

Disability Culture: it's a Way of Life

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Ultimately Disability culture should be recognised as one of the many strands running through contemporary multi-cultural society. A lot of Disabled people believe there is a great value in making links between ourselves and other oppressed groups and artistic expression should facilitate this in all sorts of ways. In time we will have our own body of artistic work about or informed by the experience of being disabled in the same way as there is already much work created from the point of view of women, people from ethnic cultures and from lesbians and gay men.

Meanwhile cast your mind back for a moment or two and try to remember whether you have ever, for want of anything better to do, glued yourself to a toilet seat. Now, of course it's none of my business whether you have gone in for that sort of activity, or not. I only bring the matter up, because I am sure that if you did try a little of this non-addictive experimentation with solvents, you would find the effect pretty similar to one of the humdrum, but nevertheless, important experiences of my daily life and the daily life of a lot of Disabled people - you would find yourself unable to get up off the loo. Come to think of it I cannot get myself onto the loo either, but sticking, pardon the pun, to the initial problem, I am sure you can imagine the difficulties this raises. Incidentally, I hope you are finding my attempt to find a way of making the experience real for you as well, useful. Not everybody favours the school of 'disability-awareness training', which requires able-bodied people to smear vaseline on their glasses and stuff cotton wool in their ears so they can know what it's like to be Disabled. As far as I'm concerned, if you really want to get into the subject of Disability I strongly suggest that you go and dig out the Araldite and get into the bathroom just as soon as you've finished reading this article.

So what has this got to do with Disability Culture? Well, not unsurprisingly, being able to get on and off the loo without help does

have quite a significant effect on the lifestyle of the individual and what is culture if not almost another word for lifestyle? This loo business is a very specific and unequivocal example of the Disability experience and I don't want to mislead you into thinking that I am talking about something uncomplicated here. Being Disabled weaves itself into the fabric of life in all its aspects and very importantly it is not an entirely negative experience. For example, in the course of being helped in the loo I have made any number of friends, in fact I often find the bathroom is an ideal place to get to know people, or cement a relationship.

The experience of being a disabled woman is an interesting one. A lot of us would agree that in many ways we are treated as the ultimate in non-persons. We are not generally seen as having any sexuality and as it sometimes seems that the majority of men can only relate to women through sexuality this can mean a certain amount of isolation. However, once you've come to terms with the fact that you're not going to win Miss World, disability for women can be quite a liberating experience. We are not usually snapped up on the flower of youth for our domestic and child rearing skills, or for our decorative value, so we do not have to spend years disentangling ourselves from wearisome relationships as is the way with so many non-disabled women. This means that we are freer to get on and live our lives without the daily burden of being treated as sex objects. This is obviously a wild generalisation, but it is certainly a fact that the disability arts scene, for instance, includes a lot more women in key roles than other scenes I can think of.

In the rare moments that I am not organising my social life in the lavatory I am a worker for the London Disability Arts Forum, (LDAF) which is the London wide organisation of Disabled people interested in the arts. One of the reasons for forming LDAF was to provide an opportunity and a focus for Disabled people to start exploring this notion of our culture and to create environments that encourage its expression through the various art forms. Now of course it has to be said that obviously someone deaf, or blind, or learning Disabled would not find the toilet example an even remotely useful illustration of their lifestyle in the practical sense, but it is probably true to say that we all have similar emotional and social experiences because of our impairments and the Disabilities, which ensue from them.

Through the arts we can make discoveries about what we have in common and place the emphasis on those things rather than on our differences, thus countering the traditional charitable model of Disability that has historically kept us separate from each other. If you are not sure what I mean just think of organisations such as The Royal National Institute for the Deaf, The Spastics Society and a host of others all dedicated to the welfare of one type of Disabled person or another.

I do not believe there is any doubt that Disabled people have our own culture in that our lifestyles, in the main, are distinctly different from those of non-Disabled people. Whether Disabled people en masse want to term this difference a culture remains to be seen. Certainly a lot of Disabled people shy away from acknowledging that they have anything to do with disability as a movement and there are indeed strong pressures on us to be 'normal' and to fight on an individual level against the injustices we face, which work against our collective strength. However, LDAF has about one hundred members, other Disability Arts Forums are springing up all over the country and the indication is that there are an awful lot of Disabled people around who want something other than integration into mainstream culture - whatever that is - and who do want the time to explore our identity as Disabled people.