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Freak Fucker: Stereotypical Representations  
of Sexuality in British Disability Art

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Abstract

Political in aesthetic, using the social model of disability, artists have reflected on the portrayal of 'positive' images of disability debating society's depiction of stereotypical images. Whilst some disability artists now reconsider the need for theoretical distinctions between 'positive' and 'negative' images of disability which has been argued to confirm good and bad norms of disabled people, many have reclaimed stereotypical images in their work in order to confront prejudicial social attitudes. This reclamation of stereotypical representations has never been more confrontational or controversial than in the visual imagery of sexuality in disability art. Analysing select works from disability artists such as Ann Whitehurst's 'Wheelchairbound' (1993), Jo Pearson's seminal film 'Freak Fucking Basics' (1995), as well as Ju Gosling's multi media piece 'My Not-So-Secret Life as a Cyborg' (circa 2001), this paper critiques their representations of these adverse stereotypes. Viewed as 'asexual', deviant 'freaks', objects of 'fetish' and voyeurism within private and political spheres, disability artists seek to redress the governance of disabled people's sexuality redefining dominant myths that perpetuate preconceived notions of 'acceptable' desirability.

Introduction

Born out of the highly political Disability Movement in the mid 1980s, disability art provided a new way in which disabled people could become actively involved in cultural production, challenge hegemonic stereotypes and promote a disability identity. Contextualised within the Movement's core theoretical concept through the work of disability academics the fundamental Social Model dismisses medicalised views of disability and argues that: "...Disability is not a condition of the individual. The experiences of disabled people are of the social restrictions in the world around them."<sup>1</sup>

Political in aesthetic, disability art has sought to redress the imbalance of dominant 'negative' and therefore 'disabling' images which represent disabled people as the mythical, tragic 'Other'. More recently, since the 1990s, some disability artists reconsidered the need for counteracting 'negative' images with the 'positive' whereby they have been argued to merely confirm 'good' and 'bad' norms of disability. In doing so, artists such as Ann Whitehurst, Jo Pearson and Ju Gosling, reclaim stereotypical images in their work confronting (often controversially), prejudiced social attitudes.

More significantly for Whitehurst and Pearson, whose work was produced in the early to mid 1990s at a time when the Social Model became a universally recognised concept thus influencing policy for the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act, their contributions highlighted a need for disabled people to be recognised as strong, independent individuals with authoritative opinions. Exploring the predominantly taboo subject of sexuality and disability, which because of adverse private 'fears' and continued political governance, has become an issue of human rights, disabled people are represented as 'asexual', deviant 'freaks', objects of 'fetish' and voyeurism. Redefining preconceived notions of 'acceptable' desirability in the non-disabled consciousness, these selected disability artists examine perpetual prominent attitudes that are immersed in the mainstream obsession with physical attractiveness.

Before analysing designated works from Whitehurst, Pearson and Gosling, the Social Model concept must again be revisited. Whilst acknowledging the pivotal significance of this theory and the profound impact it has made globally for the Disability Movement and subsequently, disability art, it is important to consider the underlying problem it exposes. Derived from feminist discourse, Jenny Morris in the seminal text 'Pride Against Prejudice' poignantly critiques: "...there is a tendency within the Social Model of disability to deny the experience of our own bodies, insisting that our physical differences and restrictions are entirely socially created...to suggest that this is all there is to it is to deny the personal experience of physical or intellectual restrictions."<sup>2</sup> In this respect, taking into account both approaches to the concept of disability, the personal experience of sexuality can be ruminated through the work of each disability artist including collective experiences of stereotypical attitudes that disabled people encounter about their sexuality.

### Sexual Subjugation

Ann Whitehurst's 1993 piece 'Wheelchairbound' draws upon parallel images which correlate between stereotypical symbols of disability - the 'wheelchair' and 'deviance' related notions of disabled people as objects of 'fetish' - identified by the corseted seat associated with sado-masochism (S&M). As

a wheelchair user, Whitehurst represents its limitations or constraints and the social sexual constraints enforced upon disabled people via legislation, health care professions and their related institutions. Symbolising restrictions in privacy and access to a confidential sexual life, often breached by everyday requirements of personal assistants, Whitehurst illustrates how a persons physical disability restricts their basic rights to physical contact and intimacy. Stating that she constantly seeks to "...develop her ideas and disrupt a patterning, society's and her own,"<sup>3</sup> Whitehurst instantly confronts the viewer with a stereotypical image of sexuality and disability whilst reinforcing the collective sexual desires of disabled people.

Most interestingly in this work there is no depiction of the body, often used to reinforce society's views of disability within the Medical Model placing an emphasis on impairment itself and with it notions of dependent 'childlike' 'asexuality'. Reaffirming domination and control from S&M practice, the stereotype situates phrases in the piece like 'power and the powered' chair resolutely as a tool for identification and empowerment. Executed before the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act', but during the precedent intermediary period of the Direct Action Network's first campaign for civil rights, Whitehurst reclaims 'fetishistic' disability stereotypes in order to destabilise hegemonic prejudicial control. Substituting the visually prominent corseted wheelchair as a focus for 'untold' sexual desire, disavowal is rendered whereby, as Stuart Hall notes, "...a powerful fascination or desire is both indulged and at the same time denied. It is where what has been tabooed nevertheless manages to find a displaced form of representation."<sup>4</sup>

## Freaks and Fetishists

Jo Pearson is an award winning multimedia artist and producer for the BBC disability magazine programme, 'From the Edge', as well as the highly acclaimed yet controversial 1995 film 'Freak Fucking Basics'. It is a provocative documentary, examining the personal experience of disability, sexuality and prejudice. Featuring actor, musician and renowned disability performance artist Mat Fraser, this thirteen minute film shot in black and white and colour, relays between Mat's own account of sexual stereotypes which connects to performance of his accompanying soundtrack 'Outsiders': "This songs about me you sex and the practice. Of having the libido of a normal sexuality. And with it confronting the straight worlds reality."<sup>5</sup>

Confronting the 'straight worlds reality' indeed with his reclamation of stereotypical language, Mat tells us of previous involvement with Sadeo Masochistic (S&M) 'Outsider' clubs highlighting dominant stereotypical prejudices of disabled people as objects of 'fetish' belonging to the realms of what he calls sexual 'low lives'. Not denying a personal

interest and gratification through S&M he acknowledges the fact which Shakespeare has noted in his research that: "Disabled people very commonly find themselves the focus of sexual interest from people who find their impairment titillating."<sup>6</sup>

As Mat articulates, however, instead of viewing this sexual situation as oppressive, he emphasises feeling an affinity with other 'Outsiders'. Reiterating the words of his music, Mat casually makes anecdotes relating to his past sex life. Using the phrase 'freak fucking' Mat explains how some of his previous non-disabled sexual partners have dubiously slept with him for "...smug point scoring of having fucked an outsider".<sup>7</sup> Alternatively and controversially from the subsequent complaints of many disabled women, Mat also confesses in the film how he himself has slept with women who have various impairments in order to satisfy an inherent curiosity. Addressing his own sexual voyeurism, Mat challenges the viewer to consider their voyeuristic treatment of his body and sexuality.

The most intriguing aspect about this film must be Jo Pearson's decision to represent the personal account of a disabled man's sexual experience and not her own or another woman's. In many respects this could relate to notions of the similar sexual inequality and voyeurism placed upon non-disabled women with mainstream society and disabled men, stereotypically equivalent to passivity and dependence. Documenting the reflections of a disabled man who displays an athletic prowess through martial arts, redefines society's standards of masculinity and thus desirability primarily validated by athletics and sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, multimedia artist Ju Gosling continues this reference with 'fetishism' and disability. Reinventing herself as a virtual work of art known as 'Ju90' in cyberspace, Gosling's 'My Not-So-Secret-Life as a Cyborg' (circa 2001) explores the social construction of disability through performance art. Illustrated with various self portraits deeply reminiscent of the paintings by Frida Kahlo, she discusses issues surrounding identity, disability and sexuality. Focusing on 'Borg/Brace', alter-ego Ju90 turns her back to the viewer, presenting the custom made orthopaedic brace. Made of plastic (which Ju later had sprayed silver) covering the length of her spine fastened with nylon straps, Gosling presents herself as an object of fetish and voyeurism. Reasserting an ownership of the corset, she traps all personality in the brace so that she becomes assimilated within it. The fundamental feature throughout Gosling's multimedia work is the significance placed on androgyny. With a reinvented virtual name, 'Ju90', Gosling disregards her real name Juliet, typically associated with tragedy and femininity, and replaces it for a condensed version referring the '90' to late 1960s animated character Jo 90.

Likewise, this URL name gives no primary evidence of gender, identity, or sexuality, reinforcing an ambiguity. Commenting that her previous "...androgynous image had

vanished"<sup>9</sup> as soon as she began wearing the borg/brace, she also reiterates however "...it exaggerated my femininity and impairment whilst conflating the two".<sup>10</sup> Intentionally custom designing the borg/brace with a ying/yang symbol and dolphin image marking the exact location where the spinal injury began, Ju depicts the point of 'deformity' from personal signification.

Examining the triptych photographic piece: 'Dancing with Darkness' we become aware of her past as a classically trained ballet dancer. With short hair and empowering poses, Ju presents two main stereotypes of disabled people's sexuality. Relating 'androgyny' to 'asexuality' she identifies herself as a "...queer woman who likes to dress up as a boy".<sup>11</sup> Depicting fitness related femininity holding ballet shoes, the orthopaedic corset defines her body into a curved traditional hourglass silhouette. Acknowledging the voyeuristic fascination she attracts from orthopaedic fetishists, in the third photograph, Ju prominently displays her brace confidently, whilst holding up a physical aid, thus reclaiming herself as a strong, desirable and sexual disabled person.

#### Reversing Hegemonic Control?

As Craig Owen suggests, in 'Beyond Recognition, Representation, Power and Culture', that if the main intention of the stereotype is "...with the express purpose of intimidating the enemy into submission"<sup>12</sup> then Ju90 succeeds with her authoritative representation. Reversing hegemonic power through the reclamation of sexual stereotypes, all of the artists examined seek to shift the imbalance of society's prejudice. Nevertheless, a fundamental question has to be asked: do re-represented mainstream stereotypes really make the 'non-disabled' rethink their prejudiced attitudes particularly at the cost of other disabled people who may find these confrontational images offensive? Although this question provokes ongoing debates about representation in disability studies often dividing opinions in research and the Movement itself, I must make another point derived from Owens: "While the stereotype enjoys an unlimited social mobility - it must circulate freely if it is to perform its work - it must nevertheless remain fixed, in order to procure the generalised social immobility which is its dream."<sup>13</sup>

In terms of reclaiming hegemonic control of the stereotype, it is arguable whether such deep-rooted simplifications can ever really be reversed particularly when there are continued overwhelming inequalities in power and access. For disability artists, therefore, who endeavour to reclaim these stereotypes and re-present them back to the mainstream culture, it can only be more successful perhaps if it is given an opportunity to indeed 'circulate freely' assisted by greater financial independence and creative control.

#### Summary

Promoting further research/publications on disability art/culture, more support could possibly be obtained from government arts bodies and arts institutions heightening an awareness about disabled people's sexual rights and overall stereotypical representations in society. Despite the possibilities in mobilising cultural control of stereotypes, whilst the majority 'non-disabled' society chooses to dilute distinctions between disability art and disability and the arts,<sup>14</sup> a necessary combination of 'positive' and 'reclaimed' stereotypical can never be given total recognition in order to make a profound impact for the future.

#### Footnotes

1. Excerpt from Swain, John (et al.), 'Introduction,' p. 2 in Swain, John (et al.), *Disabling Places, Enabling Environments*. Sage Publications in association with Open University Press, London, 1993.

2. Morris, Jenny, Introduction, *Feminism and Disability Politics*, p. 10 in Morris, Jenny, *Pride Against Prejudice - Transforming Attitudes to Disability*. The Women's Press Ltd, London, 1991.

3. Whitehurst, Ann, from the Outside Centre artists online page, <[www.outside-centre.com/artists/white.html](http://www.outside-centre.com/artists/white.html)> p.1, February, 2002.

4. Hall, Stuart (ed), Section 4.3; 'Fetishism and Disavowal', Chapter 4; 'The Spectacle of the Other', p. 267 in Hall, S (ed), *Representation - Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage Publications and the Open University Press, London, 1997.

5. Fraser, Mat, 'Outsiders' in Fraser, Mat, 'Survival of the Shittiest' CD music album, THE FUNK SYSTEM, 2001.

6. Shakespeare, Tom (et al.), Chapter 5, 'Bad Sex', 'Fetishism', p. 125 in Shakespeare, Tom (et al.), *Untold Desires - The Sexual Politics of Disability*. Cassell, London and New York, 1996.

7. Commentary from Fraser, Mat in Pearson, Jo (Director), 'Freak Fucking Basics' film documentary, betacam colour and black and white. Running time, 13 minutes. The Arts Council of England, London, 1995.

8. Refer to Part II, 'Managing Self/Society Conflict' in Gerschick, Thomas, J, 'Sisyphus in a Wheelchair', 'Sexuality', p. 198-200 in O'Brien, Jodi (et al.), *Everyday Inequalities - Critical Inquiries*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Massachusetts, USA and Oxford, England.

9. From Gosling, Ju, My Not-So-Secret-Life as a Cyborg website page, 'The Brace Borg', <<http://users.netmatters.co.uk/ju90/cylife.3.html>> p.1, February, 2002.

10. Op cit.

11. From Gosling, Ju, 'My Not-So-Secret-Life as a cyborg

website page, 'Ju90', <<http://users.netmatters.co.uk/ju90/whoju90.htm>> p.1, February, 2002.

12. Owens, Craig, Part II, 'Sexuality / Power', 'The Medusa Effect or the Specular Ruse', p. 144 in Owens, C, *Beyond Recognition - Representation, Power and Culture*. University of California Press, Berkeley, and Los Angeles, 1994.

13. Op cit., p. 195.

14. The Arts Council of England specifically defines this difference in their information sheet 'Disability and the Arts: Get it Right', 'What's it all about?' p. 5 as a phrase which incorporates the active inclusion of disabled people within mainstream arts primarily as spectators and creative workshop project participants. Document written and produced by the Arts Council of England, London, nd.

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