



Out on a Limb

Challenging Images of Disability through
Contemporary Art



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CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS

Kate Griffin and Damien Robinson

Kate: In Autumn 1998, the Whitechapel Art Gallery facilitated the production of *Picture This*, a video project exploring the use and development of British Sign Language (BSL) in galleries and museums. The structure and content of *Picture This* were developed collaboratively and represent the combined experience of a group of deaf and hearing people involved in BSL interpreted events at the Whitechapel.

When asked by the curators of **Out on a Limb** to write a catalogue essay about the *Picture This* project, set in context of the Whitechapel's on-going work with and for deaf artists and practitioners, it occurred to me that it would be impossible to accurately describe or illustrate the relationship the Whitechapel maintains with its deaf audience without integrating two distinct voices - the gallery's own and that of the deaf artists and audience members who regularly use and contribute to the Whitechapel programme.

Damien Robinson, an artist with whom I have worked closely in recent months on a number of projects, including *Picture This*, thus agreed to join me in writing this paper. Our essay, which reflects our individual experiences of deafness and the visual arts, is presented as a dialogue, not least because this format most genuinely represents the way we have worked together, in the past, in the spirit of collaboration.

The paper will use the term 'deaf' to encompass all aspects of deafness, both medical and cultural. It represents, in this context, those who are deaf, deafened or hard of hearing, as well as those who share a sign language and experience of Deaf culture.

Damien: Collaboration, to me, is about developing an open exchange of ideas and information. The visual arts community like any specialist group has its own specialist vocabulary and jargon. One of the aims of *Picture This* was to encourage dialogue around the development of specialist BSL vocabulary for the visual arts. Without a shared understanding of the meaning and ideas behind arts language, the means of contributing to an arts dialogue can only be partial. With the increase of meaningful interaction between galleries and deaf artists and audiences, specialist BSL vocabulary can be developed and disseminated.

The Whitechapel is not a Deaf Arts organisation, but allows, through its programme, the gallery and audience (deaf and hearing) to expand their ideas about deaf people's involvement in the visual arts. By 'meeting in the middle' both groups are able to discuss their current needs and ideas and importantly, how to move forward in the future and how to work together to achieve this. To my mind, it is vital that organisations with a positive interest in this field of work are given constructive encouragement and advice from the user group.

Kate: Yes, if someone were to ask me, as a hearing person working in a visual arts organisation, what concept, thought or idea stood most clearly in my thinking around work with deaf audiences, I would say, firstly, that an open dialogue with deaf people is at the heart of developing valuable and sustainable relationships.

We were discussing a statement made by John Wilson, Deaf Arts Officer for SHAPE London, who wrote recently,

Most hearing people imagine that art galleries would provide one form of art which deaf people would not need any support to consume on the same terms as hearing people. Afterall, you don't need to hear anything to understand a painting. The fact is however, that for most deaf people, art galleries may as well be on another planet.

For me, this comment highlights very clearly an assumption, often made, that the visual arts are and always have been accessible to deaf people. However, there is a contradiction here. Despite being a visual language, access to the visual arts means so much more than simply looking. It means access to the opportunity to contribute to a public discussion and debate regarding art and its place in our lives, as well as access to involvement in creating and exhibiting artwork.

Damien: Yes, for deaf artists and audiences, the way deafness is perceived and interpreted by the hearing world can restrict involvement and the development of practice.

Deafness, along with a number of other disabilities, is not always physically visible. Within gallery environments, deaf audiences remain a largely unidentified sector of the arts community. It is only when communication and interaction is initiated, either through BSL or oral systems, that we become recognisable as a distinct group. Indeed, the real 'void' is rarely about deafness itself, but about the gulf in communications and mutual understanding that must be overcome. Deafness is often perceived as a loss rather than as a difference in the way we interact with each other and with the hearing world. No-one assumes, for example, that a French artist has something 'missing' because they do not speak English. There is some way to go before a fuller understanding of deaf people's use of alternative language systems is achieved.

Kate: The Whitechapel is privileged to have a dynamic and rewarding association with its deaf audience. It is, however, important to acknowledge that this relationship did not occur by accident. In fact, the development at the gallery of work with and for deaf artists and audiences has been an on-going and cumulative process, which began with and continues to involve a dedicated consultation with deaf people and with organisations with expertise in deaf arts issues.

Two out of every ten gallery talks per Whitechapel exhibition are interpreted in British Sign Language (BSL). The gallery also hosts D'Art, an informal group of deaf artists and arts enthusiasts meeting after interpreted talks, amongst whom there is a common interest in contemporary art.

Damien: Because I am deafened - I was not born deaf - it was only when I went to college that I started to realise how many barriers existed in the arts world and in education systems. The grant at the time, for one year's communication support for my studies, was so low, I had to choose which lectures I could afford to go to. I spent a lot of time feeling frustrated because I knew how much I was missing. I did not have full access to information or debate about the visual arts.

The first time I went to a gallery which was holding an interpreted talk, I do not think I took in the information because I was so stunned that finally someone was thinking about the needs of deaf people and looking at us as a valued part of the artistic community. The Whitechapel group D'Art has allowed that kind of involvement to be taken a step further, by giving deaf people with an interest in the visual arts an opportunity and venue in which to meet and debate the issues raised in the talks, with access both to the speaker and to gallery staff. It is also a social occasion where deaf artists can meet up, network, share information and discuss working practice.

Kate: For the gallery's part, the deaf people attending gallery talks and D'Art meetings make a very valuable contribution to the gallery's programme, not only in terms of dialogue and debate, but actively as facilitators. These events have given gallery staff themselves the opportunity to network and to meet deaf artists, a number of whom have since worked in other areas of the gallery's Community Education Programme.

During D'Art meetings, participants are encouraged to complete a short evaluation form. At least one member of staff is also available to receive feedback and much comment is offered informally. In this way, the meetings also provide a lively forum in which the interests and needs of the group are made known to the gallery. What is interesting and apparent is the broad range of concerns within the group.

Damien: Yes, I think one of the things that may be particularly hard for a hearing audience to comprehend is that neither deaf audiences nor artists are a homogeneous group. There are a wide variety of communication systems, backgrounds and access needs within a group drawn together by the visual arts. Galleries and arts venues need to explore this variety within a sector labelled with the umbrella of 'deaf' if they are to have a meaningful dialogue and outreach systems.

Kate: It is also true to say that an awareness and understanding of this variety can genuinely broaden the scope of a gallery's work. Whitechapel initiatives, such as a recent Artists in Residence project with local hearing impaired students and projects like *Picture This* could never have had the impact or success without that grounding. As a visual arts organisation committed to the professional development and status of practising visual artists, it is also important for the gallery to be aware of this inherent variety in order to be able to support deaf artists in their professional lives through employment.

Damien: Equality is not just about being 'consumers' of the arts, but about access to all aspects of the art world including employment. The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) published research in 1998, which showed that employers considered deafness a worse barrier to employment than a criminal record or a history of drug abuse.

Given that the arts is a hugely competitive career sector in its own right, the combination of attitudinal prejudice and a lack of opportunities has meant that arts employers often fail to draw on the wealth of talent and skills which exist within the deaf arts community, both as practising artists and as arts workers. Although the arts world is becoming more aware of artists who are deaf, there are few deaf arts workers in positions to influence decision-making processes. Recognition of deaf people not just as an audience, but as artists, teachers and arts workers is the next leap the arts community has to make.

As an artist, I have worked with both deaf and hearing children (and in collaboration with both deaf and hearing artists). This is really when you see how a programme like the Whitechapel's has an impact beyond the gallery. In a recent project co-ordinated by the gallery, I worked with a hearing artist, Hew Locke and a group of hearing impaired students at St. Paul's Way Community School. The students and their teachers saw a deaf artist and a hearing artist working together on an equal basis. The students came to the gallery and realised they too could be involved in the arts if they wanted to.

Kate: It is definitely at those times when creative collaborations have a very tangible impact that the future potential is imaginable. I am optimistic that a broad, open and on-going dialogue between galleries and their deaf publics will ultimately see a time when deaf artists and audiences are universally able to claim the equal right to participate in and deliver the visual arts. If we, the arts community, are bold enough to set ourselves that challenge, then the possibilities are endless.

Damien: I agree. To acknowledge the existence of that challenge is to begin to address the issues underpinning deafness and the visual arts. However, standards of good practice, concepts and ideas are constantly evolving and changing. The current upsurge in debate around the issue of what constitutes 'Deaf Art' is, for example, providing us with an opportunity to define our identity. There is as yet no consensus. What unites us is our identity as artists and that we are deaf, not that our work can only be understood from a single perspective. I feel that that plurality of vision and experience is one of our strengths.

Kate: I am convinced that it is the diversity of our individual experiences and understanding that makes sharing, in the context of collaboration, such an exciting and rewarding experience.

Kate Griffin is the Community Education Co-ordinator at the Whitechapel Art Gallery where she has a particular responsibility for work with disabled audiences. The Whitechapel has an on-going commitment to work with and for disabled people and was recently short listed for a Gulbenkian Award in the category of Best Provision for Visitors with Disabilities

Damien Robinson studied at Great Yarmouth College of Art and Design and Goldsmiths. Since graduating she has divided her time between working as a practising artist and as an arts administrator. Most recent projects include the De@fsite digital art work for the Photographer's Gallery and the group exhibition 'Adultessence' at the Phoenix Arts Centre in Exeter. She is also a Visual Arts Assessor for London Arts Board.