**You’re just little: How participatory photography can raise awareness about the everyday experiences of dwarfism.**

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People with dwarfism have a history of being on show. They occupy a prominent place within both historical and present day entertainment venues, including the Victorian freak show, Circuses and the Pantomime. In these spaces, their height has been constructed as a spectacle, however their disabling experiences have remained invisible. Furthermore, images denoting disability, including references to disability access, rarely include people with dwarfism. Instead they are dominated by stereotypes of disability which reinforce the belief that disability is a functional limitation and require some sort of aid. Both forms of representation have aided in hiding the everyday experiences of people with dwarfism. Whilst the arts have played a part in misrepresenting people with dwarfism, participatory photography offers the opportunity to raise awareness about their everyday experiences.

Disability arts reflects the experiences of disabled people. According to Julie Allan “Disability arts has developed as a particularly powerful genre which enables exclusionary barriers within a disabling society to be exposed” (31). ‘You’re Just Little’ was a photography exhibition that included a participatory element with contributors from the Dwarfism community, which added another dimension to disability arts through the inclusion of ‘dwarf arts’. The exhibition took place from the 4th-14th October 2018 at the Spectrum Cultural Club in the North East of England. The exhibition coincided with dwarfism awareness month, with the aim to educate society about a particular impairment group which has long been misrepresented. The exhibition revealed the challenges, obstacles and societal assumptions that people with Dwarfism experience on a daily basis (Robson). For example, one of the largest images within the exhibition was of a packet of crayons. The artist, Steph Robson, used this image to demonstrate how people with dwarfism are often infantilised. The crayons referred to the experience Steph had when out one afternoon for a family meal. A member of staff brought over some crayons for the children in the group, which they thought also included Steph.

The artist was Steph Robson, aka ‘Hello Little Lady’, who often writes about her everyday experiences as a woman with dwarfism. Steph is a recipient of and was awarded one of the Sunderland Culture - Creative Development Fellowship and has Russell Silver Syndrome, but comments how her identity as a person with dwarfism is often contested including by other people with dwarfism. It is hoped that the exhibition will help with the development of dwarf arts in order for people with dwarfism to tell their own stories. What was also striking is that Steph’s attempt to raise awareness through the exhibition was ignored by one of the UK’s most prominent association’s for people with dwarfism. Despite this, the project gained attention from the University of Sunderland, the Northern Echo and a local MP for the North East of England.

The aim of the project was to show the built environment from the perspective of someone with dwarfism, demonstrating the numerous barriers they encounter due to a mismatch in height. Everyday spaces that the average sized person takes for granted are literally out of reach for people with dwarfism. These were made prominent within the exhibition. This also included the gallery space, as most artworks are hung at a height accessible for the average sized viewer, making it an exclusionary place for people with dwarfism. As the title of the exhibition suggests, people with dwarfism are just dismissed as ‘little’ by the general public as opposed to disabled. I myself, could relate to this as I am often told I am ‘just small’ as opposed to a disabled person, which dismisses the wide range of disabling experiences I encounter on a daily basis. Pritchard (2014: 64) points out that ‘if the size of a space or facility was not a contributing factor to a person’s disablement, then there would be no need to ergonomically construct a space or facility for the average sized person’.

The artist recruited participants with dwarfism, via social media, and asked them to send photographs of everyday spaces from their perspective. The height of participants ranged from 3ft 2” (97cm) to 4ft 8” (142cm). Although the exhibition was based in the UK, Steph received photographs from people living as far afield as the USA and Australia. All in all 10 people sent in around 50 photographs. I, myself, took part in the exhibition and sent several photographs of spaces, which were mundane and often go unnoticed by the average sized person, but nonetheless have an impact on my day to day activities. For example, one image I sent was of tea and coffee facilities which my institution puts out for staff everyday. The other was a standing lectern which I am expected to use when giving lectures, however as the image shows it is impossible for someone of my height to see over it. All of the photos not only place everyday objects out of reach, but also make the viewer question how they would respond to that disabling space and how they would feel. It can make you feel excluded and unimportant.

The exhibition forced the viewer to confront the everyday experiences of people with dwarfism, without putting people with dwarfism on display. For once, people with dwarfism were behind the camera. Their presence was prominent, yet remained invisible. Viewers were not given the opportunity to stare at people with dwarfism, but instead at their encounters within the built environment. Photography is usually a tool which is part of the oppression people with dwarfism have experienced for years. With the invention of the camera in the 19th century, audiences within the freak show could purchase a photographic memento of the freak show performer, such as dwarfs. Fast forward to the 21st century and the popularity of the camera phone has led to numerous incidents of people with dwarfism being photographed by strangers. However, the exhibition photographs acted as a tool to empower people with dwarfism to tell their own stories. No longer can the average sized person dismiss the spatial experiences of people with dwarfism, as they are forced within that space.

The photographs were displayed at the eye-level of the artist, forcing the average sized viewer to step backwards to view a variety of spaces from the perspective of someone with dwarfism. The aim was to showcase the numerous disabling barriers that people with dwarfism have to interact with on a daily basis and educate the gallery visitor about the everyday struggles of living in a world created for the average sized person. These were not necessarily your typical access barriers, such as sets of steps, but everyday mundane facilities such as coat hooks on the back of toilet doors. Reactions from the viewers included comments such as ‘thought provoking’ and ‘I just didn’t realise’. These comments are understandable given the lack of true to life representation of dwarfism in the media. When it comes to images of disability, dwarfism remains absent, meaning our disabling experiences go unnoticed. Our ordinary experiences were seen as extraordinary by the average sized viewer.

“As I hung one of the [participant's] photographs up, I realised that I had never seen the world reflected back at me through another person’s eyes of a similar viewpoint, let alone on a gallery wall. I’ve never experienced that before as part of my life - in books or magazines, let alone as art in a gallery.” (Steph). We are constantly forced to view the world from the perspective of someone much taller than ourselves. Our voices are often excluded from both the disabled and non-disabled communities, leading to a lack of awareness given to the experiences of people with dwarfism. Pritchard (2020) explores how people with dwarfism are often questioned when trying to access accessible spaces as they do not match stereotypical perceptions of the disabled body. It is about time disability arts expand to include a wider range of impairments, including dwarfism.

**Works cited**

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