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MUSEUMS, PREJUDICE AND THE REFRAMING OF DIFFERENCE

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6

DISPLAYING DIFFERENCE

Revealing and interpreting the hidden history of disability

> the meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical flaws, but in social relationships in which one group is legitimated by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy and its self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others. Representation ... simultaneously buttresses an embodied version of normative identity and shapes a narrative of corporeal difference that excludes those whose bodies or behaviours do not conform.
>
> (Garland Thomson 1997: 7)

The chapters thus far have focused predominantly on issues of reception and consumption exploring the variable, but not wholly unpatterned, ways in which diverse audiences respond to, engage with and construct meaning from exhibitions designed to counter prejudice. These dynamic processes have been explored, for the most part, within the context of museums that explicitly position themselves – through their missions, goals and practices – as agents of social change. This chapter extends discussion of the social agency of museums in rather different directions. Moving away from the audience, it focuses instead on questions of production – on the museum processes and practices associated with exhibition-making and representation. Moreover, it draws principally on research that has been undertaken within a range of museums that, taken together, can be considered rather more typical of the sector at large than those more specialised museums that have so far formed the focus of this study. Finally, whilst the discussion thus far has examined wide-ranging prejudices, purposefully avoiding a narrower focus, this chapter takes disability (and associated prejudice based on perceptions of physical differences) as a lens through which to explore the particular dilemmas that exhibition makers might encounter in their attempts to engage audiences in the task of recasting individual and collective understandings of difference. It considers the scope for wide-ranging collections – of fine

and decorative art, social history, costume, ethnography and so on – to yield material that might support interventions, or trans-coding strategies (Hall 1997),[1] intended to counter prejudice, by contesting or subverting what Stuart Hall terms the 'dominant regime of representation'; a regime which, I shall argue, undergirds negative and stigmatising understandings of disability in many contemporary Western societies. For Hall, a regime of representation refers to 'the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which "difference" is represented at any one historical moment' (1997: 232). A given regime may be composed of heterogeneous and shifting depictions of difference but, at particular moments, can be understood to take on a dominant character. Hall, for example, describes how a particular regime of representation can be seen across different periods comprising wide-ranging depictions of black people and representational practices which 'have been used to mark racial difference and signify the racialized "Other" in western popular culture' (ibid.: 239).

The arguments I have so far put forward are premised upon (and have attempted to extend and evidence) the idea that museums possess constitutive or generative capacities – the potential to shape, rather than simply reflect, social relations and realities. Museum displays, and the discourses of difference they embody, have social effects and consequences. The poetics and politics of exhibition practice have often combined to shape, reproduce and concretise dominant (negative) understandings of difference, by excluding and marginalising (through elision) or by constructing representations that are reductive and essentialising, discriminatory and oppressive. By casting racial, gender, physical and other 'variations' as inferior or deviant, museums have privileged ways of seeing that have made prejudiced understandings of difference more perceptible and permissible, that close off, rather than open up, possibilities for mutual understanding, respect and social justice.

Building on these concepts of social agency, this chapter explores ways in which museums might also operate as sites for the staging of interventions designed to confront, undercut or reshape dominant regimes of representation that underpin and inform contemporary attitudes towards disability. These interventions, or counter-strategies, are based on the assumption that meaning is never fixed but rather in flux and always open to change, however pervasive and persistent dominant representational strategies might be. Counter-strategies can be deployed to destabilise existing meanings and to surface new ones enabling 'different things to be shown and said' (ibid.: 270). Through displays which contain protean and nuanced interpretations of difference, which mitigate, complicate or subvert prevalent stereotypes, which elicit (and frame) visitor responses and which enable (and inform) society's conversations, museums can offer alternative, non-prejudiced ways of seeing.

This chapter addresses a number of questions. How might such purposive displays be created and what dilemmas and challenges are curators, educators, designers and other actors in the exhibition-making process, likely to encounter along the way? In particular, what approaches might be deployed to interrogate and mine existing collections to investigate the histories of disability and disabled people to identify material evidence that might be marshalled to play a part in countering prejudice? How might museums, including those that have not traditionally viewed themselves as agents of change, draw on their collections (generally amassed and arranged according to very different agendas and criteria) to develop displays that attempt to reframe the ways in which society perceives disability?

I begin by considering the particular inflections inherent in prejudice directed towards disabled people to begin to suggest the most appropriate forms that interventions and counter-strategies within museums might take. The ways in which museums have most often understood and engaged with disability and their relationships with disabled people are then outlined to provide further context. The main body of the chapter discusses the findings from a recent project undertaken by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester[2] which set out to explore wide-ranging collections in institutions in the UK to uncover the 'hidden history' of disability and to identify material evidence that might be (re)interpreted to offer new liberatory narrative forms. The chapter concludes by discussing some of the interpretive dilemmas which exhibition-makers might face in seeking to develop representational counter-strategies intended to offer audiences alternative ways of understanding, thinking and talking about disability.

Specificities of prejudice

Different forms of prejudice, as I described in chapter 2, share in common a number of features. Expressions of prejudice are directed at those who are perceived to be not only *different* but also (though in distinctive ways) *inferior* or *deviant*. Whether blatant or covert, prejudiced discourses of all kinds (regardless of the particular targets at which they are directed) are both *functional* and *purposive*. They are designed and meted out to achieve certain ends; to blame or to justify discriminatory actions and behaviour, to exclude or to marginalise, to intimidate or to belittle, and so on. Moreover, specific prejudices very often mobilise distinctive stereotypes to achieve their purposes. Representations of difference in diverse media forms have often been characterised as prejudiced by virtue of their reliance on (and perpetuation of) a limited and limiting repertoire of demeaning stereotypes that offer reductive and essentialising conceptions of marginalised and oppressed groups.

Whilst diverse forms of prejudice have these features in common, specific manifestations, directed at particular groups, are nevertheless distinctively inflected. For example, in their recent study of attitudes towards a range of minorities in England, Gill Valentine and Ian McDonald found that prejudice directed towards asylum seekers was most often couched in economic terms. Asylum seekers were frequently perceived to be undeserving recipients of preferential treatment for housing and welfare benefits. Attitudes towards transsexuals and transgendered people were most often characterised by 'tolerance born out of pity' and a lack of respect for these groups was very often demonstrated through laughter. Prejudice expressed towards minority ethnic groups was complex and contradictory. British Asian people[3] were sometimes praised for their 'hard working and family values' but were simultaneously perceived as being unwilling and unable to integrate with white people. Black British people were more commonly perceived as 'being good at integrating with white people and as sharing similar social and cultural values' (ibid.: 12). However, these perceptions were also accompanied by negatively stereotypical views, especially of young black men, who were frequently associated by interviewees with drugs and other criminal activity.

These inflections are, to varying degrees, situated and dynamic and are likely to vary significantly across different cultural contexts and through time. Depending on the individuals or groups at which they are targeted, and the social, political and economic contexts within which they are expressed, particular forms of prejudice are therefore fluid, differentially motivated and couched in variable ways. The shifting nature of prejudice has been noted in a number of different contexts but has been most fully explored in the context of evolving forms of racism. The 1970s and 1980s, for example, saw the emergence in the United States of the terms 'symbolic' or 'modern' racism to describe the more subtle, covert and indirectly expressed views, actions and behaviours which, researchers argued, were replacing 'traditional' or old-fashioned racism which was characterised as 'blunt, hostile, segregationist and supremacist' (Walker 2001: 26).[4] Catherine Kudlick's (2003) review of recently published research concerned with disability similarly highlights the contingent and contextual nature of attitudes towards disabled people. Although most of the work she reviews is based on research in Western Europe and North America, the inclusion of a study of images of blindness and blind people in a medieval Islamic society both brings into sharp relief and challenges many of the assumptions about disability that prevail in the West.

Despite this fluidity, and mindful of the situational character of prejudice, it is nevertheless possible to identify some of the features commonly associated with negative conceptions of disability. What characteristics are inherent in prejudiced discourse motivated by perceptions of physical differences? What stereotypes of disabled people are most prevalent and

widely deployed in representational practices across different media? In what ways are these used and for what ends? Addressing these questions, I shall draw largely on literature from Western Europe and North America to highlight some of the characteristics of prevalent attitudes to disability although some of those identified will resonate within other contexts.

Disablism

Although there are terms, in relatively widespread usage, which refer to forms of prejudice (or related pernicious, stigmatising conceptions of difference) based on race (racism), gender (sexism and misogyny), sexuality (homophobia and, less commonly, heterosexism), there is no universally accepted label for prejudice on the basis of disability (Kudlick 2003). This omission is perhaps especially surprising given the significance, in raw numbers alone, of disability as a social category. Although definitions are problematic, it is estimated that nearly one in five Americans (Kudlick 2003) and one in seven people in Britain (Disability Rights Commission) are disabled. Catherine Kudlick points out that, in the US, whilst the term 'ablism' is coming into increasing usage it is often 'tinged with the sarcasm people reserve for politically correct expressions such as "physically challenged" and "differently abled"' (ibid.: 771). In Britain, the term disablism, although similarly marginalised in academic and popular discourse has, in recent years, begun to be used more widely. Although its precise definition is contested (as with other terms to describe specific forms of prejudice) a recent report uses disablism to refer to 'discriminatory, oppressive or abusive behaviour arising from the belief that disabled people are inferior to others' (Miller et al. 2004: 9). The absence of a commonly used term to describe prejudice motivated by perceptions of bodily difference reflects the wider marginality of disability as a subject of critical inquiry; a situation which disability studies scholars in recent years have highlighted and begun to redress. It further reflects the unease which continues to surround disability as a topic of everyday conversation. As Snyder et al. suggest: 'Just as sex was the ubiquitous unspoken subject in the Victorian world, disability – the harbinger of mortality – is the ubiquitous unspoken topic in contemporary culture' (2002: 2).

Prejudice directed at disabled people, some have argued, is less commonly expressed with the malevolence and vitriol that other groups may experience. 'Unlike racial, ethnic and sexual minorities', Kudlick argues, 'disabled people experience attacks cloaked in pity accompanied by a widely held perception that no one wishes them ill' (2003: 768). Indeed, many people are perhaps unlikely to view their benevolence towards disabled people as constituting prejudice. In their study, cited above, Valentine and McDonald found that no interviewees openly acknowledged that they held prejudiced attitudes based on disability and many expressed support for an equality

agenda (especially in relation to service provision) for disabled people. However, the language respondents used to talk about disabled people was especially revealing. Many focused on notions of help and care reflecting, as the researchers argue, 'the way that disabled people are implicitly regarded as lacking competence, vulnerable, and deserving of pity' (2004: 10). Although interviewees in their study had generally had greater personal contact with disabled people than with other minorities, many participants nevertheless expressed concern about their own language and behaviour. One woman from London, in her mid twenties, stated:

> My brain automatically goes on to the things you shouldn't do, and the things that you've been told are bad to do to people with disabilities. I get paranoid that I am going to do one of those things, or that I'm going to be obviously referring to this checklist of things that I shouldn't do. I can't just act naturally as much as that's what I want to do.
>
> (ibid.: 11)

These comments are illustrative of broader anxieties that reflect unease and discomfort with the idea of disability. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson, describing the encounter between a disabled and non-disabled person, notes: 'The interaction is usually strained because the non-disabled person may feel fear, pity, fascination, repulsion, or merely surprise, none of which is expressible according to social protocol' (1997: 12). Though distinct from other forms of prejudice in several respects, the *effects* of disablism are no less debilitating than those that may be delivered in more hateful and malevolent terms. Disablism, many have powerfully argued, operates to close off opportunities for disabled people in all aspects of everyday life.

The supercripple, the victim and the villain: stereotypical representations of disabled people

> Any casual visitor to museums in Britain would assume that disabled people occupied a specific range of roles in the nation's history. The absence of disabled people as creators of arts, in images and in artefacts, and their presence in selected works reinforcing cultural stereotypes, conspire to present a narrow perspective of the existence of disability in history.
>
> (Delin 2002: 84)

Stereotypes, as I discussed in chapter 2, feature in representational strategies across wide-ranging media and are mobilised in ways which very often support and reinforce prejudiced ways of seeing, thinking and talking about

difference. Stereotypes give emphasis to a few distinguishing traits at the expense of complexity, constructing reductive and essentialising understandings of social groups. Wide-ranging studies that have investigated the representation of disabled people in literature, film, television, advertising and other mass media have frequently highlighted the prevalence of recurring stereotypes which are suffused with notions of pity, fear, revulsion and deviance. As Katherine Ott has observed, 'Most interpretations of disability rely in some way upon a handful of stereotypes that include the tragic victim, super cripple or maniacal villain (driven to evil by the misfortune of an unbearable disability)' (2005a: 13).

Early discussion of representation concerned the appearance of disabled people in literature. In 1987, Kriegel proposed stereotypes including the 'demonic cripple' and the 'charity cripple', while Holden (1991) examined the roles taken by disabled people in the Bible. In 1992, Colin Barnes and David Hevey both published influential works looking at the relationship between media representation and the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes. Barnes examined wide-ranging media (citing literature, film, television, radio and news media) and found twelve recurrent stereotypes which included disabled person as curio, as 'supercripple' and as pitiable or pathetic. Hevey (1992) focused on photography used in charity advertising to show how these purposefully constructed images carried messages designed to generate a preordained response in the generally non-disabled audience (understood to be the charity donor). Thus, Hevey studied the use of focus, colour, grain and props to create images of disabled people which suggested infantilism, dependence, passivity and need.[5] More recently, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, in her powerful analysis of literary texts, highlights the ways in which representational strategies have consistently served to construct the disabled figure not simply as exceptional or extraordinary but rather as deficient, inferior or deviant. 'From folktales and classical myths to modern and postmodern "grotesques,"' she argues, 'the disabled body is almost always a freakish spectacle presented by the mediating narrative voice. Most disabled characters are enveloped by the otherness that their disability signals in the text' (1997: 10). Not all of the persistent stereotypes of disabled people that have been highlighted are necessarily overtly demeaning. There are many examples of the representation of disabled people as heroes who, through their heroism and emphasis on their outstanding achievements, transcend the experience of disability and, in some cases, effectively 'pass' as 'honorary non-disabled' persons.

Empirical studies of representation and stereotyping have focused, for the most part, on processes of production (on the ways in which ideas about disability have been inscribed and encoded within diverse media forms) rather than those associated with reception and consumption (the ways in which diverse audiences – disabled and non-disabled – have decoded and otherwise responded to and constructed meaning from the stereotypical

representations they encounter). Although there may be relatively limited empirical evidence concerning the social effects of distorted depictions of disabled people in the media, the symbolic power of representational strategies (in particular, their agency in shaping public perceptions and expectations of disabled people) has generated considerable discussion within the disciplines of disability and cultural studies. Moreover, there has been a strongly expressed view among disabled people that media representation has played, and continues to play, a significant (and negative) role in shaping their lives and the opportunities that are open to them. Colin Barnes (1992: 2), for example, has spoken of 'a growing awareness among disabled people that the problems they encounter are due to institutional discrimination and that media distortions of the experience of disability contribute significantly to the discriminatory process'. Referring to the effects of literary representations, Rosemarie Garland Thompson similarly argues that 'Because disability is so strongly stigmatized and is countered by so few mitigating narratives, the literary traffic in metaphors often misrepresents or flattens the experience real people have of their own or others' disabilities' (1997: 10).

This brief consideration of disability prejudice begins to suggest some of the possible approaches that might be taken by museums in developing interpretive interventions designed to construct new cultural narratives that undermine dominant negative understandings of disabled people. Before exploring these more fully, however, it is useful briefly to review the ways in which museums have most often viewed and engaged with the notion of disability. How have museums typically responded to imperatives presented by the disability civil rights movement and associated political agendas? To what extent have museums engaged with issues related to the representation of disabled people in their collections, displays and exhibitions?

Museums and disability

Museums have become increasingly sensitised to the topic of disability over the last two decades, although in very selective ways. Disabled people have been conceived almost entirely as (under-represented, potential) audiences, who must be accommodated through the implementation of strategies designed to increase access to museum buildings and exhibitions. Whilst legislative drivers for change have ensured that questions of physical (and to a lesser extent, sensory) access for disabled visitors have remained firmly on the agenda for many museums, rather less attention has been paid to other questions posed by disability.[6]

Janice Majewski and Lonnie Bunch (1998) describe three distinct tiers of disability access that museums should address in developing exhibitions that meet the needs of their audiences. The first tier, which they term 'access to the exhibition's physical elements', is concerned with enabling visitors

to gain entry to the museum building itself and to navigate successfully through and around exhibitions. This level of access encompasses those elements which most readily spring to mind for museum professionals when questions of disability are raised – the visible 'hardware' of access, such as the provision of lifts, ramps, handrails and accessible toilets. The second tier they consider is 'access to the exhibition's content' which requires an acknowledgment that visitors experience displays in different ways. 'In exhibitions', they argue:

> museums must give consideration to issues that range from label legibility to label text comprehension; from video captions and audio description to multiple levels of understanding and enjoyment of the exhibition's themes and content. Accessibility to content means accessibility to the written word, the objects, the media presentations, and the interactives.
>
> (ibid.: 156)

Although some museums have made significant progress in this area, others have barely begun. This unevenness in provision is powerfully illustrated in Catherine Kudlick's (2005) personal account of the experiences of visiting a local history museum and neighbouring fine arts museum in a major American city. As a person with a visual impairment visiting museums with a blind companion, Kudlick describes the multiple barriers – physical, sensory, attitudinal – to gaining access at one venue compared with the much more positive experience at the other. Having described the unhelpful, even hostile responses of staff at the local history museum to her enquiries about facilities for visually impaired visitors, Kudlick reflects on the impact of disability legislation and highlights the need for further change:

> Why is it that when America seems eager to open its civic places to the broadest possible audience, certain public institutions appear so ill-informed about people who require alternative ways to fully participate? Here we are, at a time when the [Americans with Disabilities Act] has been in effect for over a decade, people with disabilities have seen the promise of increased social awareness and powerful technology, and a generation of people like the women in the [local history] museum have grown up in large urban centers pouring money into their civic places. And yet in the early twenty-first century, two people still couldn't visit this museum on the spur of the moment or at the very least encounter employees sensitized enough to treat them with anything but contempt. Why is it that some people view visitors like us as problems rather than as opportunities to present exhibitions in new and interesting ways?
>
> (2005: 78)

The third tier of access described by Majewski and Bunch is concerned with the representation of disabled people and the inclusion of disability-related narratives and interpretation within exhibitions. This, they argue, has been almost entirely overlooked.

Representing disability

Museums in many parts of the world have become increasingly preoccupied with the challenges associated with representing (at least some forms of) cultural difference within their collections and displays. This concern has been especially marked amongst museums in post-colonial contexts and those in societies which have undergone dramatic social, political and demographic changes. Countries and contexts vary in terms of the forms of difference that are acknowledged as legitimate (and therefore deserving of museums' attention) but might include group identities defined in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, disability, religion, age and so on. Museums then have faced increasing pressure to reform, to reinvent themselves as agents of inclusion and to accommodate, through display, multiple forms of difference. Despite widespread rhetorical support for the notion of representing diversity and a growing body of research concerned with the poetics and politics of representing and working with previously excluded or marginalised groups, museum practice nevertheless remains selective and uneven. On the one hand, for example, it has become increasingly unacceptable for public museums in many contexts to present exhibitions which overtly perpetuate negative racist stereotypes or for major city museums to persist in sidelining the contributions of minority ethnic groups that have had an established presence in the community for many decades. On the other hand, it has been argued that change is both too slow and too slight. Jane Morris, for example, in a newspaper article published to coincide with the start of Black History Month in the UK in October 2004, wrote: 'Few British museums tell the story of black or Asian people in anything but the most cursory fashion'. Similarly, Bourne (1996), Liddiard (2004) and Vanegas (2002) highlight the very limited display of material that relates to gay and lesbian lives.

It is only relatively recently that the representation in museum exhibitions of disability and disabled people's lives has begun to receive much attention, and two distinct but interlinked concerns can be identified. The first refers to the absence or invisibility of disabled people within most museums' displays. There is growing support for the view that, by neglecting to depict bodily difference in their exhibition narratives, museums not only reify the idealised human form but, in doing so, present a historically inaccurate view of the past. As Katherine Ott suggests:

> The ideal which we imagine in history is unquestionably able-bodied ... People present a spectrum of body types, and until recent decades, the most common physical traits included being arthritic, stooped, pock-marked, scarred, toothless, or bent and injured in some way. Difference was everywhere, yet it is missing from the history we present to the public. The healthy, idealized figures in exhibits, films, and re-enactment are as false as the landscaped and manicured grounds of a Civil War battlefield.[7]
>
> (2005a: 21)

The second concern relates to the extent to which museums' depictions of disabled people – where they do exist – rely on (and reinforce) the limited range of negative stereotypes found in other media forms. What part do museums play in buttressing the dominant regime of representation in relation to disability?

Buried in the Footnotes

These linked concerns provided the impetus for a major research project, *Buried in the Footnotes*, undertaken by RCMG between 2003 and 2004. The project set out to address a deficit in knowledge and understanding around the hidden history of disability by investigating museum collections and displays in the UK to identify evidence attesting to the lives of disabled people. It further aimed to identify and examine curatorial practices and other factors which may have contributed to historical and contemporary under- or mis-representation of disabled people. Though based on fieldwork across collections in the UK, the findings of the project, as I shall argue in due course, have relevance and implications for museums internationally.

Research aims and methodology

The rationale for the research grew out of earlier preliminary investigations undertaken by Annie Delin which had suggested that museum collections may hold material that could attest to the lives of disabled people but that this was only relatively rarely displayed and then only in particular, most often stereotypical, ways. Delin (2002) had argued that disability history qualified as a hidden history using a definition proposed by Anne Laurence:

> The term Hidden History is used when the history of a hitherto neglected group begins to appear: as, for example, in the case of black history, women's history, lesbian and gay history ... The phrase is not simply used to describe the group's emergence into mainstream history: it also has an explicit message that these groups have lacked a history because society has been unwilling to see them as a separate group with particular rights. Groups hidden from history are hidden for three reasons. They are hidden because of prejudices against the group in the past, because of modern prejudices; and because of the absence of records.
>
> (Laurence 1994: 3)

Building on Delin's hypothesis, the research team developed a project underpinned by the idea that, if museum collections held the hidden history of disabled people, they might potentially be viewed as resources with which to contribute to a reframing of the ways in which contemporary society viewed disability. The project then set out to explore a number of questions. In particular, what evidence exists within museum collections and associated documentation that relates to the lives of disabled people, both historical and contemporary? How, if at all, has this evidence been interpreted, displayed or otherwise made accessible to the public? If so, within what categories have disabled people been represented? What factors, historical and contemporary, have affected the way in which information about the lives of disabled people (linked to material held in museums) has been collected, documented and made publicly available? Finally, what factors influence, or have influenced, curators' attitudes towards this information and its dissemination?

Buried in the Footnotes used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods to address these questions. Befitting the exploratory nature of the investigations, our approach was open and flexible. Project funding from the Innovation Awards scheme administered by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Board was especially significant in this respect, as it enabled us to approach the field with the possibility of failure (for example, finding few objects linked to disability) and to allow for unexpected outcomes which could then be explored and tested in the process of research. Importantly, the project team was composed of both disabled and non-disabled researchers with different experiences, specialist knowledge and insight – of disability, of museums and of research methods. Researchers with disabilities played a central role both in shaping the research agenda and in gathering, analysing and interpreting the data.

The primary research consisted of two main stages. First, a self-completion questionnaire (see appendix 2) was sent to a sample of curators to achieve variety in terms of geographical distribution, mode of governance, size of organisation and collection type (including fine and decorative art, social history, archaeology, local, industrial, maritime, medical and military history). The questionnaire had two main objectives: first, to identify levels of awareness amongst curators of the existence of relevant material within collections and to gauge their attitudes towards its collection, documentation and interpretation and, second, to identify a shortlist of appropriate case studies for the next (qualitative) phase of the research.

Two hundred and twenty-four questionnaires were distributed and seventy-three were returned, a response rate which was higher than expected. (Some curators who did not submit completed questionnaires nevertheless contacted us to give their reasons for non-participation which included shortage of staff time and resources, existing commitments to recataloguing or redisplay and temporary museum closure.) Of those who did respond, twenty-nine stated that they would be willing to be involved in further research as a case study museum. From these, ten case studies were subsequently selected[8] to include a variety of organisation types. In addition to size, geography, mode of governance and collection types, we wanted to include known examples of good practice, museums with a potentially 'obvious' connection to disability (such as medical or military connections), and also an example of a museum that had stated in its questionnaire return that it held nothing relevant to the project within its collections. Each case study was visited by members of the research team, interviews were conducted with curators and other staff, displays were reviewed and collections databases were searched for relevant objects. The database searches used a wide range of search terms (many of which might be perceived as offensive in a contemporary context but were nevertheless widely used in the past), to see if this would elicit new information about possible relevant objects in the collection. The key search terms used were: disabled, disability, blind, deaf, lame, surgical, cripple, dwarf, giant, lunatic and invalid. Additional search words were used where relevant to the collection type, including adapted, altered, crutch and peg-leg.

A key element of the research process was a colloquium, following completion of fieldwork and data analysis, bringing together knowledgeable commentators from a number of fields to assist us in interpreting the significance of our findings, to generate new insights into the material we had identified and to test our preliminary conclusions. Participants from different constituencies were selected to participate – disabled people with an interest in cultural practice or issues of representation, the museums profession (at curatorial and directorial level), research communities, and strategic bodies (for example, MLA: the Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives and the East Midlands Museums, Libraries and Archives Council). Our research generated a wealth of material and findings that addressed each of the research questions. For the purposes of this chapter, I intend to focus on those findings which relate primarily to the material we found within collections and their potential use in representational counter-strategies.

Identifying relevant objects

Buried in the Footnotes started with the premise that museum and gallery collections were likely to contain material attesting to the lives of disabled

people or otherwise linked to disability. Although we had no idea of the nature, quantity, or condition of that material (or of the information attached to it that related to disability), our assumption was that there would be a certain amount of evidence to be found. We subsequently discovered that wide-ranging collections of all kinds did, indeed, contain a wealth of relevant material, in fact, on a much larger scale than we had originally anticipated. Our questionnaire asked curators: 'Are you aware of any material in your collections which relates to disability and/or the lives of disabled people?' To assist respondents, we provided some indication of the kinds of material that might be considered relevant including, for example, objects, clothing or personal items used or owned by disabled people; works of art or objects which portray disability as a feature or central topic; and art works or objects created by artists/makers who had a disability.

Of the seventy-three questionnaire respondents, whilst a high proportion (fifty-eight) identified some objects within their collections, the majority of these felt that they had only one or two items that would be deemed relevant for our research. Subsequent in-depth research with case study museums revealed many more objects than those initially identified by curators in their questionnaire responses. A number of factors were suggested which could account for the significantly higher number of objects identified during our visits compared with those identified via the questionnaires. Curators had time during the preparation for the visit to consider the issues raised and had usually identified some additional items before the researchers arrived. There was also time during the case study for curators to think about their collection in the light of this research. Moreover, the researchers brought subjectivities and specialist perspectives to bear on the investigation of collections and were able to identify items where the connection with disability was perhaps not so immediately apparent to a non-disabled curator. Finally, the wide-ranging search terms used to interrogate the databases (with which some museum staff were initially uncomfortable) revealed many of the additional items.

False teeth, spectacles and walking sticks

During the course of the research, a number of questions were raised by curators and subsequently discussed by the research team which linked to definitions of disability and the criteria which might be used to determine whether or not an object was deemed to be relevant to disability history. For example, what conditions or experiences were included within our definition of 'disability'? Whilst some impairments or bodily variations appeared to fall relatively straightforwardly into widely accepted understandings of disability, experiences of mental ill health, sickness and disease, war injury, and learning differences (such as dyslexia), for example, were deemed

relatively more problematic, mirroring broader (and highly politicised) debates surrounding definitions within the disability world. Objects of contested relevance included walking sticks (which may have been used to aid mobility or simply as a fashion accessory) and false teeth and spectacles which, though commonplace today and not regarded as signifiers of disability, may have been differently perceived in the past.

Some curators also asked what relationship between an object and disability qualified it for inclusion within our study? For example, should objects collected and donated to the museum by a person known to be disabled but which otherwise bore no readily apparent relationship to disability be construed as relevant? Would we want to include a medal given to an (apparently non-disabled) lifeboat man for saving a crippled man's life?[9] Some of these concerns resonated with dilemmas posed by attempts to mine museum collections for material linked to the histories of other marginalised groups (such as those defined by ethnicity or sexuality) whilst others were especially pertinent to disability. In particular, the relative permeability and fluidity of the boundaries which distinguish disabled from non-disabled people (compared to those which may be used to define other marginal identities based on, for example, gender or ethnicity) emerged as especially salient. The dynamic and fuzzy character of the threshold between disabled and non-disabled identities has been similarly noted by Rosemarie Garland Thomson who contrasts the neatly defined disabled figure that often appears in literature with the more ambivalent experience of disability in real life:

> Even though the prototypical disabled person posited in cultural representations never leaves a wheelchair, is totally blind, or profoundly deaf, most of the approximately forty million Americans with disabilities have a much more ambiguous relationship to the label. The physical impairments that render someone 'disabled' are almost never absolute or static; they are dynamic, contingent conditions affected by many external factors and usually fluctuating over time ... The fact that we will all become disabled if we live long enough is a reality many people who consider themselves able-bodied are reluctant to admit.
>
> (1997: 13–14)

We were mindful of the potential sensitivities surrounding definitions of disability – for example, the emergence in recent years of an increasingly politicised social movement of the deaf who have preferred to view themselves, not as disabled but as 'a linguistic minority with distinct cultural and historical traditions' (Richardson 2002: 77) – but also of the potentially negative consequences that might arise from the application of tightly defined parameters. Following discussions within the research team and during the colloquium we eventually decided to resist the establishment of rigidly

Figure 6.1: Stumper Dryden by Frank Meadow Sutcliffe (1853–1941)

Source: By kind permission of Whitby Museum

defined definitional boundaries to determine what 'counted' as disability history and what should be deemed to fall outside the remit of our study, and instead to maintain an openness to the possibilities presented by the collections. Members of the research team were comfortable with the use of the terms disabled and non-disabled to denote the different perspectives we each brought to the project but the application of this binary division was felt to be less appropriate when assessing the material within collections.

Objects by collection type

Whilst we expected to find significant numbers of items within specialist collections that related to medical, military or industrial history – because of the (perceived) 'natural' links with disability history – a rich variety of disability-related objects were, in fact, discovered across collections of all types. Table 6.1 shows the main types of collection within which material was found.

The discovery of large numbers of objects across such wide-ranging types of collection has significant implications for the generalisability of findings from this research project, suggesting that many museums in different countries

Table 6.1 Disability-related material identified by collection type

Collection type	*Material identified*
Social history	Social history collections held a vast range of material types including objects and images associated with home life, childhood, education, personal relationships and working life (Fig. 6.1). A large number of aids and items of equipment such as crutches, callipers, prosthetic limbs, braces, spinal carriages and wheelchairs are also included in this category (Fig. 6.2). Some of these objects were accompanied by information which linked them to named individuals, but many were not.
Fine art	Numerous paintings, drawing, photographs or sculptures were either suggested by curators in their questionnaire returns or subsequently identified during case study research. These included works by disabled artists, both historical and contemporary, and works portraying disabled people as a subject (Fig. 6.3). Some artists used unorthodox methods of working because of their disability (for example, using their shoulders, feet or mouth to paint), some explored disability-related themes in their work and some are known to have been disabled through documentary material linked to the artworks. A large number of drawings and sketches for stained glass panels depicting healing scenes with lame, blind and crippled figures were identified. In paintings, blind people figured as a popular subject (for example, blind fiddlers, pipers and beggars), some of real named individuals and others of possibly fictional characters.
Archives	Archives proved to be an especially rich source of disability-related material. They included material from Cripples Guilds – photographs, logs and registers, annual reports and fundraising records. Medical archives, not surprisingly, were found to hold large quantities of information including personal medical records, records of treatment, and admission registers for hospitals and asylums. There were numerous letters, journals, ships' logs and collections of ephemera in archives specialising in military and naval history, fairground history and personal collections relating to disabled individuals.
Oral history	Where oral history records existed, they were found to provide one of the richest sources of anecdote about disabled 'characters' in recent history. They also included the personal testimony of disabled people who featured as interviewees.
Decorative arts	Collections contained a wide range of decorative items, particularly ceramics, featuring beggars, war veterans or other disabled characters. Depictions of healing scenes featured on a number of items. There were also decorative or craft items (embroidery, quilts and so on) made by individuals who were described as 'invalids' or 'cripples'.

Table 6.1 continued

Collection type	*Material identified*
Archaeological	Archaeological collections included both human remains showing evidence of impairments and a limited number of artefacts depicting disability in decorative or symbolic form. Examples included mummies with amputated limbs and Roman pottery fragments showing dwarf and hunchbacked figures.
Costume	Costume collections revealed a few pairs of shoes and a small number of textile items made for, or worn by, people with disabilities. Several curators noted difficulties associated with identifying disability in the wearer. Many costume items were associated with 'freaks' or characters, for example Charles Stratton's (Tom Thumb) suit and Arthur Caley's (the Manx Giant) boots. Other items included back braces, built-up shoes and adapted items of clothing.
Military	Items noted in armaments collections included guns and other weapons adapted for use by people with one eye or one arm/hand.
Ethnographic	Ethnographic collections included figurative pieces, vessels and other objects depicting blindness, limblessness and other impairments. It was recognised that further, subject-specialist research was needed to understand more fully the meanings of these objects within their originating contexts.
Contemporary	Items within this category included contemporary material resulting from museum outreach projects with groups of disabled people, items relating to the Paralympics, disability action/politics and government initiatives (such as the European/International Year(s) of Disabled People) as well as contemporary art and craftworks.

and contexts are likely to contain material with relevance to disability history or with the potential to support disability-related narratives.

Meanings and narratives

In what ways were disabled people most commonly represented in collections and displays? What did the wealth of material found within museums have to say about disability, past and present? The representation of disability across a variety of media, as I have earlier stated, has generally been characterised as limited (in scale and scope), often reductive and negatively stereotypical. Disabled people as victims, as passive, sexless and low achieving are dominant in both historical and contemporary cultural narratives. Disabled people who are perceived to defy these negative stereotypes (for example, by virtue of their heroism or super-achievements) may be presented as 'overcoming' or transcending their disability (Delin 2002).

Figure 6.2: Wheelchair

Source: Photo courtesy of Royal London Hospital Archives

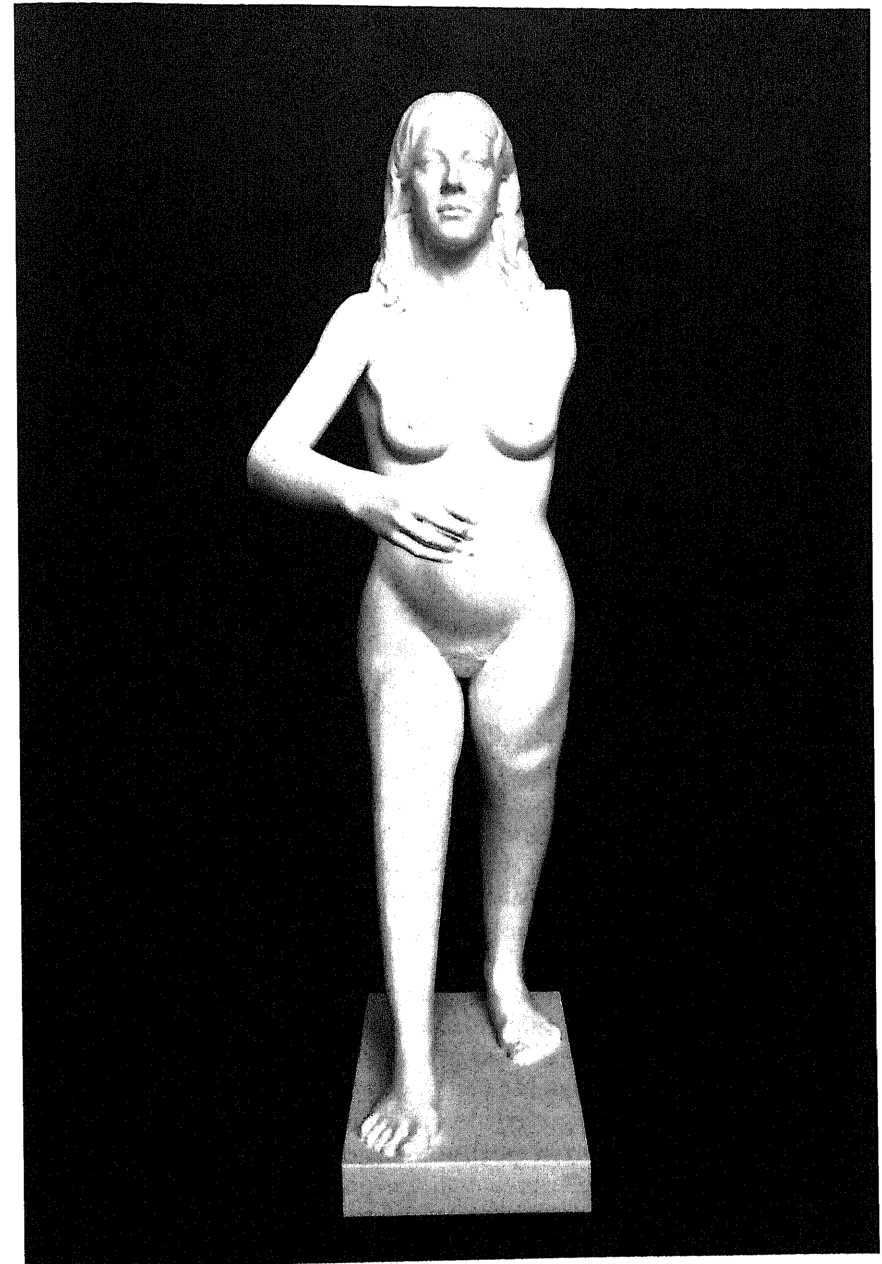

Figure 6.3: Catherine Long by Marc Quinn, 2000. Copyright: the artist

Source: Courtesy of Jay Jopling/White Cube (London). Collection of the Art Gallery and Museum, The Royal Pump Rooms, Leamington Spa

Beggars, heroes and freaks

Many of the items identified by museums in their questionnaire responses resonated with these dominant stereotypical representations and three distinct categories emerged from our analysis. The first category referred to objects which tended to cast disabled people in passive roles – as recipients of care, support, charity or biblical miracle cure; typically nameless beggars, vagrants, asylum residents and hospital patients. The second category featured items linked to narratives in which known individuals overcome the constraints presented by their impairments and transcend their disability, perhaps through creativity or heroism – for example, military heroes and successful artists and sportspeople. The third category most commonly suggested by the material offered to us in our questionnaire presented disabled people as freaks or local characters defined by their physical oddity and viewed as objects of amusement or pity – the extreme 'others' generally perceived to be outside the range of ordinary human appearance. (The term 'freak' is used here to denote people who, at any stage in their lives, were exhibited or exhibited themselves to be stared at for money. Material linked to a number of well-known individuals such as Charles Stratton (Tom Thumb) and Joseph Merrick (the Elephant Man) appeared in collections.)

In contrast, the many objects revealed during the second stage of data gathering, through in-depth case studies, unearthed objects which suggested the occupation of a much wider range of roles by disabled people. Here the research techniques deployed were designed to draw out and reveal unexpected evidence. The researchers offered both an alternative perspective and the time and opportunity to search for material in different ways. Material evidence of disability revealed during this phase of the research suggested the permeation of disability through a much wider range of roles in society, at different class levels and to differing extents of integration and marginalisation. Alongside the asylum residents, freakshow performers, beggars, dependent invalids and recipients of charity funding, we also found evidence of disabled people fulfilling roles including those of teacher, naval commander, parent, lover, collector, benefactor, painter, cooper, miner, musician, linguist, quilter, embroiderer, sculptor, fundraiser, radiographer, nursing educator, politician, merchant and so on.

The study revealed only a small number of displays in which these more varied roles were interpreted to the public or in which prevalent stereotypes were resisted. Examples included exhibitions at the National Maritime Museum in London which emphasised the humanity of Lord Nelson (Fig. 6.4), several displays at Hollytrees Museum in Colchester which represented disabled people in nuanced and wide-ranging ways, and rich narratives exploring the lives of disabled staff as well as patients at the Royal London Hospital Museum and Archives. For the most part, however, we found that disabled people were absent from museum displays. Where objects were exhibited, their link to disability was seldom made explicit in labels or they were interpreted in mono-dimensional ways which echoed stereotypical and reductive representations of disabled people which have been found to be prevalent in other media. Disabled people were often represented as poor, passive, sexless and dependent, frequently seen as an economic drain, needing to be cared for, and unable to be productive in terms of employment or creativity or depicted in ways which emphasised their physical difference at the expense of other qualities or attributes.

Figure 6.4: The collections of the National Maritime Museum, London, included numerous items depicting or otherwise related to 'disabled hero' Lord Nelson

Source: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries

Interviews with curators suggested that this situation stems from a lack of consensus about the significance and importance of these issues (whether or not museums have a responsibility or a role to play in engaging with issues around disability and countering negative stereotypes), coupled with considerable anxiety about how to display and interpret the material held within collections. Together these concerns accounted for the cultural invisibility and distorted representation of disabled people in museums.

Display dilemmas

The representation of disability is a largely uncharted area of museum practice and one which many of the practitioners encountered during the study perceived to be especially fraught with pitfalls and challenges. Whilst a few organisations had experimented with the inclusion and interpretation of material connected with disability and disabled people's lives most were inhibited from exploring this issue by a range of concerns and anxieties. Many staff cited a fear of making mistakes and of offending disabled people, for example, by inappropriately drawing attention to or stigmatising difference or by using language which may be judged by some to be outdated, distasteful or disrespectful. Others made various conjectures regarding the anticipated and unwelcome behaviours (staring, ridiculing) and responses (shock, distress, discomfort) that might be stimulated amongst museum visitors by exhibitions depicting visible bodily difference. Although many interviewees were interested in exploring ways of incorporating disability-related narratives within their displays, there was a perceived need for guidance that could enable them to move forward in this area.

The concerns felt by staff were very often articulated in the form of interpretive dilemmas or challenges which, it seemed, prevented them from tackling an issue which they were otherwise open to exploring. The dilemmas I shall now consider were those which were most frequently raised by museum staff in our study. These are, for the most part, specific to the context of disability but some nevertheless resonate with concerns raised in relation to the representation of other minorities that have, in recent decades, sought increased visibility through representation within museums and other arts and media forms.

Staring (and the shadow of the freakshow)

The one thing that everyone knows about staring, Rosemarie Garland Thomson has observed, is that you were told by your mother not to do it (2005). Whilst the practice of staring may be discouraged or frowned upon in many social encounters and public settings, museums, in contrast, are sites in which the prolonged, attentive and intense gaze is both actively encouraged and sanctioned. Staring that is directed at displayed objects or images is generally valued as an appropriate and desirable response in museum visitors, indicative of stimulated interest, surprise, wonder, awe and heightened curiosity. However, when viewed as a response to the display of objects linked to disabled people or to the depiction of the disabled body, staring might be understood to take on very different meanings and connotations. Being stared at is part of the lived experience of many disabled people. As Garland Thompson observes:

> Disabled people have variously been objects of awe, scorn, terror, delight, inspiration, pity, laughter or fascination – but they have always been stared at. Staring at disability choreographs a visual relation between a spectator and a spectacle. A more intense form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, surveying, gazing and other forms of casual or uninterested looking, staring registers the perception of difference and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant. ... Because staring at disability is considered illicit looking, the disabled body is at once the to-be-looked-at and not-to-be-looked-at, further dramatizing the staring encounter by making viewers furtive and the viewed defensive.
>
> (2002: 56–57)

The freakshows that flourished in the late nineteenth century, in which individuals perceived to possess unusual or inexplicable bodies performed for and were stared at by the paying public, may have largely disappeared by the middle of the twentieth century but, it seems, they nevertheless continue to cast a powerful shadow over contemporary museum practice. Several curators interviewed for this research invoked the freakshow – and a desire to avoid freakshow-style approaches – as reasons for not displaying some material in their collections. Anxiety and uncertainty were especially pronounced when curators were discussing the challenges linked to the contemporary display of material linked to individuals who were, in their own time, known freakshow performers although this concern very often extended to other objects or images that depicted or referenced physical differences.

Although the practice of staring at displayed objects or images within exhibition settings differs from that which occurs in a face-to-face encounter between the disabled person and the non-disabled viewer, many curators nevertheless expressed anxiety about the implications of displaying material in ways which might invite and authorise disrespectful and otherwise inappropriate forms of looking. One curator in our study commented:

> If we show pictures of people, we are sending them out on their own and you might get reactions like kids laughing at them. You can't write a label saying 'you mustn't laugh at these people'.

How then might disabled people be made visible within museum displays but in ways which do not simply encourage visitors to gawk at bodies perceived to be anomalous and deviant and which resist the authorisation of staring as a negative and reductive response to oddity? What strategies might museums deploy to frame the encounter between the viewer and the viewed in ways which result in respectful and reflective forms of attentiveness in the museum visitor? In Spring 2005 a new exhibition, *Whatever Happened to*

Polio?, opened at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. The fiftieth anniversary of the development of a vaccine to prevent polio provided the impetus for the exhibition but, for the project's director and lead curator Katherine Ott (2005), this was only part of the story.

> Most publicly available histories of polio have tended to focus on medical advancement and the development of the vaccines. People who had polio only make cameo appearances for dramatic effect, usually as children and cautionary reminders. After many conversations with friends and colleagues in the field of disability studies it became clear that the experiences of people who had polio could be the counterweight to the story of the medical breakthrough. We wanted to include the people who are central to the story but we also wanted to influence the way in which museum visitors would look at them.

Although preliminary research for the exhibition revealed large numbers of images of people with polio, the majority of these depicted individuals in an explicitly medicalised context. Most photographs emphasised dependency, passivity and illness, showing people as patients, completely or partially naked, often being examined or attended to by a physician or a nurse who was touching a part of their body or supporting them. For Ott, 'These images effectively annihilated the humanity of the person shown. In the end, we included only one of them within the exhibition and accompanied it with a quotation from a polio patient that referenced the lack of autonomy that many individuals experienced' (ibid.).

To counter the medicalisation of the story of polio, the exhibition includes numerous photographs displayed as if part of a family album. These highly personal images show people with polio in everyday situations, going to parties and picnics, getting married and playing with their children (Figs. 6.5 and 6.6). Laid out along the entire length of two walls of the gallery, they effectively frame (physically and conceptually) the entire exhibition. For Beth Ziebarth (2005), head of the Smithsonian's Accessibility Program, 'the family album device encourages visitors to stare but at the same time challenges their preconceptions of disabled people by embedding people with polio in everyday social settings rather than solely medical situations'.

Dilemmas linked to the encouragement of inappropriate forms of looking are perhaps inevitable in any attempts to enhance the visibility of disabled people in museum exhibitions. 'The feeling of being on display', David Gerber suggests, 'is something with which almost all disabled people have had to deal; it is, in fact, a singular form of oppression – the oppression of unwanted attention – that disabled people share with few others' (1996: 44). However, there are perhaps, as the example cited suggests, ways of redressing the cultural invisibility of disabled people by framing the visitor's gaze in particular ways.

Figure 6.5: Wedding of Dan and Carol Wilson

Source: Courtesy of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Medical Science Collections

Passing, outing, naming

A further set of dilemmas emerged from our study concerning the circumstances in which a disabled person's identity might or might not be revealed to the public, the implications of 'outing' a person as disabled (who might not themselves want, or have wanted, their disability to be made known) and the contextual factors which influenced decisions regarding whether or not to interpret an object or artwork through a disability-related narrative.

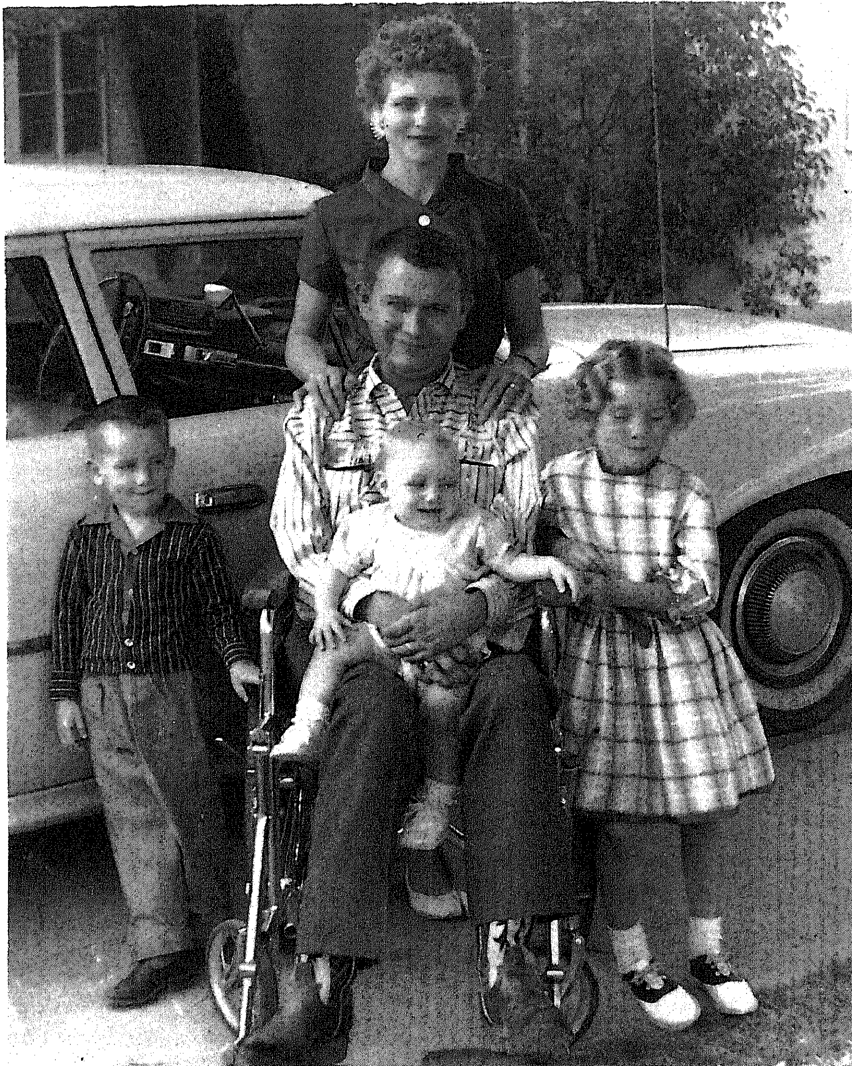

Figure 6.6: A family outing

Source: Courtesy of the Archives of Post-Polio Health International, St Louis, Missouri, USA

Passing

Discussing disability identity, several writers have used the concept of 'passing' to refer to the ways in which an individual might, for varied reasons and motivations, deny or conceal their physical difference and attempt to 'pass' (in certain contexts) as a non-disabled person. Catherine Kudlick has argued

that, 'like the pioneers in gay and lesbian history, many disabled scholars try to "pass" worrying that "coming out" will lead to stigma and isolation as long as our culture consciously or subconsciously equates *dis*-ability with *in*-ability' (2003: 769). Related issues emerged through our research in the museum context, for example regarding whether or not artworks by disabled artists should be interpreted in ways which referenced their disability, a topic which provoked strong feelings and sometimes divided opinion (between and amongst) museum practitioners and disabled people. On the one hand, it was felt that labelling an artist as disabled (especially where this was not perceived to be reflected in or relevant to understanding their artwork or life) was unhelpful, inappropriate and might be viewed by audiences as clumsy and tokenistic. Some curators felt that including information within an exhibition regarding an artist's disability might be a reductive rather than an enlarging process, effectively constraining the ways in which audiences perceived or related to the work on display. In contrast, others argued that there were benefits to be gained from stating an artist was disabled, particularly in terms of destigmatising disability and challenging persistent negative stereotypes. As many museums have attempted to broaden the appeal of exhibitions by including within their interpretation not only art historical but also, increasingly, biographical information, some felt that it might be increasingly appropriate to include reference to their disability, alongside information regarding their personal relationships and working life. Most agreed, however, that there could never be a straightforward universal solution and that curators should weigh up a range of contextual factors in determining whether or not (and also the extent to which) disability should feature in exhibition content. Whilst the wishes of individuals (and those of their descendants) were deemed to be very important, it was also recognised that these needed to be considered in the light of contemporary (changed) social attitudes to disability and be weighed against the potential benefits to be gained from the sensitive and thoughtful inclusion of disability-related interpretation.

Outing

Curators, not surprisingly, expressed anxieties concerning the practice of 'outing', a term more commonly used to refer to the public disclosure of a person's sexuality rather than their impairment. They were wary of identifying as disabled a person who concealed their disability in the public sphere, of retrospectively imposing on an individual a disabled identity that they may have resisted or, in the case of a living person, may be unready or unwilling to adopt. This is a controversial and contested area, and for many good reasons.

The 'outing' of a prominent historical figure whose disability has tended to be denied or (more passively) overlooked might usefully be understood as a

form of 'representational counter-strategy' (Hall 1997: 272) through which negative and stigmatised perceptions of difference are reversed or subverted.

The controversy surrounding the addition to the Roosevelt (FDR) memorial in Washington DC of a bronze statue depicting the President seated in a wheelchair provides an especially high profile example of this type of strategy. FDR, who contracted polio in 1921, spent his entire presidency from 1933 until his death in 1945 in a wheelchair although, until the new addition was unveiled in 1997, the memorial had included no acknowledgement of his disability. Opponents to the new statue argued that FDR's preference for concealing his disability should be respected and insisted that public memorials should not be appropriated to make social statements in this way. Disability culture advocates, on the other hand, argued that FDR's wish to hide his impairment was shaped by the mores of the time in which he lived and that, in the present-day context, an honest portrayal of the President provided a powerful means of challenging negative attitudes towards disability.[10]

How then should museums approach these difficult issues? In what circumstances might it be appropriate for a museum to address a disability that historically has been denied or hidden? Can museums successfully reconcile the wishes of a person (or those of their family) who may wish to remain silent about their disability with the views of disability culture advocates who seek recognition from society of the presence and the contributions of disabled people? Majewski and Bunch (1998) highlighted these challenges facing curators and concluded that the decision whether or not to refer to a person's disability had to be carefully considered. They cite a number of specific dilemmas including an exhibition at the California Afro-American Museum in 1988 entitled *Black Angelenos: The African American in Los Angeles, 1850–1950*, which aimed to explore the history of some of the city's pioneering black families to understand when and how leadership and influence evolved over time. Researching the life of Robert Owens, an influential political and cultural figure until his death during the Great Depression, the curator found medical records which showed that Owens had struggled with clinical depression which ultimately led to his suicide in 1932.

> When the curator interviewed Owens' ninety-year-old daughter, she was adamant that 'the shame' of Owens' illness and death should remain a family secret. While the curator felt that this information was an important historical note that would help to explain the decline of the family's influence, he was concerned about the living family's real fear of embarrassment.
>
> (ibid.: 153)

Subsequently, the museum decided not to explicitly explore this aspect of the story within the exhibition narrative but chose instead to include the

material in an accompanying book to make the history available to scholars (ibid.).

Naming

Many curators we interviewed suggested that images of disabled individuals within exhibitions should, as a general rule, be accompanied by a label which included the subject's real name. Similarly it was felt that, in most circumstances, the interpretation of artefacts linked to the life of a disabled person should also reveal to visitors the personal identity of the user or maker. Anonymity, some felt, might be construed as dehumanising and, especially when viewed alongside material linked to named non-disabled people, to suggest an inappropriately hierarchical relationship. Failing to provide the names of disabled people, some suggested, might inhibit visitors' capacities to make personal connections, and encourage them to focus on a person's impairment rather than to see the multifaceted individual.

In practice, however, we found many instances of displays in which material featuring or linked to disabled people did not carry their names. This issue appeared to be especially problematic in museums with collections linked to medical history. Examples included photographs and paintings depicting groups of hospital patients; residents of asylums for the insane (in some of these the names of staff were offered but not the names of the disabled people); crutches, braces, and prostheses (which were sometimes accompanied by the name of the object donor but not the disabled user themselves). A range of reasons were posited for the omission of a name including missing information regarding the identity of the individual; not having permission from the person depicted or their family; fear of causing offence to visitors with personal connections to the individual featured; and adherence to legal and medical protocols regarding anonymity of patients and sensitivity surrounding the feelings of living family members. (This last reason was most notably offered in relation to the depiction of residents of asylums for the insane.)

Alison Plumridge, then Senior Curatorial Officer at the Royal Pump Rooms in Leamington Spa – a museum and gallery housed in one of the last National Health Service-funded spa therapy centres in the UK which continued to treat people until late in the twentieth century – explained the particular challenges she faced in relation to the issue of naming.

> A lot of the pictures we have were taken between the 1920s and the 1980s to publicise the baths and consequently it is rare to have any information about the people in them. In certain cases we have identified patients and members of staff and there is a real possibility that if information is not recorded now it will be

lost forever. But how can you reconcile patient confidentiality with the need to present patients not as curiosities of medical science, but as real people whose stories should be told? It's not easily resolved.

(Nightingale 2004: 29)

Finally, a third display dilemma emerged from our research in relation to what might be termed 'difficult' material – disability-related objects which were linked to stories of pain and loss, of disempowerment and discrimination.

Telling difficult stories

Interventions designed to enhance the visibility of previously marginalised groups in wide-ranging media forms are, to a large extent, underpinned by a desire to celebrate and destigmatise difference, to offer new ways of seeing and understanding which replace, challenge or subvert dominant negative modes of representation. Thus Stuart Hall (1997) describes a series of transcoding strategies deployed since the 1960s which have attempted to contest, in varied ways, racialised regimes of representation in film, photography and advertising, for example by attempting to reverse negative racial stereotypes or by seeking to substitute 'positive' images of black people and culture for the 'negative' representations that have tended to dominate across different media forms.

A similar desire to re-present disability in *positive* ways can be seen to underpin many of the arguments proposed in this chapter thus far. Museums, it has been suggested, might usefully explore ways of redressing the absence of disabled people in displays and developing new cultural narratives which counter persistent and prevalent negative stereotypes that define individuals solely in terms of their impairments, typically equating physical difference with passivity, vulnerability, dependency, non-achievement and so on. Our study suggested that many museum collections hold considerable potential to represent disability differently, in more positive ways – to construct empowering, respectful and rounded ways of seeing physical differences not as deficient, inferior or deviant but as both natural and extraordinary.

The tension between, on the one hand, celebrating and affirming difference through positive forms of representation and, on the other, acknowledging and exploring the sometimes challenging, painful and difficult stories associated with disability surfaced in our study. Alongside the objects which might be deployed to present disabled figures which confront or displace negative images we also found many objects which were linked to aspects of disability history which lent themselves to rather less celebratory interpretations. These more challenging materials, present in diverse collections, were linked to a range of histories and

events including war injury and mutilation (and associated experiences of vagrancy, mental illness and poverty); freakshows; the experiences of the disabled victims of the Holocaust; histories of asylums, hospitals and workhouses; medical treatments and cures which were experimental, brutal or unsuccessful; and industrial illness and injury created by, for example, mining and fishing.

These difficult stories again prompted considerable debate amongst the disabled people and museum practitioners consulted during our study although ultimately there was considerable consensus surrounding the view that museums should not shrink from these sometimes discomforting subjects but rather should explore ways of enabling audiences to engage with both their historical and contemporary significance. Interventions motivated by attempts to destigmatise difference, the research team concluded, play an important role in extending the range of representations of disabled people and complicating reductionist and totalising understandings of disability that are manifest within prevalent stereotypes. However, it was also acknowledged that the deployment of such strategies was accompanied by a danger that the difficult questions posed by the realities of life for disabled people in the past, the ways in which society has dealt with their presence, and current prejudices towards disability could potentially be overlooked or obscured.[11]

Museums relating to medical history, not surprisingly, held a lot of material that was seen as potentially difficult for visitors to deal with and for curators to interpret. The Royal London Hospital Museum's treatment of the story of the X-ray martyrs was, however, viewed by colloquium participants as particularly thoughtful. The museum's displays explore the history of the hospital and developments in medical practice and include many references to disabled people who were not only patients but also pioneering staff and influential benefactors. These interpretations, the research team concluded, offered humanising, empowering and often surprising representations of disabled people. Alongside these 'celebratory' stories were others which dealt with more painful and challenging themes. One panel which tells the story of the X-ray martyrs features a number of images of Ernest Harnack and his assistants, the pioneer radiographers who continued to experiment on themselves despite losing their health through radiation injuries when the dangers of X-ray work were not fully known. One of these images, showing the hands of one of the X-ray martyrs (Fig. 6.7), although deemed potentially distressing to some visitors, was sensitively displayed and contextualised alongside other images and material.

Conclusion

In their attempts to engage with the imperatives posed by the politics of difference that has emerged over the last fifty years, museums have often

Figure 6.7: One panel at the Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum tells the story of Ernest Harnack and his assistants, the pioneer radiographers who continued to experiment on themselves despite losing their health through radiation injuries when the dangers of X-ray work were not fully known

Source: Photo by courtesy of Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum

struggled with the legacy of historic collections which have supported (or been *perceived* to support) the telling of only partial or biased histories – histories that reflect the experiences and values of a dominant or majority social group. In recent years, there has been a trend towards mining and reinterpreting existing collections to identify material through which new cultural narratives that redress the prior exclusion or marginalisation of, for example, women and minority ethnic communities can be constructed. Alongside these initiatives, proactive contemporary collecting projects have attempted to enrich collections to enable museums to engage audiences whose experiences and stories have been hitherto neglected. Despite these trends the representation of disability within museum displays and exhibitions has remained largely a *terra incognita*.

The study on which this chapter primarily draws suggests that many museums' collections hold material that might be interpreted in ways intended to offer new, liberatory disability narratives and which begin to fray, destabilise and subvert dominant (negative) representational practices.

Despite the richness of material held by museums, the representation of disability remains a neglected area of practice. Many reasons account for this inaction but the presence of dilemmas which are perceived to be bound up with attempts to enhance the visibility of disabled people has played an important role in inhibiting practice. Considerable uncertainty surrounds the most appropriate ways of tackling the subject of disability and many are fearful of making mistakes and causing offence.

Although the dilemmas highlighted by curators arise from genuinely vexing questions (to which no concrete right answers exist) they might also be seen to function for some as excuses; as convenient reasons for not tackling the under- and misrepresentation of disabled people in their museum's displays. There are, after all, processes and mechanisms, tried and tested in other areas of museum practice, which can be used to explore ways to move forward. Anxieties and uncertainties surrounding the most appropriate ways to represent disabled people arise from a model of practice in which the curator is expert and the authority for determining the ways in which material is displayed and interpreted lies within the museum. Where this model holds sway, practitioners are much less accustomed to consulting with communities and other stakeholders about issues of representation than they are in contexts where collaborative and partnership-based approaches to exhibition development have been more widely adopted. In North American and Australian Museums, for example – where the presence and activity of local Indigenous populations have transformed museum practices – advisory groups, consultative panels, joint management practices and so on are now widely viewed as essential for the development of exhibitions of Native materials (Peers 2000).[12] These processes of consultation and collaboration offer one means through which museums might equip themselves with the expertise and the perspectives to inform the ways in which they tackle the representation of disability.

Concerns regarding the encouragement of staring, the practice of outing, the telling of painful stories and so on constitute legitimate dilemmas but they are not wholly intractable and do not, in themselves, entirely account for the lack of activity in the field of disability representation. Underpinning all of these concerns is the continuing debate around the social roles and responsibilities of museums. To what extent should museums concern themselves with addressing issues of contemporary social inequality and discrimination? What opportunities (and, indeed, obligations) might museums have to represent disabled people more fairly and accurately in ways which counter negative stereotypes and prejudice?

Some practitioners in our study were open to, and enthusiastic about, the idea of museums developing displays which attempt to offer alternative, respectful and non-prejudiced ways of thinking and talking about disability. They believed that museums of all kinds were places

for exploring and valuing cultural differences and that collections should be viewed and interpreted not solely through the lens of 'disciplinary specialism', but also through that of 'contemporary social concerns'. Others, however, called into question the appropriateness of museums engaging in purposive attempts to shape audience attitudes and perceptions. One curator's discontent with contemporary museum trends and discourse was expressed as follows:

> We steer clear of these issues. I would feel uncomfortable about trying to change someone's perceptions unless there is something which has been a common belief and has been proven wrong. At the moment it's all about education and social inclusion and we just stand back from that because in two or three years it will be something else. We don't take on fads.

Between these extremes of opinion were those whose comments demonstrated openness to exploring these issues further but who remained uncertain about the capacity for museums to counter prejudice.

I have not attempted in this chapter to offer definitive solutions to the dilemmas which emerged from the research. Given the complex and contested issues surrounding the subject of disability, clear-cut answers are unlikely to be forthcoming. Instead I have sought to highlight, and explore through examples, some of the challenges inherent in attempts to reconfigure the museum's representational practices as they relate to disability and to point to possible ways forward that have been pursued and developed in other contexts. My intention has been to draw attention to directions which might fruitfully be explored and through which an enhanced understanding of the museum's potential to reframe conceptions of difference, and disability in particular, might emerge. Such exploration, it is hoped, will take the form not only of further research and debate but also further experimentation in exhibitionary practice.

In the final chapter I pull together the themes that have threaded throughout this investigation of the social agency of museums and discuss, with reference to a number of different examples, the larger and especially vexing questions that have been posed.

6 DISPLAYING DIFFERENCE

1 Hall defines the practice of trans-coding as 'taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings' (1997: 270).
2 The study was funded through an Innovation Award from the Arts and Humanities Research Board. The project team comprised Jocelyn Dodd, Richard Sandell, Annie Delin and Jackie Gay.
3 The researchers report that, 'Cultural and national differences within the category Asian – be it Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Pakistani or Indian – were not recognised' by respondents in their study.
4 John Richardson, in his study of the ways in which British broadsheet newspapers are implicated in the production and promulgation of anti-Muslim prejudice similarly highlights the fluidity of racism. He states, 'Of course racism is not a fixed concept – to the degree that it may be more appropriate to talk of *racisms*. This point is illustrated by the manner in which racism has changed, shifted and re-emerged in different guises over the last 300 years or so, and the way it *continues* to re-emerge, creating new positions on racial hierarchies and warranting new forms of social control to police these new racisms' (2004: xiv).
5 More recently, Hevey curated an exhibition, *Giants: Disabled People Reaching for Equality*, which was created to celebrate the European Year of Disabled People and which was shown at the City Hall, London in 2003. The exhibition represents a purposive attempt to counter the negative perceptions of disabled people he had earlier written about.

6 Rosalinda Hardiman (1990), for example, has highlighted the lack of attention given by museums to issues related to the employment of disabled staff.
7 In an article on the under-representation of disabled people in British museum displays, Peter Berridge, Director of Colchester Museums offered a similar viewpoint. 'If you walked down a street in Roman Colchester you'd see people of different races and you'd see disabled people, whether they were beggars or soldiers injured in the war ... If we don't display them' he argued, 'then it means we're editing them out' (Nightingale 2004: 29).
8 The selected case studies were Snibston Discovery Park, Leicestershire; Manx Museum, Isle of Man; National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh; Royal Pump Room, Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum; Whitby Museum, Yorkshire; Royal London Hospital Museum and Archives; The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; National Maritime Museum, Greenwich and Colchester Museums.
9 Interestingly, a senior museum professional participating in the colloquium suggested that some of these questions concerning definition were so pedantic as to constitute forms of evasion and reflected an entrenched unwillingness on the part of some curators to engage with the broader issues raised by the research.
10 For further discussion of the controversy surrounding the new addition to the FDR memorial, see Garland Thomson (2001).
11 Hall (1997) similarly highlights this danger in relation to interventions designed to contest racialised regimes of representation.
12 Interestingly – especially given the UK context for the empirical element of *Buried in the Footnotes* – Laura Peers has highlighted differences in approaches to exhibition development between museums in the UK and those in other contexts. Although focusing on the field of ethnographic curation, her observations nevertheless suggests that the prevailing approach to curatorship in the UK is one in which the habit of consulting stakeholders about issues of representation is less fully formed than it is elsewhere. 'Museums in North America, Australia and other areas where local indigenous populations have pressed for change to museum practice,' she argues, 'are now working in a very different manner from many of those in the UK and Europe, where physical and political distance permits another set of approaches to museum display and representation ... North American museums dealing with Native materials have shifted away from a model of exhibition development which is controlled from within the institution and in which the curator is the ultimate authority ... Source community members have also become integral to the entire process of curation and exhibition development ... While not all exhibitions on Native people developed at North American museums work this way, the climate of curation has shifted significantly on that continent, to make collaboration and co-management the model for such work' (2000: 8–10).