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Cultural Capital

Reflections on books and the arts from the New Statesman culture desk



Bedding In: An interview with Liz Crow

In response to the coalition's benefits overhaul, Liz Crow is Bedding In.

BY [JONATHAN SOCRATES](#) | PUBLISHED 02 NOVEMBER 2012 16:13



Bedding In, the latest performance by artist-activist Liz Crow, has been created in response to the coalition's attack on disability benefits. Over three days, Crow, who has a disability herself, will perform her "bed-life": "I wear a public self that is energetic, dynamic and happening. I am also ill and spend much of life in bed," says Crow. "The private self is neither beautiful nor grown up, it does not win friends or accolades, and I conceal it carefully."

For forty minutes each day, viewers will be invited to approach the bed and engage Crow in "Bedside Conversations", discussing the piece and its context. Here, Crow talks about disability hate crime, the role of art in social issues and the Paralympics' media coverage.

You ascribe a 50 per cent rise in disability hate crime to a propagandist campaign. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Over the past couple of years, and especially in the run up to the Paralympics, I've watched an extraordinarily divisive reporting of the benefits reforms in the press, particularly in the tabloids, across the political



spectrum. They portray disabled people as inventing or exaggerating impairment, being too lazy to work and living lives of luxury at the taxpayer's expense. They tell a story of disabled people as fraudsters and scroungers, in complete contradiction of the DWP's own recorded fraud rate of 0.3 per cent. Alongside this press reporting, the reporting to police of disability hate crime has risen exponentially. Talking to other disabled people I know, many of us find we have become hyper-vigilant when out in public, and vast numbers have experienced disability-targeted aggression or worse. There's been a rise in reported disability hate crime of 50 per cent and research from Glasgow Media Centre has at least partially attributed that to the fraudster/scrounger rhetoric. It's a dangerous reporting in a time of austerity that encourages the general population erroneously to place blame on disabled people for the country's financial woes.

What role can art play in politics and social issues?

Art can give glimpses into other people's lives and broaden our view of the world. It can ask questions and present viewpoints not seen elsewhere. Artists are good at communicating, at raising difficult questions, and at exploring creative alternatives. Playful or provocative, it can make us see and think differently, make an emotional connection to audiences and go on working long after the piece is officially over. It can act as a provocation to spark a deeper debate about particular issues. We can only make change for the things we know about; for me, the most exciting art brings to light lives on the margins and invites the onlooker to become a part of creating change. In showing art in a range of settings, from galleries to schools, festivals to community settings, we can reach audiences who wouldn't usually touch art, and audiences who wouldn't usually touch politics, and take both by surprise.

Do you think participatory art such as *Bedding In* is a particularly effective means of engaging the public in social issues?

One of the things that *Bedding In* can do, which I haven't much seen elsewhere is that it can portray the human story set within its broader social context. So the work is not just about me; I am symbolising the thousands of people who live a bed-life, but, particularly through the Bedside Conversations, I am able to enter into a dialogue with the public in a way that allows them to ask questions, relate it to their own lives and take it out beyond the gallery space. I could write about my bed-life, but there is something about playing it out in a public space that goes deeper to the heart of what that life means against the current backdrop of benefits reform. It is an opportunity to raise more challenging questions and to set the bed-life overtly within the present difficult political climate.

What do you hope would be the outcome of your performance?

I want to make a hidden group of thousands visible, but also to demonstrate that what others see as contradiction, as fraud, is simply the complexity of real life. For those of us with complicated, fluctuating and invisible impairments, the new benefits system has proved to be incapable of supporting us appropriately. The assessment process fails to measure these kinds of impairments and so we fall through the gaps. In doing so, we become even more invisible. My hope is that Bedding In will join a much larger conversation of disabled people, supporters, the Sparticus campaign, DPAC, Black Triangle, UK Uncut and others; that by using a wide range of approaches we can be much more effective in reaching many more people. My hope is that these voices combined will inform the public enough that their outrage will force a change in benefits reform towards a system that is more humane.

What do you make of the coverage of this year's Paralympics and its portrayal of those with disabilities?

The Paralympics was a strange, wild collision course for me, where the extremes of benefits and Paralympics reporting hit just as I make my way to my own benefits tribunal. It was exhilarating to see disabled athletes so completely and naturally at home in their bodies, and I think it shifted many people's ideas of what disabled people can be, yet the experience was also bittersweet. Just as the athletes will struggle, away from the Olympic stadium, to live up to that 'superhuman' ideal, in the context of benefits reforms, the idea that "with determination" any disabled person (or non-disabled person!) could be superhuman has repercussions that are deadly serious. At the root of this is that we are measuring two very different groups of disabled people; the benefits classification system is based on a mechanical view of impairment that fits most athletes but which excludes those of us with chronic and fluctuating conditions, even though we are the most likely to be out of regular employment and in need of ESA.

What do you have planned next?

I'll be taking another version of Bedding In to Salisbury in April (just as the replacement of DLA with PIP hits), this time occupying my bed round the clock for three days and broadcast on webcam.

Bedding In takes place at the Ipswich Art School Gallery as part of the SPILL Festival of Performance until 3 November.

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