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Editorial

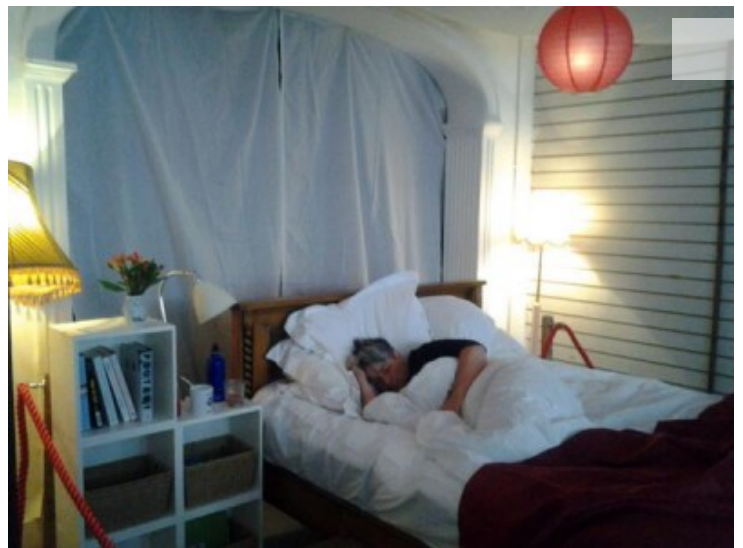
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Avant-garde or art as activism? Colin Hambrook discusses Disability Art in relation to Grayson Perry's Reith Lectures and Liz Crow's In Actual Fact / 4 November 2013

Since 1948 the BBC have been broadcasting an annual series of lectures by leading figures of the day addressing contemporary themes. It's over twenty years since there was last a Reith Lecture on the place of the Arts within society, so initially I was a bit non-plussed as to why Grayson Perry had been chosen to deliver a series which I normally associate with heady science or hearty politics.

I listened to the third of the '[Playing to the Gallery](#)' series of talks 'Nice Rebellion: Welcome in' immediately seeing how the title might relate to Disability Arts. The Disability Arts sector has a legacy going back to the 1980s, of looking to produce art that challenges attitudes towards disability - the kind of art as activism that seeks to challenge institutions and institutionalised discrimination.

True to the title of his talk Grayson argues convincingly that the idea of rebellion within art is a



Liz Crow's Bedding Out performance at Edinburgh Fringe in August 2013. Image © Jane Bence

tautology; that everywhere art institutions applaud Art that dresses itself up as going against the grain; and that the cultural zeitgeist of the Western world has reached a point where 'subversion' is as much a target for commodification as anything else. "...the lifeblood of capitalism is new ideas," he argues, because "they need new stuff to sell!" And when seeking the shock of the new, what better product than subversion?

So where does the concept of Disability Art fit in with the idea of seeking to challenge? Some years ago at the 2007 debate held by London Disability Arts Forum in Tate Modern, Yinka Shonibare described Disability Arts as 'The last remaining avant-garde movement'. If we think of the idea of avant-garde to mean "at the forefront of rebellion", I'm not sure that is completely true. Feminism may have moved forwards into the mainstream to a greater or lesser effect, but it strikes me that the artists who popularly most exemplify 'art as rebellion' at this moment in time are the Russian punk band [Pussy Riot](#). In the aftermath of a public performance of a punk prayer to oppose the unscrupulous vilification of women through the sanctification of State by Church in Russia, they have put their lives on the line. [Recent BBC reports](#) of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova say that after going on hunger strike following abuses in jail, that the Pussy Riot member has disappeared, and is feared dead.

As much as Grayson Perry talks about the globalisation of Art practice, it is very evident that the rules that apply in the Western world are different to those in the East. And that attitudes towards human rights are equally very different. Or are they? What is the life of a disabled person worth in a situation where so many of us can be declared fit for work, whilst on our deathbeds? And what does it mean when the fact of so much misery and suffering can prevail against the most vulnerable members of society with hardly a murmur raised in opposition in our media?

Personally I'm not sure whether the term 'avant-garde' conjures up the idea of something that's controversial. It perhaps says more about where we've come from than where we're going. Again with reference to one of Grayson Perry's stories from his lecture, the term describes Duchamp's Urinal but not Brian Eno's recent ploy to fill it with piss.

And so I'd very much doubt whether avant-garde is a term we'd see as applicable to our movement. However, to my mind Liz Crow is one of the few disabled artists seeking to present art as activism - and to use the precept of Disability Art as a form that speaks about the experience of disability, rather than the experience of impairment.

Her counter-propaganda site [In Actual Fact](#), was created to give actual facts about benefits and public services cuts - and to counter the political use of austerity to justify the deaths of disabled people who are being cast aside. Tomorrow is The People's Assembly national day of action against austerity. Crow is urging people to tweet (and Facebook) from the In Actual Fact site, adding the #burnausterity hashtag at the end of tweets

adding the #BritainontheFiddle hashtag at the end of tweets.

On Wednesday 6 November 9.00pm, BBC will broadcast 'Britain on the Fiddle' (the first in a series of three). This is a chance to show In Actual Fact working to counter propaganda. Crow is calling for mass-tweeting on the #britainontheFiddle hashtag, answering every single lie with relevant tweets from the IAF site.

In Grayson Perry's mind sincerity may well be 'problematic' and by implication a disguise for much 'bad' art. But then as much as I'm looking forward to listening to the rest of his series of Reith lectures, I doubt he would ever give disability art the time of day, or indeed see the critical nature of what we're trying to achieve.

[Please click on this link to go to the In Actual Fact website](#)

Keywords: activism,disability art

Debz / 5 November 2013

This is a complex subject, and you've raised so many issues and questions, I hardly know where to begin in response.

Not only that, you've been thinking about this subject for a lot longer than I have. I'm tempted to shut up at this point, quit while I'm ahead, or at least, stop before I embarrass myself...

Briefly, this is what I think:

Liz Crow's work moves away from being Art because it is didactic and leaves little or no room (no need) for imagination or interpretation. I'd call it creative protest. Clever and completely necessary. Not Art. Scores high on message, low on medium, maybe.

Whereas...

Jon Adams, Katherine Araniello, Noemi Lakmaier, to name but a few.

Your own work meets your criteria for disability art: it speaks to the pain of exclusion and oppression, not describing the experience of impairment.

It is uncompromising and unequivocal. Yet, in your work, as in the work of the other disabled artists I mentioned, there is opportunity for the viewer/audience to enter into a dialogue, a relationship, with the work. There is scope for... the work requires, demands even... an emotional response. There's an exchange going on, an interaction, give and take.

Enough for now.

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7 Nov

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DisabilityArtsOnline

7 Nov

@disabilityarts

It's nearly a year since the first episode of Criptarts and I'm still laughing

disabilityartsonline.org.uk/criptarts

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In Actual Fact

6 Nov

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@InActualFact101

DailyMail claims 75% disabled people "faking it." DWP says ESA fraud 0.3%, DLA 0.5% iaf.gd/lwt #InActualFact #britainonthe fiddle

Tweet to @disabilityarts

18 February 2013

The National Disability Arts Collection and Archive (NDACA)



NDACA aims to preserve, digitise, and make public the significant works of art and items that have been important to the Disability Arts Movement.

The archive will help to capture an understanding of the historical influence of Disability Arts and the social struggles of the movement in changing attitudes towards disabled people.

To find out about the project as it develops [please click on this link to go to www.ndaca.org.uk](#)

The Creative Case for Diversity



The Creative Case is a re-imagining of the Arts Council's approach to diversity and equality, setting out how these areas can and should enrich the arts for artists, audiences and our wider society.

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