

WE WANT TO REMODEL THE WORLD *

Vic Finkelstein - 4 October 1996

'You want to change the world?' The questioner asked with an expression of incredulity. I hesitated. Should I answer truthfully or back away as we so often did in public? We were attending a Central Television feedback meeting at a very early stage in the presentation of the Sunday morning LINK programmes. I had argued the case for a clear and open platform for the social interpretation of disability. We were not just pressing our case for the able-bodied world to accept us, to be more caring and make adjustments for our 'needs', but suggesting that the able-bodied world had to change – it was disabling us. 'Yes' I replied after a moment. 'We want to change the world' and with this I changed myself, my public identity, from a passive-dependent user of care services to an active citizen expressing my fundamental human right to have an impact on the world in which I live.

Changing the world is a heavy agenda. Not the overnight outcome of a conference, a neat piece of research, publishing shelf-miles of learned books, sympathetic legislation, lawyers and professionals seeing the light and supporting our struggles, heroic cripples championing the 'cause' and receiving awards, it is not successful charities collecting loads of money and running publicity campaigns for the deserving poor, not the media drumming up sympathy for the tragic but brave, not a disabled elite mingling with the rich and powerful in parliament on our behalf. No, changing the world is all of these things; and it is changing all of these things. Above all changing the world is the sum total of all our endeavours to promote, support and participate in making social change. At the heart of this activity beats the collective will of the disabled grass roots, and the sum total of this will is a whole new culture.

The social interpretation of disability is a vision where the picture emerges only when all the pieces are put together in the right place at the right time. Not everyone can see this picture. Twenty years ago we had to face hostility from those who regarded our vision, the creation of a non-disabling barrier-free social and physical environment, as a utopian fantasy. Fifteen years ago we faced hostility when we put in place the next piece in the vision, the creation of democratic organisations of disabled people united in a common purpose. Ten years ago a small group of people met in a climate of scepticism to give shape to the next piece, a forum for the development of the new disability culture. As we join LDAF and DAIL magazine in celebrating this important anniversary, we should be applauding not only a hard earned success but sharing in a cultural heritage that we have all been privileged in creating piece by piece.

Now is also the time to look ahead to the creation of the next piece in the picture of our emancipation – mainstreaming our disability culture so that its celebration of difference, its vision depicting a non-disabling society, acquires a universal appeal. This should not only engage an increasing number of disabled people at the grass roots in creative activity but place the disability perspective (the social model) at the leading edge of social change for all. This will finally end the mistaken assumption that there are naturally negative social consequences of having an impairment and make clear the civilising vision for all citizens that we are creating in our disability culture.

'Yes', I wanted to repeat in this editorial to all those who support our struggle for change, and to those who doubt our ability to contribute to a caring world and not just receive assistance from non-disabled people, 'we do want to change the world, to remodel the world according to the perspective of disabled people, to develop and share our culture, because this will improve your quality of life, whoever you are'.

* This editorial was prepared for the 10th anniversary of the founding of the London Disability Arts Forum (LDAF) and published in the DAIL magazine.