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(Dia)logics of Difference
Disability, performance and spectatorship in Liz Crow's *Resistance on the Plinth*

BREE HADLEY

In this article I examine how artists with disabilities use public-space performance to encourage passersby to reflect on the construction of public discourses about disability – and, therefore, the construction of publics that are potentially inclusive of people with disabilities. I concentrate on British storyteller, artist, filmmaker and activist Liz Crow's *Resistance on the Plinth*, one of four pieces Crow has produced over the past three years as part of the *Resistance* series, an examination of the Nazi regime's Aktion T4 programme, which resulted in the mass murder of a quarter of a million people with disabilities. Created in August 2009 as part of Antony Gormley's *One & Other* public art project, the piece featured Crow dressed in a Nazi uniform and seated in a wheelchair on the Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. For Crow – who creates work in a British context where public debate about the eugenics of genetic testing, euthanasia and assisted suicide is prevalent in the media – the Nazi atrocity is still rich in confronting imagery, resonant and relevant in a contemporary context. In this article, I consider the challenges that Gormley's extremely public *One & Other* presented for professional artists like Crow, who are committed to intervening in public perceptions of identity, community and culture. I describe the structural choices Crow made to provoke debate about the cultural logics embodied in the image she presented, and analyse some of the spectatorial responses from online forums such as the *One & Other* website, Facebook and Twitter immediately following the event.

ANTONY GORMLEY'S *ONE & OTHER*

Antony Gormley is a British sculptor best known for a series of works emphasizing the human body, and its relationship to a range of spaces in the material and social worlds. His early works include the Turner Prize winning *Field for the British Isles* (1994), which featured 40,000 clay figures created by volunteers facing the viewer from the floor of a large room. More recent works include *Time Horizon* (2006), which featured 100 cast iron figures of Gormley's body placed among olive trees in Calabria, Italy, and *Event Horizon* (2007), which featured thirty-one iron and fibreglass casts of Gormley's body displayed atop buildings visible from London's South Bank. Gormley's sculptures use transfigurations of the body, scale, proximity, distance, separation, and – in his later works – interventions in public space, to call viewers' attention to their ways of being in the world.

In 2009, Gormley was commissioned to create *One & Other*, a public art project for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square. Gormley described *One & Other* as an attempt to make a 'lens through which [to] see what the UK is like now' (Gormley in Sutherland 2009). It gave 2,400 people selected at random via a lottery a chance to do whatever they wanted for an hour on the vacant Fourth Plinth over 100 days in July, August and September 2009. At

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the time, Gormley characterized *One & Other* as 'a celebration of our national diversity, an extraordinarily precarious mixture of those who just wanted to do something fun and those with a burning cause for which they wished to serve as a living representative' (Gormley in Kennedy 2009). In this sense, while *One & Other* had its supporters and its detractors, it engaged with the workings of the Habermasian public sphere, as the space or stage where individuals and groups negotiate social ideas, opinions and systems, and (supposedly representative) discourses adopted by the State are displayed and developed (see Habermas 1989: 30–1, Fraser 1990: 50–7). *One & Other* experimented with definitions of the public, who performs it, when and how, and thus offered Plinthers a platform to explore how ideas of identity, community and culture are performed in a very public space.

In practice, what people chose to do on the Plinth was broad-ranging and sometimes bizarre. Performances ranged from considered acts and people promoting causes to people pleading for jobs via placards (Press Association 2009), and even one person appealing to the British government to help her get a reprieve from a death sentence in the US (Batty 2009).

Throughout its 100 days, *One & Other* was the subject of continual media commentary. Some commentators, like *The Guardian*'s Alex Needham, suggested it 'created a real and virtual community' in 'a very short space of time', as an 'incredibly varied group of people' engaged Plinthers 'either by heckling and applauding in Trafalgar Square or by posting online' (Needham 2009). Others saw it as simply a new version of the reality TV programme *Big Brother* (Brooker 2009, Jones 2009), as it became a 'surprise hit' for its media sponsor Sky TV (Holmwood 2009). In effect, Plinthers were engaging two intersecting components of the public sphere – one live, one mediatized. As a result of the Sky TV sponsorship and web streaming, there was a media-fuelled pressure to perform or 'do' something in public space (Ekow Eshun on British Sky Broadcasting 2009, Dowse 2009).

Yet, as commentators like Patricia Bickers and Jonathan Jones pointed out, the intersection of the live and the mediatized often resulted in a situation where the web streaming offered a 'privileged view', while the live performance left Plinthers and spectators with 'a depressingly foreshortened view from above or below' (Bickers 2009: 12). 'The camera,' Jones noted, was 'far, far closer to the participants than any spectator [could] get'. As a result, the live performance presented 'a diminishing, isolating of the individual,' which, paradoxically, 'remove[d] the performers from the social world.... If *One & Other* [was] an image of British democratic life in our time,' he argued, 'it was a pessimistic one. It [was] a portrait of a society in which people will try anything to get their voices heard, even stand on a plinth, but where no one can hear what they are saying' (Jones 2009).

THE CHALLENGE OF ANTONY GORMLEY'S *ONE & OTHER*

The complexity of *One & Other*'s attempt to construct a portrait of the British public – or publics – left some Plinthers with a sense of trepidation. As one participant, Jill Dowse, argued 'this was not an easily manageable context for any kind of presentation' (Dowse 2009). She found it difficult to create 'a dramaturgically sound piece for an audience whose presence would be so unpredictable.... [Moreover] the live coverage threatened a *post hoc* call to account for anything I might say or do, leaving me open to misinterpretation and criticism from the public or media' (Dowse 2009).

In using her own Plinth performance to prompt passersby to reflect on their contribution to the construction of public discourses about disability, Liz Crow also faced a risk of misreading of the culturally recognizable image of the Nazi she chose to present.

As Lois Keidan (2007: 129) has argued, in the UK artists with disabilities have embraced the potential of public-space performance, performance art and live art. Many have rejected

naturalistic, narrative modes of storytelling in which autobiographical accounts of struggle may be misread as narrowly framed portraits of individual suffering (Heddon 2008: 4) with no connection to broader political coalitions or concerns. Artists with disabilities have adopted styles that allow them to use a distinctive set of interventionalist strategies to deconstruct the stereotyping they feel they are subject to in daily life; these include recitation of the images, rhetoric and personae UK culture uses to define the disabled body; counterposition of images and commentary; and an unconventional relationship with space and spectators. Most critically, artists with disabilities have demonstrated a desire to do this in productively 'live' public spaces and places. Artists such as Aaron Williamson, Katherine Araneillo and Ju Gosling commandeer public spaces, reperforming the interactions they commonly experience in these spaces – including a desire to 'help' poor, suffering disabled people – as a sort of guerilla theatre (see Hadley et al. 2010). These artists challenge passersby to replay, or reperform, their habitual response to recognizable images associated with disability in order to make hidden assumptions about disability visible, if not to the passersby themselves, then, at least, to others looking at their performances.

This sort of public-space intervention is risky. Its success relies on the artists' ability to destabilize dominant figurations of the disabled body by putting their reperformance of recognizable images, rhetoric or personae in what Petra Kuppers calls a bracket or frame that makes spectators aware of the complex blend of fact and cultural fiction (2004: 2). As Hans-Theis Lehman has argued in his analysis of postdramatic theatre, if fact blurs into fiction and fiction blurs into fact, the frame for an action becomes fuzzy (2006: 99-101). This means spectators experience an uncertainty that sometimes leads to an uncomfortable deferral of meaning-making (102-3). This deferral thwarts spectators' tendency to read recognizable images, rhetoric and personae as part of the phenomenon they are trying to deconstruct.

What interests me in this article is the way Crow – as an artist with a disability working in a very 'live' space – managed this framing, fuzziness and uncertainty in *One & Other*, a public-space performance in which the risk of misreading was particularly acute because of the multiple public spheres, spectatorships and (sometimes competing) discourses about the project.

LIZ CROW'S *RESISTANCE ON THE PLINTH*

Certainly, Crow felt the pressure surrounding her hour on the Plinth on Saturday, 8 August 2009. For Crow, 'the term disability arts may include explicitly politicized work about disability. However, it may also include work about daily lives, which happens to engage a disability perspective because that is part of the artist's lived experience' (Crow 2010). While Crow's prior work hasn't always been driven by activism *per se*, it has always included 'themes of identity, resistance, survival [and] finding a place in the world [that] apply to being human' (2010), linked to a disability perspective because that is part of her own lived experience. Like many artists with disabilities, Crow feels that the narratives projected onto disabled people's bodies can be more disabling than the physical impairments of their bodies (Crow 2009b). As Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell argue in *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000), the way we 'do' disability, and 'do' relationships with disabled people, is based on a cultural script that offers disabled people a limited range of socially determined personae or identity positions – the monster, the corrupt, the charity case or the brave sufferer – which are replayed again and again in literary, dramatic and filmic canons as well as in daily life. Paradoxically, the roles and relationships prescribed are designed not to tell us what it means to be disabled but, rather, what it means to be able. Dominant figurations of the disabled body function to define the margins that confirm the centrality of the able self in

social and symbolic systems (Hadley 2008). The disabled body is, as Snyder and Mitchell put it, 'a metaphor and a fleshy example of the body's unruly resistance to the cultural desire to "enforce normalcy"' (2000: 48). Accordingly, while dominant figurations of the disabled body may be very visible, they render the disabled body invisible in the public sphere (Kuppers 2001: 26), as a body that is understood only in terms of the narratives we project onto it.

Crow felt strongly that disabled people should have a presence in *One & Other* and wanted to create a powerful image (Crow 2010). With this objective in mind, she chose to present herself, in her wheelchair, in a Nazi uniform. Although Crow planned her hour on the Plinth in detail, and tested her image prior, the situation, including the media coverage, naturally left her somewhat nervous. She worried that people would simply see her piece as a comedy performance by a woman who looked like a bad band leader in an oversized Nazi uniform, and did not actually commit to going ahead with the project until she had tried on the uniform in Bristol four hours before taking the train to London for the event (Crow 2010).

For Crow, the Nazi uniform was designed to 'draw attention to a hidden history and the message it holds for us all today' (Crow 2009a). The uniform appears in a series of works Crow has produced with her company Roaring Girl Productions under the *Resistance* title, including an installation, a film, and a documentary about making the film (Crow n.d.). It not only referenced the Nazi murder of a quarter of a million disabled people but also represented the way disabled people are subjected to discrimination, their plight relegated to private and medical realms. She considers this historical narrative 'still really contemporary' in a UK context:

> Seventy years ago, the Nazis instituted their first official programme of murder. It targeted disabled people and became the blueprint for the Final Solution to wipe out Jews, gay people, gypsies and other social groups. Today, the development of pre-natal screening and a rush to legal rights for newly disabled people to assisted suicide, show that disabled people's right to life still needs to be defended. With a rise in hate crime, disabled children still excluded from mainstream schools, and over 340,000 disabled people (more than the population of Cardiff) living in institutions, disabled people still experience those historical values as a daily threat. (Crow 2009a)

Crow says 'had people openly spoken out at the very first stage where disabled people were murdered, had they thought disabled people's lives were worth saving or speaking out for, then the rest of that history would also be different' (Crow 2009b). Yet, for Crow, popular cultural and political discourses continue to characterize disabled people as sufferers, in need of cure, or to be 'pu[t] out of their misery' so they are not a burden to themselves, their families, or their nation. The *Resistance* series speaks to concerns about the absence of disabled people's voices in the debate about these issues in the dominant public sphere (Crow 2009b).

Crow's performance on the Plinth was based on what Allan Sutherland has characterized as 'a series of memorable images, carefully choreographed to take advantage of space and time' (Sutherland 2009). The key to the piece was the counterposition of two images – the Nazi uniform, associated with eugenics and a desire to eliminate people who do not accord with the Aryan 'norm', and the wheelchair (Crow 2010). Crow was lifted onto the Plinth in a white sheet, which she then took off, revealing the Nazi uniform. After that, she raised a flag, with words from Martin Niemöeller's anti-Nazi statement: 'First they came for the sick, the so-called incurables and I did not speak out – because I was not incurable'. She then removed the Nazi uniform and flew the flag again (Crow 2009a, see Sutherland 2009). Crow's performance was characterized by simple gestures, interspersed with long periods of stillness and silence, carefully constructed to have an impact in a context where it was always going to be difficult to communicate with an unpredictable spectator group, watching live in person and via webcam.

Crow sees two options in presenting politicized works that raise questions about the inclusivity of the public sphere and public spaces. The first is to present a very controlled work – what Bakhtin would call a monologic text – which dictates its own reading. The second is to present an uncertain work, which, due to undecidability and a resultant deferral of meaning-making, becomes what Bakhtin would call a dialogic text, drawing spectators into a dialogue rather than dictating a reading. For Crow (2010), the latter is more likely to draw attention and encourage people to 'stop, look and think'. In *Resistance on the Plinth*, the framing device Crow used to create this uncertainty was not so much confusion between fact and fiction – though there may have been confusion about whether Crow was really a Nazi, really a wheelchair user and so forth – but, rather, the incompatibility of the two images, which made it difficult for spectators to process what they saw and reconcile conflicting realities. Spectators were asked to interpret, then reinterpret. The counterposition of images invited passersby into a more difficult meaning-making dialogue, in which the irreconcilability of the contradictory images, ideologies and cultural logics Crow embodied encouraged them to continue thinking and talking about these logics after the encounter.

Though Crow did not have much opportunity to look at what was happening below while she was on the Plinth, she did see groups at the edge of Trafalgar Square trying to decipher the image and the words on the flag. Apparently, spectators noticed that the image did not immediately make sense, though their ability to work out why varied according to the frames of history/habitus they brought to the encounter, and their familiarity with the historical implications of the image. Having created this uncertainty, Crow felt a need to provide a platform for spectators to work through (Crow 2010). In this case, it was via the presence of about fifty supporters on the ground handing out flyers with the full Niemöeller quote and Crow's own rationale (Crow 2010, Crow 2009b).

REACTION TO LIZ CROW'S *RESISTANCE ON THE PLINTH*

In the days following *Resistance on the Plinth*, Crow's performance received attention in a range of online and offline news outlets. Crow called her local new paper, *The Bristol Evening Post*, which published images of the work the following week, and the national newspaper *The Guardian*, which did not cover the work at the time but did include it among their list of the 'Fourth Plinth top ten' at the conclusion of *One & Other* (Crow 2010).

The reaction to Crow's work on the *One & Other* website, and on other websites, blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, offers some indication of spectator responses.[1] According to Crow, the first response on Twitter was 'WTF' – what the fuck – followed by conversations in which spectators worked out the meaning of the image, drew links to their own experiences, their families' and friends' experiences and their own art or activism. Spectators inserted additional information, identifying Crow as an artist and pointing others to the *Resistance* installation and film websites. For Crow, the sense of community that developed among these secondary spectators had the potential to broaden the work's value as activism.

The tone of the reaction to *Resistance on the Plinth*, particularly on the social networking site Facebook, was positive and celebratory.

> It is very moving to watch you sitting there. You have just taken off the shawl and there you are in the Nazi uniform It is shocking and humbling and very emotional.
>
> (Jan Fairley, 8 August 2009, 09:15pm, quoted on Artichoke et al. 2009)

> when you put on ya hat, and i thought, jeez, what's happenin' here? at first i was a bit shocked. then i realised, this must be some kind of statement. then i read why ya there...and it all became clear. i've checked the plinth out a lot, and you're the most powerfull image 've seen.
>
> (Martin Morris, 8 August 2009, 09:39pm, quoted on Artichoke et al. 2009)

[1] The comments from the *One & Other* website, Facebook and Twitter cited here were retained by Liz Crow as documentation of *Resistance on the Plinth*, and the response to it, at the time.

• **Liz Crow** *Resistance on the Plinth*. *Photo Arts Council England/Kevin Clifford*

Interestingly, though, one spectator did not see disability as oppressive – at least, not anymore.

> Where is the evidence for a rise in hate crime against people with disabilities? Or do you mean hate crime in general? It's the perpetuation of the myths of fear released by the press that causes these misguided beliefs in society. In all of my work in Social Work and through my Social Work studies, the evidence clearly shows a move to more acceptance of disabilities of all kinds. The institutions are closing down and people are being introduced back into the community. All have now closed in Scotland. Perhaps we should be looking to toward the future rather than the past?
>
> (Stephen Social Work, 8 August 2009, 02:13pm, quoted on Artichoke et al. 2009)

In this (reductive) reading, the spectator attempts to reconcile the image in terms of the ways of being, behaving and seeing embedded in his habitus. This is not the belief that disabled people should be dealt with by removing them from the public sphere but rather that we as a society have moved past this; disabled people are no longer excluded, and there is no value in a historical image that looks to a past better forgotten.

This post drew numerous responses (quoted on Artichoke et al.). One spectator called him a 'fool' and challenged him to provide 'proof and/or evidence of the closure of ALL institutions in Scotland' (John McG aka Wheelzuk, 11 August 2009, 03:23pm). Others, including Wheelzuk, provided personal examples of the abuse disabled people are subjected to on a daily basis (John McG aka Wheelzuk, 11 August 2009, 03:23pm; Alan Summers, 12 August 2009, 03:52pm) or published Equality and Human Right Commission research reports (Kai, 17 August 2009, 08:58am). One spectator reiterated the relevance of the Niemöeller quote in light of contemporary political debates (Bob, 12 August 2009, 06:31pm), while another, Kai again, told him that Crow's performance 'perfectly supports Pastor Niemöeller's words that if you ignore history you are condemned to repeat it' (Kai, 17 August 2009, 08:58am).

These posts represented a debate between different cultural logics and can thus be characterized as contesting the characteristics of the public sphere. A number of the posts – particularly those debating things such as the closure of institutions in Scotland – operated at the level of facts and verifiable examples, without necessarily broaching the more insidious ideological beliefs that underpin any argument based on facts. The online remembering and remediation of *Resistance on the Plinth* raised questions about the longer-term impact of a dialogue at this level. Crow creates her work within a social model of disability, which suggests that it is our tendency to keep debate about disability at the level of

the concrete logistics of different bodies and bodily impairments rather than address the cultural ideologies that define different bodies as impaired. Accordingly, the path towards the creation of publics that are inclusive of disability lies not just in curing or compensating for bodily idiosyncrasies but in challenging the cultural discourses, ideologies and values that characterize these idiosyncrasies as intolerable. When interviewed about *Resistance on the Plinth* and her broader body of work, though, Crow indicated that she does not find this argument clear cut. While disability is a cultural phenomenon, the reality of pain and impairment means the cultural critique is not an end-all to this debate (Crow 2010). The discussion prompted by *Resistance on the Plinth* drew attention to a range of pressing problems associated with discourses about the eugenics of genetic testing, euthanasia and assisted suicide in the UK. As a result, it challenged public assumptions about what it is like to live with pain, impairment and disability (including what it is like to be told constantly that this is intolerable) and drew a community of disabled people together to voice common concerns. Whether the debate was at the level of facts, feelings or ideologies, it embodied an extended, reflective engagement with a work whose meaning could not be fully processed in the moment of encounter.

CONCLUSION

Crow's *Resistance on the Plinth* is a public-space performance that deliberately courts uncertainty, undecidability, debate and dialogue. In many ways, the conflict that characterized this portion of the online remembering and remediation of the work further confirms the value of Crow's approach. *Resistance on the Plinth* demonstrated the way that fuzzy or blurred frames, which encourage a deferral in meaning-making, are most likely to draw spectators into a dialogue about the culturally determined logics that dominate our daily lives. Moreover, responses to *Resistance on the Plinth* illustrated how spectators bring their 'selves' – the usually hidden modes of being, behaving and seeing embedded in their bodily habitus – into this dialogue. These responses highlighted both the challenges and the possibilities of public-space performance for encouraging spectators to reflect on their own ideas, ideologies and contributions to the construction of discourses and ideas about disability. The work's impact was a direct result of Crow's emphasis on uncertainty, which allowed for a complex, emotionally charged and potentially productive encounter between the beliefs held by the artist and those held by her spectators.

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