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T4: Hitler's holocaust rehearsal



As Resistance, a new touring installation, prepares to hit the road, its creators and performers, along with historians and activists, look back with Kelly Mullan at T4, the Nazi killing programme on which it reflects, and asks what lessons can be learned today



In 1939, Hitler authorised Aktion-T4, a programme of mass-murder targeting disabled people. T4, combined with unstructured so-called "wild euthanasia", killed more than a quarter-of-a-million disabled people, yet this history is largely forgotten. Indeed, thanks to the light-entertainment phenomenon of the same name, the mention of T4 is more likely to evoke images of Miquta Oliver on the

beach than disturbing scenes of grey "death buses" transporting disabled people to killing centres.

Of this "death bus"-shaped hole in history, Dr David Bolt of the Centre for Disability Research at Lancaster University says: "I wouldn't say that little is known about T4, rather that the knowledge is too frequently ignored and too infrequently disseminated. Why? Disturbingly, because the lives of disabled people are sometimes deemed less valid, so the twisted logic is that the lack of representation makes perfect sense, as though there would be little interest in any such history."

Artist Liz Crow has responded to this historical phenomenon by creating a dual-screen installation that will tour the UK this autumn. At the core of the installation are two films. One, Resistance, is the story of Elise, a patient who sweeps her way out of an institution to escape as a grey bus pulls up. The other, Conversations, is a "making-of" documentary where actors discuss the impact the project has had on them. As director Crow says: "All of the disabled people involved felt it personally. It's our community's history."

Claudio Ahlers, who composed the music for Resistance, says: "I'm German and I've learnt much about the atrocities that were committed during the Nazi regime; yet this was the first time that the systematic killing of people with disabilities was brought to my attention."

Eva Fielding-Jackson is the daughter of two profoundly Deaf Holocaust survivors. She says: "I knew about the Holocaust since the day I was born (well, from the day I could understand things), but I only knew about T4 from a conference I attended in Washington in 1998. I knew about the euthanasia and the mercy killings but not that it was originated by the T4 programme. I was well informed about the Holocaust, so if I didn't know then how many others still don't know?"

Asked why so little is known about T4, Crow says: "Museums ask: 'Where's the first-hand testimony? We'll be interested when we see that.' But this was a different type of holocaust. Jewish people were taken to concentration camps and some were able to survive there and eventually give evidence, whereas disabled people were taken from holding centres to killing centres and killed on the same day."

Medical confidentiality is another barrier to gathering evidence. "I find this absolutely ironic and it adds to the horror," says Crow. "The names of prisoners persecuted in concentration camps are available, but because disabled people were in the medical system they are subject to confidentiality."

Relatives need to consent to releasing names but many won't because of the stigma, particularly of the psychiatric system.

"Even our visits to the killing centres yielded scant information on individual stories. There were about half a dozen case studies available because the relatives of those people came forward and they said they wanted them to be remembered."

Crow discovered the story of Elise in a book called By Trust Betrayed by Hugh Gregory Gallagher.

"What struck me were the stories of resistance. Resistance doesn't have to mean stashing guns in a forest. You can resist by saying no."



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It was a seemingly small act of resistance taken by disabled people in the town of Absberg that eventually ended T4. In Absberg the disabled people from the holding institution socialised with the local townsfolk, so on the eve of the day they knew that they were being sent to the killing centre they knocked on every door to say goodbye. They didn't save themselves, but the people of Absberg were so outraged that they protested, leading to the intervention of Bishop Von Galen and the cancellation of T4. This was the end of structured killings but "wild euthanasia" continued until three weeks after the end of the war.

At the Nuremberg trials, very few medical staff were prosecuted and most were allowed to continue practising until retirement or death. Due to the prevailing values of the age, the authorities at Nuremberg could empathise with the notion of mercy killing. T4 was carried out against an international background of eugenics policies, which is why Crow says, "this is not about Germany, this is internationally relevant and relevant today.

"In 1920 a research paper set out the mechanics of T4. So it was pre-Hitler, under the guise of mercy killings, but it was really on economic grounds. Sums were done on how much it would cost to feed someone with X impairment on a basic diet and how that would accrue over a lifetime.

"T4 was an extreme event, but if you look at the values that underpin it, they feel very familiar. The installation will connect themes and link into the campaigns that Disability Now runs. I hesitate to say this, as it's controversial, but the values that allow abuse of parking bays are on the same spectrum (albeit very far down the other end) as the values of people who commit hate crimes. What drives this project is how we can learn and how we can change. Storytelling is a good way to get under people's defences."

Disability historian Irina Metzler says: "The uncomfortable truth is that the debate on who are valid and non-valid human beings was not just forced to its extreme level by the Nazis. Eugenics was also practised by a number of so-called democratic countries, notably Sweden and Switzerland, with programmes of enforced sterilisation for people deemed 'deficient' right up until the 1960s.

"More people than just a handful of specialist scholars need to know that disabled people were just as systematically persecuted by the Nazis. The need to know is made all the greater by current developments in the medical and biological sciences, specially in genetics, which re-open the possibility of scientific and popular debate about what is and what is not deemed a 'valid' human being.

"Genetic science can aid prognostic medicine and influence procreative medicine; genetic screening, if carried to its logical extreme, means that parental selection will reject any embryo with so-called defects; and a renewed promotion of eugenics is not unlikely. This timely installation will help to focus popular attention on the fact that in any such eugenic programmes (whether murderous or simply 'preventative') there are real, actual people, with individual lives, characters and stories, who are caught up in what is presented purely as science."

Disabled activist Linda Burnip says: "Sadly, there are a lot of things going on today which in relation to disability are reminiscent of how the Holocaust began in Nazi Germany, not least the ghettoisation of disabled people in residential care, the promotion of social attitudes through adverts on buses about benefit fraud, the changes to Employment and Support Allowance etc which give the impression of disabled people as a burden to society and nothing more than a lot of scroungers.

Disabled people seem to be being divided into two groups by Department for Work and Pensions legislation and society generally: there are 'acceptable' disabled people who are able to work and support themselves and aren't a financial burden on the state and then there are 'the others'. I think that Resistance should be shown as a warning of how easily the situation could worsen if nothing is done to stop it."

Commenting on the installation Richard Rieser, the director of Disability Equality in Education, says Resistance is relevant now as "the scapegoating of disabled people grew out of an economic crisis which is similar to the one we are now entering."

Bolt adds: "The fact that millions of Jewish people were systematically murdered in Nazi Germany has brought shame on humanity for eternity, but this is only worsened if we forget that thousands of disabled people were subject to the same inhumanity. Projects such as Resistance will surely help to stop this from happening."

Rather than depressingly focusing on the continuing plight of disabled people, Resistance looks at the continuing fight for disability rights and uses storytelling to encourage debate on how to learn from the past.

Resistance will be on tour from September.

• Liz Crow welcomes any venues interested in hosting the installation to contact Roaring Girl Productions. www.roaring-girl.com

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