



No art lover left behind: how galleries are finally welcoming disabled people

After years of being shunted to the sidelines and made to feel in the way, disabled people are finally getting galleries to listen - and enable access to all

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A few weeks ago, Tate Modern found itself at the centre of a storm after wheelchair-user Ciara O'Connor took to social media to protest that there was no ramp to enable her to enter and experience a key cylindrical work in an exhibition by the Danish/Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson.

Within days, more than 2,000 people had retweeted her words and more than 100 had piled in with their own angry anecdotes, drawing apologies from the London museum and from the artist's studio, which pointed out that it was an old work, created in 2002. There is now a video at the side of Your Spiral View, showing what it is like to pass through. Tate and Eliasson have promised to do better in future.



Controversy ... Olafur Eliasson's Your Spiral View. Photograph: Thilo Frank/Studio Olafur Eliasson

"It turns out that this is about far more than me, a ramp, the Tate, Eliasson," concluded O'Connor, who clearly spoke for many when she tweeted: "I never get to lose myself in a picture, or wander in a reverie. I am always, ALWAYS aware of my body, how it's blocking people, how it's taking up space, how it's inconvenient and cumbersome."

While the row was swirling around the South Bank, a few miles away curator Clare Barlow was putting the finishing touches to a new permanent gallery at the Wellcome Collection that aims to address these issues. Entitled *Being Human*, the gallery's mission is to "explore trust, identity and health in a changing world". Contributors include several leading disability activists - so one of the first things Barlow had to get right was accessibility.



Changed prescription ... Dolly Sen's *Dignity* and *Help the Normals*. Photograph: Dolly Sen/Wellcome Collection

The performer, poet and film-maker Dolly Sen has contributed two exhibits: a charity collection tin entitled *Help the Normals*, and a medical prescription box named *Dignity*. "Help the Normals," she says, "makes a mockery of the charity model of disability, by switching the object of pity and the giver of pity. *Dignity* is a medication box that tells you that dignity cannot be taken four times a day. Dignity means not begging for my identity, my dreams. It means not begging to be heard, to be cared for. And that is a fight many people who are in the mental health system understand."

Sen, who had episodes of psychosis between the ages of 14 and 30, says starkly that art was "the route to save my life and save my soul". Has she felt institutionally excluded? "Luckily enough, I have not had problems in recent times," she says. "But in the mid-00s, I was part of an arts organisation called *Creative Routes*, which was run by the mad for the mad. We tried to set up partnerships with major arts establishments. One was Tate Modern, who refused to collaborate with us unless we had a mental health professional, to look after us and be an intermediary.

"They could not see this was discriminatory and patronising. They also told us if we turned up without this mental-health professional, we would be ejected from the building. We decided to do a mini-protest along the lines of, 'The Tate only likes mad people if they are dead.'"

The Wellcome Collection opened in 2007 and is one of London's most inclusive museums, its palatial baby-change facilities making it a buzzy rainy-day refuge for mothers with small children. The new gallery is on its first floor, with tall windows looking out over the tree-lined road. Entry is either from one end, up a winding flight of marble stairs, or via a lift that deposits you at double doors in the centre of the room.



Surface tension ... works by Tamsin van Essen from the *Being Human* exhibition. Photograph: Wellcome Collection

One challenge, Barlow explains, was to make the first view equally impressive from both directions. Working with the Turner prize-winning architecture collective *Assemble*, and in wide consultation with disability groups, they created a grid of display cases that splay out across the pale oak floors on black plinths that have been discreetly recessed to allow wheelchairs to get close. Labelling is in braille and audio, as well as written text.

In the background towers Yinka Shonibare's *Refugee Astronaut*, the centrepiece of a section on environmental breakdown that intersects with three other sections, on genetics, minds and bodies, and infection. So, while admiring Shonibare's colourful traveller in his afro-print spacesuit, you might be distracted by *Pity*, a music video of a wheelchair-user dressed up as a vintage Spastics Society statuette and begging in the street to a soundtrack inspired by the Luther Vandross and Janet Jackson duet *The Best Things in Life are Free*. This is Katherine Araniello, AKA *SickBitchCrips*, who died earlier this year.

Or your eye might be caught by an elegant series of apothecary vases by Tamsin van Essen, their form, shape and texture representing hereditary health conditions, from a cracked glaze of psoriasis to pustular acne and proliferating cancer cells.



Street protest ... Katherine Araniello's performance piece Pity. Photograph: Wellcome Collection

“The Wellcome Collection exists to challenge what we think and feel about health,” says Barlow. “We tend to do that through work that makes you think or encourages you to explore your feelings.”

The exhibits are only partly in place when I visit and she leads me to a bobby, bell-shaped object apparently composed of bronze and perfume. “Smell it and tell me what it reminds you of,” she commands. “Newborn babies?” I tentatively suggest. “Breast milk,” she says triumphantly. It’s one of the most unsettling museum experiences I have ever had – and that is precisely the point. “It won’t all please everyone, but we hope it will be a unique experience for each visitor. If you come with friends, you’ll be able to have some amazing conversations.”

One of the most touching exhibits is a pulpit-like desk and chair installation created by the artist James Leadbitter (AKA The Vacuum Cleaner). It’s the result of a six-month collaboration with children from a mental health ward at London’s Great Ormond Street hospital, who were asked to suggest what they’d ideally like from a carer. (Answer: a big listening ear.) They were also asked to choose objects to fill their perfect rooms. From hundreds of suggestions, 27 were selected and cast from models made by the children. Visitors can hold and squish them while reading handwritten lanyards explaining what each one means to the person who suggested it.



Touching ... James Leadbitter's pulpit-like desk and chair installation. Photograph: Steven Pocock/Wellcome

Leadbitter is a performance activist whose long-running solo show, *Mental*, invited people into his bedroom to explore how his experience of mental illness and addiction contrasted with the accounts given in years of official documents, which he gathered through freedom of information requests.

How does he feel now that this new piece is finished? “A bit terrified,” he says. “But to have the work of very, very vulnerable children in a mainstream gallery for 10 years makes me incredibly proud. They kept saying adults don’t listen to them, and I know what they mean because I was in hospital as a young person and nobody listened to me either.”

As for the objects, when we speak Leadbitter has just delivered the last batch: they include lavender, a tree, a dog and a baby rhino. The poignancy and wit of their choices chime perfectly with Dolly Sen’s summary of her artist self: “I am a broken child, but Sellotaped with glitter and stars.”

• *Being Human* is on permanent display at the Wellcome Collection, London.

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