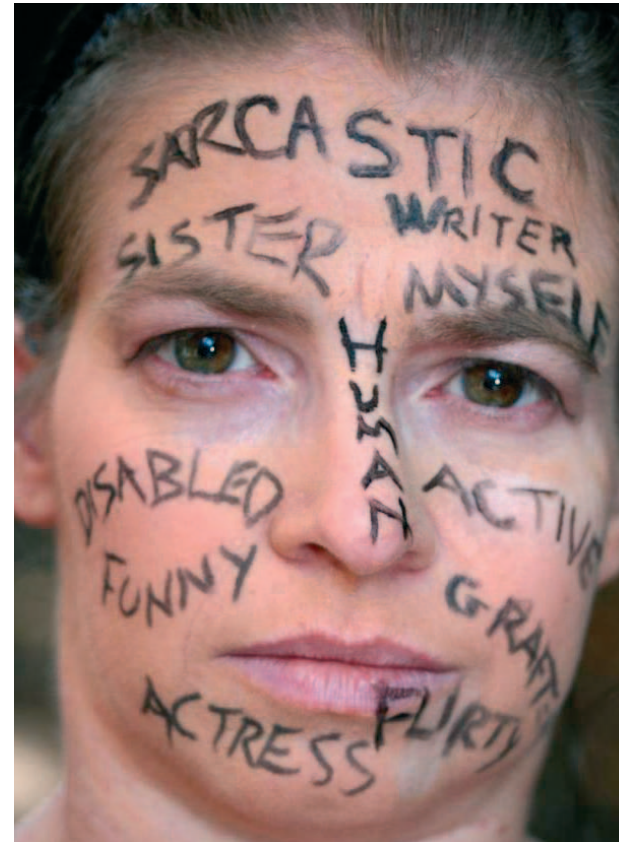
Colchester Castle Museum

Until end May 2008

http://www.colchestermuseums.org.uk/castle/castle_exhibitions.html

Life Beyond the Label is a temporary exhibition which uses objects, personal testimonies, film, artworks and more to reveal the lives of disabled people in Colchester past and present, to explore current and historical perceptions of disability and to prompt visitors to think beyond the labels often associated with disabled people through the discovery of different life experiences.

Many of the short films and other rich material from the exhibition are available on the exhibition website and visitors are invited to share their views on the topic online. The 'Objects in Focus' section below provides further information.



Lives in Motion

Glasgow Museum of Transport

Until October 31st 2008

<http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/venue/index.cfm?venueid=7>

We are pleased to confirm that this exhibition has been extended until the end of October due to popular demand.

Lives in Motion takes a closer look at the ways in which transport can both enable and disable people's lives. The exhibition is filled with many personal stories which examine the role of transport in the creation of a more accessible and inclusive society. For example 'The Journey' is a slide show made by The Three Eyes group which charts Peggy and Jackie's attempts to use public transport and provides documentation of their (often frustrating) journey. The slide show can be viewed on the exhibition website where you can also download two podcasts by journalist, Ian Hamilton. Ian talks about using public transport, bringing out the humorous as well as the serious aspects of his experiences. There are film showings running concurrently with the exhibition including: *Elegy for the Elswick Envoy* directed by Nancy Willis and *Wan Big Family* in which members of the Adult A-Team film their experiences as adults with learning difficulties.

Further information is provided in the 'Objects in Focus' section below.



Conflict and Disability

Imperial War Museum

From September 2007

<http://london.iwm.org.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.5001>

Conflict and Disability comprises a series of educational sessions for secondary schools utilising the collections and teaching expertise of the Imperial War Museum. Key sessions include Disability Rights, Welcome Home and Necessity Breeds Invention. Each session draws on multiple themes involving attitudes, war time employment, policy and rights issues and so on to shed light on the different relationships between disability and conflict and to encourage the participants to question and perhaps reassess their own attitudes to disability.



For example Disability Rights is a thought provoking session aimed at year 9 pupils. The morning session at the Imperial War Museum, London focuses on human rights and the power of protest and legislation, using disabled people's rights as a case study. Led by a workshop leader from Graeae (a disabled-led theatre group) students become Disability Discrimination Act "Inspectors" and assess the public spaces of the museum for accessibility. Students also discover how one of the first pieces of disability legislation emerged from the labour shortage of the Second World War and the large numbers of veterans returning from the war. There is also a question and answer session relating to key disability issues. In the afternoon, students visit Parliament where they have an opportunity to learn more about the ways in which laws are made and to talk to an expert on Disability Law.

On-line educational resources will be available to view on the Imperial War Museum web-site later in the year.



Behind the Shadow of Merrick

Royal London Hospital Museums and Archives

From March 2008

<http://www.medicalmuseums.org/museums/rlh.htm>

Behind the Shadow of Merrick is a short film which offers visitors to the Royal London Hospital Museum new way of engaging with objects, documents and stories related to Joseph Merrick, more widely known as the Elephant Man. The film provides a powerful and thought-provoking look at issues and attitudes surrounding disability both in the past and in the present day. It prompts the viewer to consider challenging issues in relation to disabled people and their objectification, the ways in which disabled people can be perceived and treated as public property and social attitudes to difference.

The film is available for viewing within the Royal London Hospital Museum (alongside other short films linked to the museum's collections and history) and will shortly be available for viewing remotely via the RCMG website.



Daniel Lambert: an 'Exalted and Convivial mind'

Stamford Museum

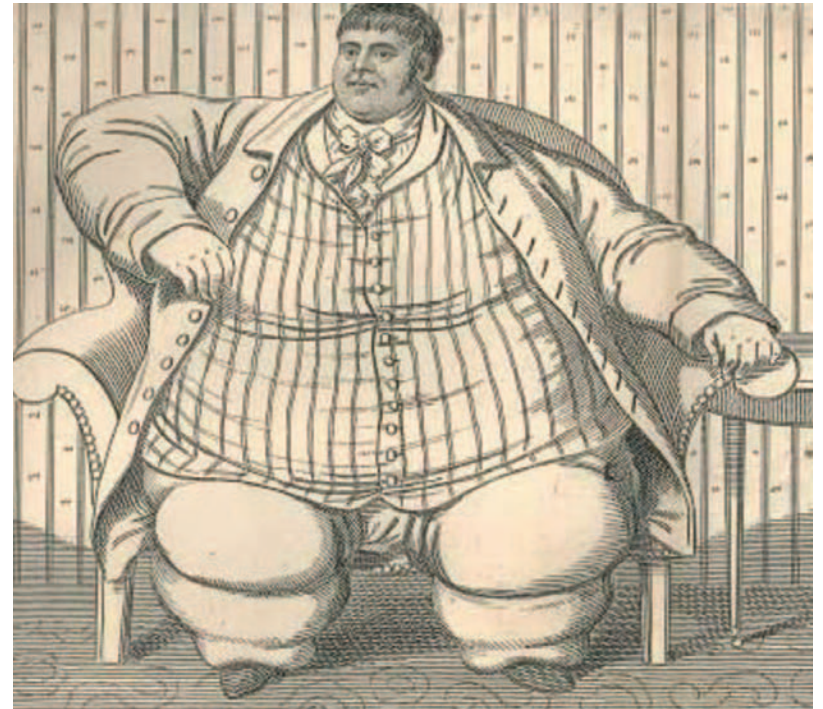
From September 2007

<http://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk/section.asp?sectiontype=listmixed&catid=9924>

Stamford's redisplay of objects and images related to Daniel Lambert offers visitors a fresh way of understanding the story of Daniel's life and personality. The project focuses on perceptions of difference and its representation including the attitudes and the myths that can be built around different individuals.

As Daniel's story testifies, the man described as having an 'exalted and convivial mind' was, after his death, the subject of mythology and exploitation.

The redisplay seeks to examine Daniel's life and personality to present a man who, in life, was revered for his intellect and wit, but became objectified after his death.



One in Four

South Shields Museum and Art Gallery

November 15th 2007 to May 1st 2008

<http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/southshields/whatson/details.php?id=E279>

The temporary touring exhibition takes its title from the fact that one in four people in the Tyne and Wear area qualify as disabled (compared to one in five nationally). The exhibition encourages visitors to examine the histories and contemporary lived experiences of disabled people in the region and offers alternative models through which understandings of disability can be made.

The project provides a time-line of policy and legal changes that have been made in relation to disability rights and equality issues. In addition, there are film contributions from local people who describe the impact that different policies and practices have had on their life experiences, including those relating to institutionalisation, government applications for disability allowances and direct payments for independent living. People's experiences of different social barriers, art work and song are also featured in this display which uses a range of different media.



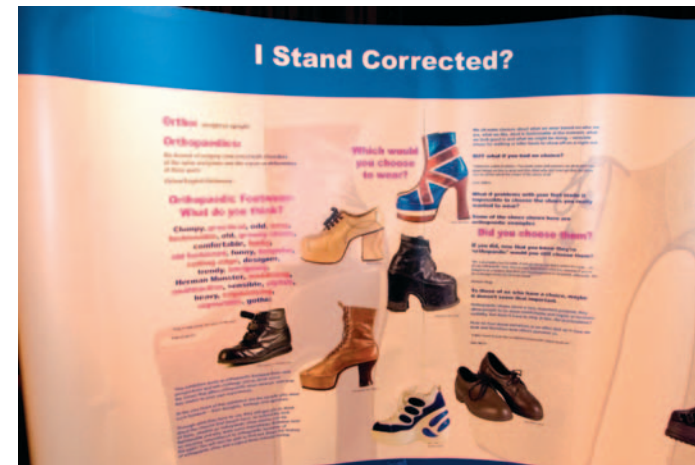
I Stand Corrected?

Northampton Museum and Art Gallery

http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/museum_gfx_en/EM000084.html

The temporary exhibition (which has now finished) explored themes around fashion and footwear, using oral testimonies from orthopaedic shoe wearers and others whose choices of fashion can be limited to specially made footwear available for their particular impairment.

The project encouraged visitors to look differently at Northampton's renowned shoe collection; to see the often surprising similarities between high fashion and orthopaedic footwear and to consider the wider implications of the differences between them also. Visitors were prompted to consider their own experiences and views of footwear and function through a range of shoe types and media. The project sought to engage visitors in debates about wider issues of identity, choice and control for those considered 'non-standard' by mass manufacturers. Elements from the completed temporary exhibition are now being incorporated into the museum's existing permanent displays.



A Whitby Fisherman's Life: 'Stumper' Dryden through the lens of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe

Whitby Museum

From August 2007

<http://www.whitbymuseum.org.uk/d12/index.htm>

The display focuses on the life of Robert Dryden who was known locally as 'Stumper'. Robert was a nineteenth century fisherman in Whitby. The small display looks at Robert's working life and role in the fishing community of Whitby.

The display uses the photographs of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe along with historical documents to bring Robert's story to life. It aims to challenge contemporary conceptions of disabled peoples' economic role, while creating new historical insights on disabled peoples' working lives.




Objects in Focus

In this next section, we provide a more detailed look at just three objects and their interpretation within the projects described above.

‘Wee Bluey’

One object currently on display in Lives in Motion at Glasgow’s Museum of Transport is an ‘invalid’ car, locally known as ‘ACs’, ‘nobby’ cars, and ‘wee bluey’. When these cars were introduced they had numerous restrictions placed upon their use although many drivers chose to ignore these. They were challenging to drive, sometimes went around corners on two wheels and reacted badly in crosswinds. The ‘Passenger Carrying is Forbidden’ sign can be seen on the dashboard of the ‘wee bluey’ in the exhibition even though, as one owner’s story tells, many drivers used the car to take their friends in to football games.





The government introduced the AC car in the 1950s. It allowed them to avoid tackling issues around inaccessible public transport at the time.

Although there were difficulties and dangers associated with driving the AC cars, they were also very significant for many disabled people in providing them with freedom to get around. Some drivers travelled across Europe in them, had romantic liaisons in them, and 'souped' them up with more powerful engines. The exhibition offers oral histories from past owners identifying their experiences with the car. One owner comments:

“It was great when chatting up the lassies to casually mention that you had a car and could give them a run home. I told them I had an AC and AC (an American company) built the fastest sports cars in the world at that time. That was actually true. However, it was a bit of a comedown when you had to say ‘You’ll have to lie on the floor, mind you’ which invariably got the reply ‘Whit! In ma good dress?’ And another relationship bit the dust! My only chance of giving a girl a run home was if it was teeming rain. How I used to pray for rain!”

Door from Severalls Hospital 1913

One of the most powerful objects in the Life Beyond the Label exhibition is a door from Severalls Psychiatric Hospital in Colchester which closed ten years ago. This door, acquired by Colchester Museums through research undertaken for the exhibition, comes from a padded side room in the Maxwell Jones ward; a locked ward on wing for female patients. Padded rooms were used to isolate patients when they were perceived to be at their most disturbed and violent. The observation window in the door allowed a nurse to monitor the patient.





The exhibition website states;

“Severalls Psychiatric Hospital opened in 1913 and at its busiest had over 2000 patients with mental health problems.

For many people with mental health issues Severalls was a place of safety. However, to pass through the doors of Severalls Hospital as a patient, especially in the early years, could mean possible confinement for life.

Shame and stigma attached to mental health led many families to abandon relatives who had been admitted. Long-stay patients became dependant on the hospital. Many had nowhere else to go.

Minor reasons were sometimes used to justify admitting patients and to have them ‘certified’; a process where a patient is recorded as being ‘insane’. These reasons could include an un-married pregnancy, people with alcohol problems and people who have seizures.

By the 1960s Severalls was considered a leader in the field of mental health care. New drugs and rehabilitation projects enabled more patients to recover and have more contact with the outside world.

Attitudes to mental health have changed over the years leading to a major shift away from long term institutional care towards care in the community.

In 1997 Severalls Hospital finally closed its doors. New building development will remove every trace of Severalls Hospital. In a few years none of the buildings will remain”.



The Blind Girl

One of the best known paintings featured in 'Talking about....Disability and Art' at Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery is by the artist John Everett Millais who painted 'The Blind Girl' between 1854 and 1856.

'Talking about... ' is a series of audio points located throughout the art galleries. They were created in collaboration with six disabled artists and explore disability in paintings.

The audio point for Millais' The Blind Girl offers visitors five different recordings to listen to;


- 1 – Background information on the painting
- 2 – How the painting relates to disabled peoples' experiences
- 3 - A personal story inspired by the painting
- 4 - A poem about the painting
- 5 - An audio description of the painting

The following is a transcription of the collaborative response by the artists who explain how they feel the painting relates to disabled peoples experience and contemporary disability politics.

“This is an idealised image of visual impairment. The artist Millais has made the blind girl appear serene and angelic, her face lit by the sun. She is long suffering – patiently fingering the grass. The painting emphasises her beauty and purity. We think Millais wanted to connect the girl to a spiritual world and to inspire pity.

The blind girl is dependant upon her young helper. Younger siblings often still act as carers to their disabled brothers and sisters today. The blind girl and her sister’s clothes show that they are poor. We feel that they are typical examples of the Victorian notion of the ‘deserving’ poor – the poor that it was people’s Christian duty to help, as opposed to the ‘undeserving poor’ whose poverty was their own fault.





The blind girl is labelled with a sign around her neck, 'Pity the blind'. We feel that the label is requesting pity to encourage charity. Her purity and closeness to God also appear to suggest that she is worthy of pity and help. Today, most people with visual impairments, and other disabilities, certainly don't want pity. Instead, we want understanding and full access. However, we feel that people often still do pity us, even if they pretend not to.

The double rainbows symbolise all that the blind girl cannot see. But the artist shows that the girl experiences the countryside through her other senses. She has an almost spiritual relationship with the landscape. This painting suggests that the blind girl understands things that others do not. These heightened senses also link to her work. The blind girl is earning a living by playing the concertina. This image shows the stereotypical belief that all blind people are musical.

We feel that visually impaired people can still very much enjoy the countryside. It can be a less complicated place for visually impaired people. Cities can be confusing places with fast traffic and tall buildings that block out the sky. But it is not always practical to live in or visit rural areas because of the lack of public transport.

Even today, charities and the media still portray disabled people in a negative way. They depict them as passive, dependent and brave, giving a completely misleading message. One charity advert comes to mind - '*She'll never see her daughter's face*'. Images of people with disabilities would be very different if they were designed by the people themselves".

For further information on

 **Rethinking**
Disability
Representation

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Web: http://www.ndaf.org/gettingnoticed/artists/willis/willis_biog.htm

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