

Resistance: The Art of Change

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(Accompanying images can be found at <http://www.roaring-girl.com/work/resistance/>)

Around 15 years ago, I read *By Trust Betrayed*, a book by Hugh Gallagher that told of the events of *Aktion T4*, the Nazi programme of mass murder that targeted disabled people.¹ The first thing to strike me was, in all my years' involvement in the disabled people's movement, how could it be that I had never come across this history before?

Apart from the obvious horror of what I was reading, two things especially stayed with me from reading that book. The first was that the values that permitted *Aktion T4* to happen felt eerily familiar, alarmingly contemporary. From one of the darkest episodes of history, these values still reverberate through disabled people's lives today.

The second was a brief, yet very powerful, section of the book that spoke of people, including disabled people, who resisted. Imagine being in an institution and made dependent on the staff for your every need, those very same people who were pivotal in your survival or demise. To resist in those conditions inspires awe.

I knew I needed to do something with what I had read and, though it took time for me to find its form, over several years the *Resistance* project² emerged. It comprises a film-based installation that has now toured to ten galleries in the UK and internationally, and a high-profile performance piece that challenges historical values and their echoes.

In this paper, I trace the history of the Disabled Holocaust, from its broader social and political beginnings to its aftermath, and I explore its contemporary impact. Describing the development of the *Resistance* project, I examine the lessons it holds for the future of a more inclusive Holocaust education and of our capacity to act for social justice. Finally, I ask what we might learn from past and present in order to shape a future that can delight in diversity.

History: Beginnings

In the decades before the Holocaust, international interest in eugenics was steadily building. The belief that the human race could be improved by encouraging people with 'desirable' physical characteristics to reproduce and preventing those with 'undesirable' characteristics from doing so was gaining increasing support internationally, including in Britain and particularly the United States, and across the political spectrum. Advocates included writers George Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf, HG Wells and Emile Zola, food industrialist William Keith Kellogg and birth control activist Margaret Sanger³. Eugenics courses in universities were funded by Carnegie and Rockefeller⁴.

Eugenics was already embedded in legislative programmes, particularly in the United States, including involuntary sterilisation, marriage controls and institutionalisation, along with cosmetic policing of disabled people via Chicago's 'Ugly Laws'.⁵ From the 1930s, asylums in Nazi Germany were opened to public tours to promote the regime's Racial Hygiene laws⁶ and by 1932, there were at least 40 university courses on 'racial hygiene'.⁷ These measures preceded the second world war and, in most cases, continued long after its close.

A 1920s publication, *Authorisation for the destruction of life unworthy of life*, by German academics Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche, concluded that whether a life was worth living was determined not only by its worth to the individual but also to society, that, in effect, an individual had to justify their existence according to external criteria.⁸ The detailed methods proposed in Binding and Hoche's work to destroy 'life unworthy of life' became the blueprint for the mechanics of *Aktion T4*.⁹ Nazism would capitalise upon an international movement of eugenics, upgrading it to a wholesale, systematic practice of genocide, but the ideas were evolved and shared by a wider world.

The onslaught against disabled people, as for other targeted groups, did not escalate immediately to its greatest extremes, but built through a campaign of propaganda. Posters, films and other media conveyed an image of disabled person as pitiable and as economic burden. In one still from a Reich Propaganda Ministry film, two white-coated orderlies stand in a ward amongst high-sided wooden cots, within which people lie. Superimposed text translates to 'Life only is a burden.'¹⁰ From a film made to promote 'euthanasia' amongst the Hitler Youth, a black man is pictured holding what appears to be a begging bowl. The camera looks down upon him and the text reads 'Mentally ill negro English, sixteen years in an institute costing 35,000 RM [Reichmarks]'.¹¹ A 1930s poster from the monthly newspaper of

the National Party's Office of Racial Policy shows a disabled man sitting in a chair with a white-coated medic standing behind him with a hand on his shoulder. The text says, 'This genetically-ill person will cost our people's community 60,000 RM [Reichmarks] over his lifetime. Citizens, that is your money'.¹²

Set against a backdrop of economic crisis and divisive ideologies, these, along with parallel propaganda against Jewish people, 'asocials' and other targeted group, were powerful and influential images which served to feed the population's anxiety and latent prejudice. They cast disabled people as 'other' and readied the population for the increasingly brutal set of laws which followed. The campaign against disabled people included increased segregation of disabled people in institutions, which exacerbated the process of 'othering'. Compulsory sterilisation was introduced in 1933 for people with specified impairments, along with an amnesty for abortion of fetuses with impairments. Marriage bans followed in 1935 through the Marriage Health Law, with the intent of preventing disabled people from reproducing.¹³ Realising that these measures alone could not eliminate the disabled population entirely, they were joined by *Aktion T4*, a wholesale attempt to wipe out disabled people through a systematic and state-sanctioned campaign of mass murder.

The Mechanics of Mass Murder

The first chapter of Nazi genocide began with a baby, born in 1938 with impairments. The infant's father petitioned Hitler for the killing of the newborn.¹⁴ After the baby had been killed, Hitler authorised his personal physician Dr Karl Brandt to institute a national programme to kill babies and children with impairments under the guise of 'euthanasia' (mercy killing).¹⁵ The *Aktion T4* programme was licensed by Hitler in an informal, secret letter. Technically, neither law nor binding order, nonetheless for the medical and legal professions it legitimated the 'euthanasia' programme. In September 1939, *Aktion T4* was extended to include adults.

One of the many reasons I remain astonished that the horror of the disabled people's Holocaust is so little known – and in 15 years of working towards *Resistance*, I have rarely met anyone who has heard of it – is that the actions against this community were a prototype for all that came later. As the first group to be targeted for genocide, the methods trialled and refined upon disabled people created a model that would later be used in extermination camps for mass killing of Jews, lesbian and gay people, Gypsies and so many others.

By early 1939, extensive planning for *Aktion T4* was underway, with health professionals across the country required to complete a single-page form stating impairment details for every disabled people they knew. They were not told of the reason for data collection. Believing they were helping disabled people access the resources they needed, some emphasised people's impairments and unwittingly made them more vulnerable to selection.¹⁶ Completed forms were sent to the *Aktion T4* headquarters in Berlin, where doctors marked them with a plus or a minus or occasionally a question mark. If it was a plus, that person's name was added to the list for extermination. This was the procedure for selection.

Those selected were rounded up from their homes or from institutions, into a fleet of grey buses with blacked out windows to prevent those inside being seen.¹⁷ *Aktion T4* was intended to be secret because the Nazi party was nervous that it would not receive comprehensive support. Staff signed an oath of secrecy.¹⁸

However, very quickly it became clear that the secret was public knowledge. Local people saw smoke and smelled burning flesh from crematorium chimneys. Relatives noticed anomalies on death certificates.¹⁹ The buses which transported people from 'observation institutions' to 'euthanasia' centres became recognised throughout Germany. As the buses drove through towns and villages, children were told by their parents, 'There goes the murder box; if you are naughty, we will put you on the next one'.²⁰ Not only was the 'secret' widely known, it was also widely tolerated.

In the early stages of creating *Resistance*, I visited two of the six institutions in Germany and Austria that were converted to death centres²¹. Making this visit alongside three of the actors was key in taking both ourselves and audiences beyond the historical logistics of *Aktion T4*, to developing a *feeling* for the history and its impact.

We visited Bernburg in Germany, an ordinary mid-sized town, with a psychiatric institution on its outskirts. A somewhat forbidding building of brownish yellow bricks and tall windows, it has a half cellar with whited-out windows. It is here that the gas chamber was based.

Hadamar, another of the killing centres, was built high on a hill. The grey buses delivered people into a large wooden garage adjoining the main building. Housing up to three buses at a time, people were disembarked along a hastily constructed corridor so that they were concealed from locals in the town below. In the institution, they were processed: photographed, stripped and examined cursorily to identify a plausible label to write upon each

death certificate. Photographs taken to record people's 'physical inferiority', supposedly for 'scientific research', were used in the Nazis' propaganda programme. Anyone considered an interesting medical or scientific specimen, or with gold fillings, had a cross drawn onto their shoulder.²²

Once processed, people were led, naked, down stone steps, a little worn, to the cellars. Today, a handrail on either side, roughened metal and traces of black paint, is worn smooth by 10,000 pairs of hands. The steps ended at a rough, bare-brick corridor that led to the gas chamber. Whilst staff were instructed not to tell patients what was in store in order to prevent their becoming 'excited', and the pseudo-medical procedure was partly designed to continue this deception, many were well aware of what lay ahead. For anyone who did not already understand, at this point there can have been little doubt that something was terribly, desperately wrong²³.

The gas chamber at Hadamar contrasted strangely with the darkened, raw feeling of the corridor. It was redolent of a modern wet room: tiled walls in white, floors in black and white checkerboard, with pipes on the ceiling, except of course they did not carry water. A drain, set into the centre of the floor continued the illusion but was cosmetic.

In the 'shower' at Bernburg, was a window near to the ceiling, the glass painted white, the frame blocked by vertical bars painted cream. When we were there, there were splashes of sun on the tiles. At Hadamar, a window was blocked with brick so that there was no daylight at all.

The 'shower room', a little under nine square metres, was packed with between 40 and 150 people at a time.²⁴ Once the door was sealed, carbon monoxide gas would be leaked amongst them. A glass brick in the wall enabled staff to observe over the ten minutes or so that it took for people to die, and to judge when it was safe to re-enter and clear the space.

Bodies were burned in the crematorium housed a few metres from the chamber. Those marked with an X on their shoulders were first taken to a neighbouring dissection room with its stone trough of a dissection table like a butcher's block, and then on to be burned. A disabled person with gold fillings had become worth more dead than alive because of the economic contribution the released gold could make to the war effort.

In the death centres, now memorials, there are full sized photographs of the ovens. Once mass-extirmination of Jewish people got underway in the East, the ovens, along with the, by now, experienced personnel were relocated to set up operations on a much bigger scale.²⁵

An archive photograph of Hadamar shows the institution high up above the small town, a stream of black smoke pouring from its chimney. Clearly, local people knew something dreadful was happening, and somebody even thought to document it. I know little about the source of this photograph, only that somebody bore witness.²⁶

Whilst *Aktion T4* was widely accepted by the general populace,²⁷ some families became increasingly vocal in their distress and church leaders, after a long period of silence, took up their cry, Hitler was concerned that *Aktion T4* might become a political liability, and in August 1941, two years after the start of its first, official, phase, the programme was brought to a close.²⁸

In one of many contradictions of the period, the Nazis worked hard towards the end of the Second World War to conceal evidence of the Jewish Holocaust, but when the first phase of *Aktion T4* ended, bureaucratic and structural evidence was left. At the end of the war, rooms used for killing simply had their doors closed and locked. It was not until the 1970s and 80s, when disabled people began to demand access to their history, that they were reopened, intact.²⁹ Yet, even in the material presence of structures and paperwork, the history of disabled people's Holocaust has been close to invisible.

Perhaps more frightening still than the first phase of *Aktion T4*, was its second, unofficial, phase. In this 'wild phase', the killing of disabled people continued. In institutions and hospitals throughout Germany, medical staff, through their own volition, killed their patients in vast numbers, one on one, through starvation, poisoning, shooting and electrocution, and out of public view.³⁰ Other patients were delivered as 'terminal' research subjects to the Görden research station in Brandenburg or the Centre for Psychiatry and Neurology in Heidelberg for testing, observation and post-mortem.³¹ By the close of war, at least 85% of the population of Germany's psychiatric institutions had been obliterated.³²

'Ordinary People'

The Holocaust began and would end with the killing of disabled children. On 7 May 1945, Germany signed an unconditional surrender; the war in Europe, and the Holocaust with it, was officially at an end. When American forces occupied Bavaria, they liberated the camps but placed a cordon around the state hospital at Kaufbeuren which had a ward for disabled children, so that staff might continue to care for patients undisturbed. Assuming medical benevolence, staff remained free to continue killing patients for another 28 days. Four-year old Richard Jenna became their last victim.³³

The final death toll from *Aktion T4* and its aftermath is impossible to know since records are patchy. Figures are based on the deaths of disabled people in the six killing centres and other institutions and are believed to be 70,000 to 80,000 from the first phase³⁴, with estimates for the two phases combined climbing to 250,000.³⁵ In truth, it is likely to be considerably higher, since the many disabled people who were slaughtered in concentration camps do not appear in these statistics. Not counted are Jewish people who never made it to ghettos or camps but were exterminated for being too old or having impairments; or Jewish, Gypsy and 'asocial' people or gay men and lesbians, selected early for gassing because they could not fulfill work details, or those who were killed during the long marches because they could not keep pace. In a war on people who did not 'fit', people with impairments were made especially vulnerable to selection.³⁶ Post-war photographs of artificial limbs piled high in concentration camps make it clear that disabled people were targeted throughout both *Aktion T4* and the wider Holocaust.

I am sickened by the numbers, but also by the sense of competition that so often accompanies their recitation. It is as though, the larger the number of any group slaughtered, the worse their experience, when, for each individual, this was their *life*. The numbers are an essential part of historical record, of acknowledging the magnitude of events, but they can also make the Holocaust so far beyond hope that we lose touch with the humanity of those who suffered. Since they could not conform to Aryan notions of what it was to be fully human, the Nazis' intent for all these groups was obliteration. Beyond the specificity of social and cultural grouping, the Holocaust was an emblem of the dangerous human propensity to divide and silence.

And we divide and silence ourselves at our peril. Anti-Nazi theologian Martin Neimöller said it best in his widely quoted verse: 'First they came for the Jews but I did not speak out because I was not a Jew... Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.' Several versions of this have been recorded, including this 1946 version: 'Then they came for the sick, the so-called incurables and I did not speak out because I was not disabled...'³⁷

In not speaking out in this first stage, a critical opportunity was lost to divert the full horror of the Holocaust from the course upon which it was set. This could have been a different history.

To look at photographs of the perpetrators reveals an 'ordinariness' amongst the killers. For example, six men, staff from *Aktion T4* headquarters, are pictured sitting upon a park bench, under a tree, all looking relaxed³⁸; staff from the Grafeneck killing centre sit in their dining hall, which displays a large Nazi flag against one wall, and smile for their photograph³⁹; a postcard from the Hartheim death centre shows a photographic montage of a staff excursion⁴⁰. The ordinariness of the perpetrators has been much commented on in Holocaust literature.⁴¹ Doctors who took part in *Aktion T4* did so on a voluntary basis, persuaded by ideology, career opportunities and access to influence.⁴²

Over the course of making *Resistance*, so many people have said to me 'What makes ordinary people commit such evil?' The more that research explores what makes people do such things, the more striking it becomes that the potential may be there in all of us, that it is conditions and circumstances, above intrinsic character, that define outcomes.⁴³ Within the *Resistance* drama, institution staff are striking in their ordinariness – ignorant, afraid, weak, self-serving but not, for the most part, intrinsically evil. One doctor, questioned at the Nuremberg Trials, stated "I didn't feel responsible since the orders came from other sources."⁴⁴ Not only were perpetrators distanced from a sense of personal responsibility, but also from those they targeted: underpinning *Aktion T4* was a belief in disabled people as 'other': separate, worth less, and disposable.

The more deeply I worked on *Resistance*, the more I became intrigued not by what drives such 'evil', but by a different question: what makes ordinary people commit such good? Throughout the Holocaust, there were people who resisted. What was it that drove them? What made them find courage where others failed? Even more hidden from the public record than the rest of this history, there were people who took extraordinary risks to speak out against *Aktion T4*.

Perhaps most notable of all, in that most hopeless of circumstances, were the protests of disabled people, hundreds of whom protested their fate.⁴⁵ In *Resistance*, Elise's own defiance is at the core of the film: her watchful, unspoken appraisal of what is in store and her shrewd plotting of escape.⁴⁶ But resistance is also in the man whose drawings commit events to paper, the woman who hums a nursery rhyme for courage, the man who fights back, the woman who shouts 'No' with body and soul, the man who tries to make himself invisible.

Amongst the snatches of historical records, are people who wrote letters of farewell to friends and family in order to alert the outside world, and others breaking out of institutions in a bid for escape. The official end of Aktion T4 came through the acts of resistance committed by disabled people, which communicated the horrors to a wider world until it was forced to take notice.

In Bruckberg in Bavaria, the night before the buses were due, disabled people made their way door-to-door around the whole town, to say goodbye to their neighbours and alert them to what was happening.⁴⁷ In the small town of Absberg in Franconia, disabled residents refused to board the bus, until guards took them forcibly, fighting and shouting the whole way.⁴⁸ According to the local Nazi leader, people were taken away 'in the most conspicuous manner imaginable'.⁴⁹ Townspeople attempted to help friends and neighbours in their struggle. Such scenes were the catalyst in spreading the word to Bishop von Galen who spoke an incendiary sermon in Munster, which was also read from pulpits throughout his diocese.⁵⁰ It triggered Hitler's concern that such resistance would damage support for the regime and it brought the first phase to a close.

To look at portraits of those people who died under *Aktion* T4, their ordinariness too is apparent. They span all ages, classes, different cultures, a whole range of backgrounds; one photograph shows a toddler who was killed. As we visited the death centres, we were struck by our own sense of connection to the portraits which lined the walls of the crematorium. Actor Lou Birks commented: 'This only happened seventy years ago, and the personal stories that we heard, and the photographs of the people that we saw, looked like you and me.'⁵¹ Indeed, there was a moment during rehearsals when I looked around the room and realised that, in the wrong time and place, every one of us there would have fallen to the Nazis. Whilst this was never spoken, it was clear throughout the making of *Resistance*, that everyone involved had picked up on how personally connected they were to the characters they were playing.

Of those who died under Aktion T4 and its aftermath, there is no first hand testimony. The day that people were transported to the death centres was the day they died.⁵² This is a different Holocaust from that of other targeted groups; since people did not survive, there is no one to bear witness for themselves or for those who died.

At best, we can learn only second hand. However, since disabled people were categorised as patients, rather than prisoners (in contrast to people sent to concentration camps), medical confidentiality precludes their details from being made public. Information on individuals is

known only where families have given permission to the memorial centres. Unlike many of the other targeted groups, impairment and disability do not necessarily carry a bond of culture or continuity within families, so disabled family members' Holocaust experiences are often not passed on to future generations. Since many families remain reluctant to claim disabled relatives, or this excruciating history, as their own, they remain almost entirely unknown.

Here are five exceptions we heard of when visiting Bernburg:⁵³

Bertha Walley, aged 43, the perfect Aryan *Hausfrau* with six children, aged from four to ten. Her beloved husband committed suicide. She was overwhelmed and admitted herself to the psychiatric institution. After two years, she was released, but readmitted because she could not cope. She was there for a further five years and so became a priority candidate. Her children went into care.

Else was 32 and engaged to a Jewish man. When he fled the country, she had to choose between him and her family. She stayed, but unravelled. She refused admission to hospital. Diagnosed with 'youth schizophrenia', the state killed her.

Ludiya was a teenager who fell from a ladder, resulting in neurological impairment – epilepsy, some learning difficulty, some walking impairment. Her family loved her. She was registered at a hospital because of her accident and at 16 was sterilised. A year later, she was removed from her family and killed.

Clare was 52. She had run the family shop. When it went broke, she fell apart. She was a patient for nine years, so was high on the *Aktion T4* list.

Another woman, name unknown, was 86. Living in her own world, she plucked flowers from the wallpaper. She had no family, no relationships; she was too old and too confused to be considered useful. The photograph showed an intelligent, proud woman dressed in black, a large bonnet on her head. I would say a woman of means.

In a small attempt to redress the balance, in the script of the *Resistance* drama, staff are nameless whereas all disabled people have names. Much is known about the major perpetrators of *Aktion T4*; in the film, it was important to return individuality and identity – *life* – to the victims. Historically labelled 'defective', 'dead ballast', 'useless eaters'⁵⁴, in the film, it is their humanity that shines through.

I have heard of a single survivor of *Aktion T4*. Arriving at a death centre during a period of escalated killing and a need for additional labour, he was recognised as strong enough carry coffins to the mass-burial site. Still alive at the time of our visit to Germany, this was a man so injured by experience that he does not speak, revealing his history only in his sleep.

Of the many disabled women who were sterilised, few have been identified, even when national compensation was secured, because of the shame or the pain of this history. After the war, surviving disabled people in institutions (that is, general institutions, rather than the death centres) generally remained there away from families and isolated from community living.

In the towns where *Aktion T4* took place, I wonder how deep the knowledge of its history is within the psyche. Staff from the memorial centres have tried to secure testimony from surviving perpetrators or from locals who witnessed the arrival of the buses and smelt the burning. 9,000 people died in Bernburg's eight months of murder, but when people are asked to come forward, no one does. There are moments of recollection, we are told, during informal conversation, the subject broached side on and with enormous sensitivity, but nothing official. Much is known, but nothing that can be documented as academically verifiable evidence. Soon that generation will be gone and so will the last traces of evidence.

In Search of Justice

In the Nuremberg Trials, which opened in November 1945, no disabled people were called as witnesses. Only a small number of doctors and nurses and other staff who participated were prosecuted. Many were acquitted and few received sentences comparable to other Holocaust perpetrators. Actions against disabled people were justified through descriptions of them as 'poor, miserable creatures' and 'burned-out human husks'.⁵⁵ One nurse (acquitted), from a hospital where over 8,000 people were murdered, said that once when she had objected to murdering a child she had received a 'big bawling out'⁵⁶. Another (acquitted), said she knew it was wrong but did not speak out because she feared for her job.⁵⁷

The chairman of the commission that ran the 'Children's Programme' escaped punishment, publishing a textbook in 1962 stating the case for the 'euthanasia' of disabled children. As recently as the mid 1990s, physicians active in *Aktion T4* were practising medicine and teaching in universities. Heinrich Burke worked in a senior role at Bernburg. Years after the war, he was found guilty of aiding in the murder of 9,200 people and was sentenced to three

years. He was released after 16 months, considered too old and frail for prison, though youthful and fit enough to return to medical practice. He died of natural causes in 1981 after a long and lucrative medical career.⁵⁸

Dr Karl Brandt, one of the leading figures in *Aktion T4*, was found guilty of crimes against humanity and executed along with six others, although he maintained to the last that the programme was an act of mercy. He said, 'I am fully conscious that when I said "Yes" to euthanasia I did so with the deepest conviction, just as it is my conviction today, that it was right.'⁵⁹

In acquitting a psychiatrist who oversaw the death of his patients in a gas chamber, the court concluded: 'we deal with a certain human weakness [...] which does not as yet deserve moral condemnation.'⁶⁰

The crucial point underlying the Nuremberg prosecution of the Disabled Holocaust is that the legal process was largely incapable of securing justice. Whilst the judiciary was clear that the murder of people for being Jewish, or belonging to other targeted social and cultural groups, was abhorrent, they remained confused as to whether killing disabled people might be a humane or public service. The prevailing values about disabled people, as inferior, pitiable and burdensome, derailed their judgement.

Perhaps it is these same values that have permitted the institutions used as death centres to continue over the years to treat patients who would once have been killed there. Perhaps these are the same values that led to the gas chamber at Hadamar subsequently having its window unbricked in order to recommission the space for patients' art therapy sessions.

It is only now, with a new generation born since the war ended, that the professional body of doctors in Germany is acknowledging that the Disabled Holocaust took place or that lessons must be learnt.

In Berlin, there is a memorial: a large weathered bronze slab set into the pavement in the place where the *Aktion T4* headquarters, long since demolished, was based. Engraved with text, in a few paragraphs it eloquently sets out what happened, ending with the words 'Those who were killed were many. Those brought to justice, few.' The plaque is touching, and also inadequate to the scale and depth of what took place. Unveiled in 1989, the same year as the

Wall came down and perhaps eclipsed by world events at the time, Germany was divided by communism for less time than it took to put up a plaque in the name of disabled people.

I wonder whether others feel my sense of deep irony, but the backdrop to the memorial is a busy bus terminus. A visit to this commemoration of disabled people who died under *Aktion T4* is accompanied by the steady roar of buses transporting people to their destinations.

I felt the need for another memorial, and this is why the *Resistance* project emerged. I wanted to create a memorial to those people who died, but also to go further: to move people from the overwhelming entrapment that arises from contemplating the scale and barbarity of the Holocaust. I wanted to look not only at the history, but at the *now*, the prevailing values that underpinned the Holocaust and how they continue to impact upon us today. I wanted to devise a project that would be a starting point for people to become involved in creating a different kind of future. It was this possibility of looking forward that kept me going through the practical necessities of the project and the emotional demands of its subject matter.

Resistance: which way the future?

Resistance: which way the future? is a dual-screen moving image installation.⁶¹ Set in a darkened space, with video projection, sound, lighting and floor-to-ceiling fabric banners, it immerses the audience in a landscape of historical drama, contemporary documentary film, and audio-visual voices.

In placing the various elements, past and present, to comment upon each other, the installation emphasises the echoes of history. In doing so, *Resistance* raises critical questions to make people talk, think and debate beyond the immediate experience of the work, creating a space in which they can make a commitment to their own contribution to change.

With over 5,000 visitors at Washington DC's Kennedy Center and a Best Exhibition Award from the *Liverpool Daily Post*, *Resistance* continues to reach a diverse public. Visitors reveal that they are building a profound connection to some of the key social issues of today and make repeat visits to explore how they can be a part of the solution.

The installation begins with a drama set 1939, a story drawn from historical records of a woman who lived in an institution and swept the institution grounds.⁶² Documented only under

her initials EB, the more I learned, the more I knew that this was a narrative I wanted work with.

Scarce detail has been recorded about 'EB', except that, on the day she was scheduled to board the grey bus, she used her familiar guise of sweeping to render herself unseen to the orderlies boarding people onto the bus, and made a bid for escape.⁶³ In developing the story of 'EB', I drew from my experience of visiting the death centres, and upon historical documentation and transcripts of the Nuremberg Trials. 'EB' became Elise Blick, her last name translated from the German *to look, to see*. Elise does not speak and staff assume that she does not comprehend, but she watches as the buses filled with patients leave and return empty. When it is her turn, she knows what is in store. Incarcerated, it appears there is little she can do, but she resists in the only way she can. As disabled people are selected and staff are complicit, she makes her escape.

As Elise sweeps her way towards uncertain freedom, her track extends beyond the borders of the screen to create a lit path of resistance for the audience to follow. It leads them to a second film, a conversation piece between three of the actors from the drama: Lou Birks, Jamie Beddard and Sophie Weaver.⁶⁴ They speak of what visiting the death centres and portraying that history on film means for them as disabled people today.

This shift from historical events to the present day connects the values that underpin Holocaust history and which continue to impact on us now. As the conversations fade, the area surrounding the screen is lit to reveal walls of green banners, printed with montaged portraits of people caught up in *Aktion T4*, as well as contemporary people, disabled and non-disabled. These are images heavily influenced by the portraits that covered the walls of the death centre crematoria. Within the banner space, is a soundtrack of voices, disabled and not, talking about their experiences of discrimination today and the impact it has on their lives. They speak of practical and emotional cost, but also describe the elation of being included. Audiences glimpse a starting point for making that inclusion a reality and are shown the possibility of their own role in this. Against a feeling that 'it is all so huge, where would I start?', here is a chance for them to find a place, however small, to make a start.

For me, the strength in *Resistance* is in acknowledging the history, in bearing witness, but also in moving from horror and hopelessness to create a far better future. This might be the best kind of tribute we can give to the people who died.

In making such a work, there is a need to reach an audience, for without an audience willing to engage with it, it can contribute nothing. Disability, never an easy 'sell', often equated with 'worthy' or 'depressing'. To combine it with the Holocaust meant I faced a difficult task in marketing the work to venues and drawing audiences through the door. As the launch drew closer, I was in search of an image that would go against expectation, compelling enough to secure both venues and audiences.

Resistance on the Plinth

When sculptor Antony Gormley announced his *One & Other* project for the Fourth Plinth of London's Trafalgar Square,⁶⁵ it seemed an ideal opportunity to represent disabled people on a public platform. For 100 consecutive days, 2,400 people would each spend one hour, on their own, high up on the plinth. Coinciding with the 70th anniversary of the beginning of *Aktion T4* (still unspoken in the press), when my name was drawn in a random selection, it was quickly clear that this would be my focus. *Resistance on the Plinth* was born.⁶⁶

Searching for an image, my marketing consultant Ros Fry and I, in a throw-away comment, had an idea. How about I go up there in Nazi uniform? And, even as we knew it was beyond outrageous, beyond bold, it was also immediately clear that this was *the* image. As a wheelchair user in Nazi uniform, I would bring together two potent and contradictory symbols – the swastika and the wheelchair – like repelling magnets.

With five weeks to prepare, and facing the most frightening thing I had ever done, it became a constant on–off, on–off, until just hours before. But on my plinth day, I found myself talking with passion about the rise in hate crime⁶⁷, a population the size of Cardiff living in institutions⁶⁸, increasing threats to exclude disabled children from mainstream schools⁶⁹, increasing abortion of fetuses with impairments⁷⁰, and a poorly debated race to assisted suicide legislation⁷¹. Forcefully reminded that the values used to justify *Aktion T4* – of disabled people as pitiful and burdensome – remain deeply embedded today, I found myself approaching the performance with a clarity such as I'd never known before.

Up on the plinth, on a warm balmy August evening at 10pm, I sat covered head to toe in a white shroud. Ten minutes in, I did the big reveal, removed the shroud - and suddenly, there was a Nazi on the plinth, a Nazi using a wheelchair.

It was an unresolvable image which kept the audience looking and questioning long after the image was past. It is a simple thing to equate the swastika with evil, but far more compelling to change its context so that the symbol confronts itself.

In the next phase of the image, I pulled a flag from under my chair, inscribed with the words, black on red, of the verse by Martin Niemöller. Then, for me, in the best and lightest moments of the performance, I shed the uniform, to black trousers and t-shirt, bare feet, to emerge from the symbol and wave the flag.

In the Square, 40 supporters from Direct Action Network (DAN)⁷² made an informal ring around the plinth, so that each time anyone came forward an explanation was forthcoming. And people lingered, watched, debated and shared experiences. When the leaflets ran out, strangers passed them on to strangers and spoke to each other about why the image mattered. It became an extraordinary event for triggering conversation and exchanging ideas.

All plinth hours were livestreamed on the *One & Other* website, with footage seen around the world.⁷³ My own written context to this performance continues to sit alongside the web archived video of my hour. Beyond my plinth hour, dialogue continued through social media, classrooms and community groups internationally. Comments include 'Your silent clarity caused me (I hope amongst many others) to question further my previous over-idealistic beliefs,'⁷⁴ whilst a supporter from the Square wrote that the hour

sparked lots of discussion and support amongst the people there who were initially surprised and confused at the striking and challenging image[...] People got it and knowing you are against Nazi ideals made them smile[...] At least a thousand people were given a message most of them had never heard before. I hope they pass it on!⁷⁵

It is the dissonance of the image that has kept people looking, bombarding them with questions and confronting them with information and meanings they may never have encountered before. Its danger became its power for, as they looked and considered and returned again, an emotional connection began to build to the history and to the now. A softer image might have raised similar questions, but is easily set aside; the visceral impact of this image and its dissonance continue to demand. Repeatedly, my work reveals that political change is driven by emotional connection; that it is the individual's 'buy in' to an idea, or ideal, that opens them to becoming a part of change.

This image on the plinth became the image for the installation, adapted into a sepia version, with me on my chair, wearing the uniform, set in a bleak, empty urban landscape against a backdrop of ominous cloud. The swastika on the armband is picked out in red, as is the text 'Resistance: which way the future?' In adopting a knowingly controversial image, in producing a representation of disability and the Holocaust beyond 'worthy' or 'depressing', it seems that, almost irrespective of people's response, they want to know more, and are propelled through to the work beyond.

Art Opening Doors

Art does not *make* social and political change, but it can open doors. Art can be a powerful tool in communicating experience and ideas at a deep abiding level. In giving us glimpses into other people's lives and broadening our view of the world, it can connect audiences to experiences, ideas and emotions at the most profound level. Art can portray a human story within its broader social context and, in asking difficult questions and presenting viewpoints not seen elsewhere, it can leave us thinking and debating long after the work is officially over.

Traditionally, in Holocaust education and museum representations of the Holocaust, there has been an emphasis on the use of 'hard' evidence, and especially on first hand testimony. It is through testimony that victims are rehumanised.⁷⁶ In the early stages of preparing *Resistance*, one major museum made it clear that, without academically verified, documentary based testimony, they would not consider showing the work.⁷⁷ Since the particularities of the Disabled Holocaust mean an absence of first hand testimony and limits to archival footage, its invisibility becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that excludes disabled people from the historical record – unless we turn to other forms of representation.

Through the *Resistance* project, my task has been to use the creative media to locate a starting point, a means for people to approach a difficult history and a complex present in order to find a role for themselves in creating change.

My own process of making *Resistance* started out factually based, driven by a desire to inform people about a hidden history. Whilst the work emerged from extensive research, drawing on key historical texts, archives, artifacts and transcripts, as well as our visit to the death centres in Germany, part of my task was to move audiences beyond notions of victims and statistics to flesh and blood people they - we - could care about.

In making the work and taking it to the public, I have realised that it is this emotional investment that is at the core of an audience's commitment to making change. As *Resistance* has toured, I have watched it connect with 11-year olds and into old age, people a lifetime away from the events it describes and those who survived the larger Holocaust, people for whom the experience is far from their own and others who profoundly recognise their own lives in the work. In the words of one viewer:

One of the most powerful things I have ever experienced. And I think the first thing my son has seen that helped him fully understand the Holocaust. Up to now it felt more like something that happened to other people – and to see the group around the kitchen table remembering the things they loved, I think brought it home for him. I was so amazed by it, I went back to see it twice more. Each time I saw more and took more away from the experience.⁷⁸

We can only make a change for the things we know about and art can bring to light lives on the margins, immersing their audiences in worlds beyond their own. In showing art in a range of settings, from galleries to schools, festivals to community settings, art can reach audiences who would not usually touch art, and audiences who would not usually touch history, and take both by surprise. When *Resistance* audiences articulate their reactions to the work, they typically use the language of cognition ('I never knew...') rather than emotion (though they sometimes talk about the feelings of characters/actors/voices). However, it is quickly clear that it is feeling that drives their *connection* to the issues raised and their realisation of personal responsibility in finding solutions.

Within Holocaust education, creative representations, based in trusted research, may become imperative for future representation. As time moves on and living survivors from other targeted groups diminish, the arts may become our primary means of communicating the Holocaust and may yet show itself as the most compelling way to 'speak' to generations to come.

It is the 'speaking to' people that is the core of Holocaust education, just as the 'speaking out' is the core of social change. As a voice in the installation says, 'If no one speaks out, then nothing changes.' In *Resistance*, Elise finds courage in extremis in a reminder that the individual can be a powerful agent in change, then and now.

A German phrase, *Wehret den Anfängen*, translates to 'beware the beginnings'. For disabled people, despite a time of considerable progress, with many who are in employment, have

families, move about the country on transport, in ways almost inconceivable just 20 years ago, today we face a period in which historical values are felt as a daily threat. We find ourselves in the midst of a new system of benefits that has been charged with contributing to the deaths of 32 disabled people each week⁷⁹ a tabloid press campaign that is portraying disabled people as fraudsters and scroungers, driving a wedge between communities, an associated hardening of public attitudes towards disabled people, and a chilling rise in hate crime.⁸⁰ Within these events are knife-edge judgements of our place in the world, a step away from whether we even deserve to exist at all.

It is a backlash, magnified by austerity and, just as in events past, there is no room for complacency. In an echo of the themes of *Resistance*, these are the places we need to focus our attention with the greatest urgency of all. When I look back to the history - whether we are talking about perpetrators, the people targeted, or the people who resisted, whether we are talking about the past or whether now and the future - everything comes down to the people involved and the roles and actions that define them. Most of all, it is through the capacity of ordinary people to commit acts of good that change is secured.

In *Resistance*, a voice says:

I cannot be silent. We can't afford to be silent. We need to fill our space. We need people to know we're here because if we begin to disappear as we've done in the past, we need people to notice that we're missing. We need non-disabled people to be our allies. This isn't an issue about disabled people for just disabled people. This is an issue about society.'

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¹ Gallagher (1995). *Aktion* (Operation) T4 derived its name from the address Tiergartenstrasse 4 in Berlin, which was the address of the villa where the Nazi 'euthanasia' programme was planned.

² For more information on the *Resistance* projects, see below.

³ Margaret Sanger is widely regarded as the founder of the modern birth control movement. In 1916 she opened the first birth control clinic in the United States, and in 1921 she established the American Birth Control League, which became later the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

⁴ Freidlander (1995).

⁵ Snyder & Mitchell (2006). The 'Ugly laws' made it illegal for people with 'unsightly' or 'disgusting' impairments to appear in public. These laws existed from the 1860s until the 1970s in several American cities.

⁶ Burleigh (1994).

⁷ Freidlander (1995), p13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p14-15

⁹ *Ibid.*, p16

¹⁰ Image can be viewed on United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website:

http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=10005200&MediaId=1064. (accessed 13 November 2012).

¹¹ Image can be viewed on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Website:

http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=10005200&MediaId=1067. (accessed 13 November 2012).

¹² Image can be viewed on the William Bremen Jewish Heritage Museum Website:

<http://www.thebremen.org/exhibitions/online/1000kids/neuesvolk.jpg> . accessed 13 November 2012).

¹³ Friedlander (1995), pp23 and 31.

¹⁴ Quarmby (2011).

¹⁵ Friedlander (1995), p39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p77.

¹⁷ Gallagher (1995).

¹⁸ Friedlander (1995), p85.

¹⁹ Burleigh (1994).

²⁰ Quarmby (2011).

²¹ The six 'euthanasia' centres for disabled people were Brandenburg near Berlin; Bernburg and Sonnenstein, both in Saxony; Hadamar in Hesse; Grafeneck in southwestern Germany; and Hartheim near Linz in Austria; for more information, see below pp29-30.

²² Friedlander (1995), pp95-8.

²³ Gallagher (1995).

²⁴ Friedlander (1995).

²⁵ This was the so-called *Aktion* (Operation) Reinhard, the code name for the systematic murder of (mainly Polish) Jews on the territory of the Generalgouvernement in Poland between late 1941 and late 1943; at the heart of this mass extermination process by gas were the three purpose-built extermination camps Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. See Arad (1987) Holocaust Education and Archive Research Team, *Aktion Reinhard Camps*, <http://www.deathcamps.org> (accessed 14 November 2012).

²⁶ Photograph can be viewed on the website of Landeswohlfahrtsverband Hessen, http://www.lwv-hessen.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-289/_nr-12/i.html (accessed 23 November 2012) and at http://www.gedenkstaette-hadamar.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-859/_lkm-584/i.html (accessed 23 November 2012)

²⁷ Freidlander (1995).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp111-16.

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- ²⁹ *A World Without Bodies*. Documentary, USA, 2002. Directed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder.
- ³⁰ Burleigh (1994), Friedlander (1995), pp151-61.
- ³¹ Freidlander (1995), pp128-31.
- ³² Gallagher (1995).
- ³³ Freidlander (1995), pp162-3.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp85 and 109-10.
- ³⁵ Gallagher (1995),
- ³⁶ Friedlander (1995).
- ³⁷ Martin Neimöller (1892-1984) was a prominent Lutheran pastor and one of the founding members of the Confessional Church which was formed in opposition to the official Nazified German Protestant Churches. He was imprisoned from 1938 to 1945 first in Sachsenhausen and then Dachau concentration camp. Neimöller made his famous quotation in the immediate post-war period allegedly during his first visit to Dachau after his liberation. See USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia, 'Martin Neimöller: "First they came for the Socialists..."', <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392> (accessed 14 November 2012); see also Harold Marcuse, 'Martin Neimöller's famous quotation: "First they came for the Communists..."', <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/niem.htm> (accessed 14 November 2012).
- ³⁸ Image can be viewed on Holocaust Education, Archive and Research Team website: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/euthan/14f13.html> (accessed 14 November 2012)
- ³⁹ Image can be viewed on Holocaust Education, Archive and Research Team website: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/euthan/grefeneck.html> (accessed 14 November 2012).
- ⁴⁰ Image can be viewed on Aktion Reinhardt Camps website: <http://www.deathcamps.org/euthanasia/hartheim.html> (accessed 14 November 2012)
- ⁴¹ Adendt (1994).
- ⁴² Friedlander (1995), pp217-30.
- ⁴³ Zimbardo (2007).
- ⁴⁴ Friedlander (1995), p228.
- ⁴⁵ Gallagher (1995), Friedlander (1995), pp170-1.
- ⁴⁶ For more information on this film, please see below.
- ⁴⁷ Gallagher (1995).
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p 109.
- ⁵⁰ Friedlander (1995), p115. Clemens August Graf von Galen (1878-1946) was the Roman Catholic Bishop of Münster in Westphalia. In his sermon on 3 August 1941 he denounced in strong words the Nazi 'euthanasia' policy and *Action T4* directed against disabled people. Made Cardinal in 1946, he was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2005.
- ⁵¹ Liz Crow, 'Resistance on Tour', Roaring Girl Productions (Installation) <http://www.roaring-girl.co.uk/productions/resistance-on-tour/> (accessed 13 November 2012).
- ⁵² Friedlander (1995).
- ⁵³ I am grateful to family members who consented to making these details known.
- ⁵⁴ Friedlander (1995), pp81-2.
- ⁵⁵ Gallagher (1995) p.217.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ Brandt's final speech, cited in Gallagher (1995), pp285-7.
- ⁶⁰ Gallagher (1995) p.217.
- ⁶¹ Liz Crow, 'Resistance on Tour' (note 52).
- ⁶² Liz Crow, 'Resistance Drama', Roaring Girl Productions, <http://www.roaring-girl.co.uk/productions/resistance-drama/> (accessed 13 November 2012).
- ⁶³ Gallagher (1995).
- ⁶⁴ Liz Crow, 'Resistance Conversations', Roaring Girl Productions (documentary film), <http://www.roaring-girl.co.uk/productions/resistance-conversations/> (accessed 13 November 2012)
- ⁶⁵ For more information on this project, see <http://www.antonygormley.com/show/item-view/id/2365/type/current#p0> and <http://skyarts.com/antony-gormleys-one-other> (both accessed 13 November 2012). The Fourth Plinth is the plinth in the northwest corner of London's Trafalgar Square

which was originally meant to hold a status of William IV but had remained vacant for 150 years. Since 1999 it has been used for a succession of temporary art installations; one of these was Antony Gormley's art project *One & Other* which ran from 6 July to 14 October 2009.

⁶⁶ Liz Crow, 'Resistance on the Plinth', <http://www.roaring-girl.co.uk/productions/resistance-on-the-plinth/> (accessed 13 November 2012). For a fuller description of the experience of making the work, see Crow (2011).

⁶⁷ Ben Riley-Smith, 'Hate crimes against disabled people soar to a record level'. *The Independent*, 19 June 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/hate-crimes-against-disabled-people-soar-to-a-record-level-7858841.html> (accessed 13 November 2012).

⁶⁸ Barnes (1992).

⁶⁹ Economic and Social Research Council, 'Experts challenge government on special needs reforms', 31 October 2011 (press release), <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/news-and-events/press-releases/17920/experts-challenge-government-on-special-needs-reforms.aspx> (accessed 13 November 2012).

⁷⁰ Bromage (2006).

⁷¹ Dominic Lawson, 'Why the disabled fear suicide', *The Independent*, 14 June 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/dominic-lawson/dominic-lawson-why-the-disabled-fear-assisted-suicide-2297116.html> (accessed 13 November 2012).

⁷² The Disabled People's Direct Action Network (DAN) is a UK wide network of disabled activists who use non-violent civil disobedience to fight for equal treatment and full civil and human rights for disabled people; for more information see http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/telegraph/m_civrgt.htm (accessed 26 November 2012).

⁷³ www.oneandother.co.uk; now archived for preservation by the British Library under <http://www.webarchive.org.uk/ukwa/target/32145446> (accessed 27 November 2012).

⁷⁴ Liz Crow, 'Resistance on the Plinth: Awards and Reviews', (Facebook comment), http://www.roaring-girl.co.uk/awards-reviews/#a_resistance-on-the-plinth (accessed 13 November 2012).

⁷⁵ Personal communication.

⁷⁶ Friedlander (1995).

⁷⁷ Hurlstone (2000) explores this in more depth in his doctoral thesis.

⁷⁸ Personal communication from Fitzmaurice, Susan, 2010.

⁷⁹ Nick Sommerlad, '32 die a week after failing test for new incapacity benefit', *Mirror*, 4 April 2012, <http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/investigations/2012/04/32-die-a-week-after-failing-in.html> (accessed 13 November 2012).

⁸⁰ Liz Crow (2012), 'Summer of 2012: Paralympic legacy and the welfare benefit scandal'. Author's draft, currently under consideration for publication in *Disability and Society* (<http://www.tandfonline.com/>), <http://www.roaring-girl.com/writing> (accessed 13 November 2012).