
Mapping the Representation of Disability in the Museum Environment

Megan Strickfaden*¹ and Janice Rieger^{2,3}

¹University of Alberta (UofA) – Canada

²University of Alberta, Canada (UofA) – Canada

³Queensland University of Technology (QUT) – Australia

Abstract

Material cultural studies questions societal issues through material things. In the case of this study, we use the museum environment and its relationship with how disability is represented as a means to exploring contemporary society's notion of disability. Museums have been producing and communicating knowledge for over 600 years and yet museums have only recently come under critical examination (Greenhill, 1992). Some interrogation of how disability is represented in museum environments has been conducted (Sandell, 2007; Sandell et al, 2010); however, a more holistic lens that considers representation as relative to the built environment and the messages displayed has never been studied. Our work looks at representation as any and all references (physical, textual, explicit and implicit) that are present within a museum including physical access (to place and space) and content (objects, didactic materials). This work is framed by theories that complement a more holistic approach and focus on the museum as a complex 'material' network where human and nonhuman actors come together to create a representation of disability. Two in-depth case studies conducted in Canadian museums that focus on disability content are the focus. The case studies involve deep object analysis (Hodder, 2003) whereby the space (exterior, interior) and displays are examined for overt or implied content related to disability. By unpacking how disability is represented through the museum-an influential institution where knowledge is both produced and consumed-insights into how contemporary society engages with and constructs disability is revealed. For instance, the representation of disability within museums is sometimes very explicit whereas other aspects of disability are barely present because these are related to cultural memories of silence, loss and forgetting (Connerton, 2006). This presentation promises to be visually rich with the aim to provoking alternate viewpoints around the role of objects and how disability is representative of questions and issues related to contemporary society.

Keywords: accessibility, built environment, consumption, cultural memory, didactics, material culture, object analysis, production

*Speaker