

What sort of archive?

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(This oral presentation was presented as part of 'Thinking Aloud', a day of discussion about setting up a Disability Arts Archive at Holton Lee in Dorset, England, on July 16th 2004).

In his introductory paper to this archive project, Tony Heaton has described how minorities with an oral tradition are in danger of losing their art and culture. But the truth is that, with certain key exceptions such as the Deaf community, we don't even have an oral tradition. We don't have any great set of myths and stories and advice on how to live in the world that gets handed down from disabled adult to disabled child, generation after generation.

So what we in disability arts have created in the last twenty years has enormous importance. For the first time, there are things in the world that communicate how it is that other disabled people have felt, what it was that angered them, made them laugh, made them cry. There are pictures and poems and songs that give the message: you are not alone. Others have travelled this road before you - and had a pretty good time doing it.

But those things will only be here if we value them and look after them. If we don't save what matters now, a lot of it will vanish, or become so difficult to find that it might as well be gone. We have to do this, and we have to do it now. Because if we don't value what we have created, why on earth should we expect anyone else to.

So what we are undertaking in creating this archive is work of enormous importance. But it isn't straightforward. To explain what a tricky task we face, I'd like to point out some of the ways this archive could fail to achieve all we hope for it.

It could get full up. We have already been advised that we must create a rigorous acquisitions policy, so that, in order to avoid being swamped, we basically exclude as much as possible.

We could fail to come up with the right answer to the question: should it be *the* archive or *an* archive. On one hand the danger is that we will have a single small but prestigious institution mopping up all available funding so that other worthwhile projects can't get off the ground and the work they would have saved gets lost. Conversely, if we aim to be just *an* archive, one among a potential many, not aiming to do the whole job, we may fail to take responsibility for important work, so that it gets lost.

We may make the wrong decisions about what is important, so that we hand down to future generations, not the most important work or the best work, but whatever happens to have met the taste of the dominant voice on whatever committee does the selecting.

The archive could be in the wrong place, so that someone from a school or college in Newcastle, wanting to study the past achievements of a local group such as the Lawnmowers or NORDAF, would have to travel down to Dorset to do so.

It could get the balance between exhibition and preservation wrong. Do we want to keep materials safe, or do we want to make them available to people?

It could fail - this is a big danger - to anticipate events such as the collapse of a Disability Arts organisation or the unexpected death of an artist, producing a chaotic situation where artefacts or information that have seemed low priority, being important but safe, suddenly are not safe and are chucked on to a skip.

It could be unable to preserve certain kinds of work because they're in the wrong medium. It is unlikely that this archive will be equipped to store film really well, for example. Nor, given its size, will it be well suited to keeping many large works such as Eddy Hardy's paintings.

I think, however, that there is a solution to all these problems, and the model for it is to be found in Australia.

The Australian Distributed National Collection was created as a way of caring for the country's diverse cultural heritage - a large quantity of moveable materials, housed in many different institutions of all

sizes, from national collections to small town museums or private ownership. Much of this material had strong local significance which would be devalued if it were taken away to a centralised national archive.

What they realised was that this material could be treated as being effectively a single collection housed in a lot of different places. Most of it could be housed locally but catalogued nationally and cared for as part of the National Conservation Strategy.

Thus a small town museum may contain three or four items that are part of the Distributed National Collection. They are recognised as having national importance, but they stay where they have local significance.

My suggestion is that we follow this model, and create a dispersed collection. Instead of trying to do it all at Holton Lee, we should encourage disability arts organisations to build their own archives, elements of which would form a part of our national archive.

We should also negotiate with institutions such as the British Film Institute and the British Library, using identification of items as part of the National Disability Arts Archive to influence the decision making of those much wealthier bodies.

This would create a collection of significant artworks, artefacts, documents and information held in part at the Holton Lee archive, but in many cases by disability arts organisations and public collections, or in some cases even in private ownership (particularly where artists wished to retain specific important works). All of these should be held in the most appropriate place in terms of conservation and exhibition, with due regard to relevance to particular communities, site-specific links, and the needs of individual organisations for whom they may still form part of their regular working practice.

Though the items in this collection would be widely dispersed, and might have widely different ownership, the collection as a whole would be subject to the disciplines of planning, development and management.

The Holton Lee building would provide the strategic centre of this collection, holding a limited number of key items, but tracking a much larger number. Its work, in combination with the Edward Lear Foundation, would include: developing criteria for judging the significance of particular work; identifying and recording the corpus of significant work; creating an information base so that scholars and students would have one central point of reference; advising Disability Arts organisations on policies for recording and archiving their own work; and providing advice and training on conservation issues.

In an emergency situation, key items, having been identified as part of the National Disability Arts Archive, would already be earmarked. The Holton Lee archive could be expected to play an interim role, safeguarding significant items until the most appropriate home for them was found. This would avoid problems such as that faced by the papers of the late Dorothy Miles, which, stuffed into cardboard boxes, passed from hand to hand in the Deaf community until they eventually ended up in the Deaf History Archive, where they could be properly safeguarded.

The Holton Lee operation would thus become an important national resource, underpinning the wider efforts of the Disability Arts community to preserve and record its own history and achievements.

This isn't just about taking care of some pictures and papers. The task that faces us is one of reaching out to other disabled people, handing something on to those who will follow us. A few years ago, in a paper I wrote for NDAF, suggesting that we set up a national collection of disability art works, I said that we had to leave some footprints in the sand, so that others will know that they are not alone. This meeting today is the start of that process.

(For more information on Edward Lear Foundation:
www.learfoundation.org.uk)