



Cultivating spaces for extraordinary artists



**Zoe Partington - ffotogallery,
'Turning it on its head':**

This is Zoe's second commission with DASH and partner galleries to create groundbreaking new work. In 2013 she co produced 'Sound Canvas' which won a Jodi Award for Innovation and has toured Shropshire and the borders after leaving The Public.

Tu Fewn and 'Turning it On its Head' is a series of images and oral descriptions, commissioned as part of the Diffusion festival theme 'Looking for America' to provide an insight into my work around Disability Arts. I've been developing this work for over 25 years, observing and experimenting with accessibility to visual imagery for blind and partially sighted people in different ways.

Diffusion is a biennial month-long international festival of photography which took place in Cardiff, Wales. In 2015 Ffotogallery selected the theme of 'Looking for America', an investigation of the status and meaning of the American Dream in relation to contemporary experience in Wales, America and the rest of the world. The festival flourished with stunning and thought provoking images and I sharing through the link some of my favourite photos and collected images of the work of Stacy Kranitz and the images of Ken Griffiths of Patagonia and the work of Jona Frank and High School/Right, amongst hundreds of images from the DIFFUSION Festival 2015 to access these go to the website address below.

I'd encourage you to view the work that I believe has many parallels with many journeys and insights of disabled artists and their work in Disability Arts. I felt at home with the festival content as a tool to challenge myths and misconceptions of America and at times I found some images challenging and some phenomenal. In a sense seeing and hearing about individual photographers journeys and the life they captured through the lens has given me an appetite to continue capturing disabled people's lives in a style that works for me.

I started this journey as an outsider and quickly felt welcomed as part of the Ffotogallery team and as a disabled artist a term I am proud to use as it is relevant to my ethos, practise, investigation, and my interest around the social dynamic of how disabled people are received by others and how disabled people are represented, discussed, assessed and analysed. I spend a lot of my life not mentioning my impairment and my chronic condition that impacts on my life 24/7 but in this context it felt relevant and valid to include the reference, and the terminology and symbolising disability and the barriers disabled people meet regularly through the lack of understanding of the social model of disability the barriers disabled people face are the external factors such as lack of access to the environment, support, education, housing, employment, discrimination, attitudes and inaccessible information all the barriers, not the actual condition or impairment.

During the past 20 years I have managed with sight loss and used it to enhance my experience of the world around me and challenge those who continue the myths, misconceptions and exclusion of blind and partially sighted people.

At the time I lost my sight I was studying an MA in the History of Art, Design and Architecture and undertaking a lot of research into photography and architecture in the UK and Dubai but on losing some of my sight I found continuing this research incredibly hard. At times I was accessing images with a small magnifier and found this exhausting so I stopped looking and using camera's and enjoying images in detail and as I did not want to be reminded of what I could not see.

At the time, lack of awareness about Disability Arts and the lack of opportunity to meet other disabled artists was devastating. It is only 20 years later that I have been supported by organisations such as Dash.

It hasn't been easy deciding to continue making art in a traditional sense and using my creative perspective to inform my work. The social model was enlightening as it taught me to forget tradition and literally abandon it and create and feel that my own way of playing with art and its associations and the free play of ideas my own.

I am constantly juggling and balancing the impact of my medical condition and the sight loss with the images and installations I create. What I mean by this is that how I see an image is not necessarily how others view it. The reason for this is that the receptors in my retina that take information to my

brain are damaged and over 20 years I have learnt to see things in a different way. The immediate impact of sightloss meant I was judging every time I looked at an image what I couldn't see it has taken me a long time for my brain to stop doing this and feel comfortable with what I am viewing. My brain views images so rapidly now I don't know what I can't see and I've also stopped caring about what I cannot see.

During this Tu Fewn commission I have had access to high quality contemporary photography from other festival photographers and other disabled volunteers, artists and their work. This has driven a passion in my work to continue to develop my photography through 'portraits, words and images'.

I have been creating new types of workshops with images and words and drawing techniques to observe and encourage participants to share what they can see with blind and partially sighted people. What is apparent is that people do view images differently but can share a common perspective which provides a way in for blind and partially sighted people to experience contemporary images and for me and this is personal, having had sight I still want to know what the visual is even if I cannot see it.

I also want a conversation at an intellectual level about the work.

The workshops are continuing to develop and a culmination of my ideas by working with another disabled artist introduced to me by Ulrike Smalley uses the idea of 'Renga' a collaborative poetry to create meaning through words.

We will work together to create 'Renga' and image workshops through words and photos.

In conversation when starting this project I didn't dream of ending it at the Turner gallery in Penarth with artists with head injuries and beginning a new journey but this is why I what I do because as soon as I mention being a disabled artist other disabled people openly begin to share their lives with me. I've really noticed this during the audio description workshops I provided during the festival and the open call attracted many disabled volunteers to come and work with me.

The festival theme was 'Looking for America' and I wanted to investigate this relationship with disabled artists. This was my starting point and the process began with exploring through email, messenger, facebook, instagram and conversations with disabled people their perspective of a notion of an American Dream.

The project also deals with my experience as a conceptual artist about the issue of sight loss and developing new ways to describe visual images to blind and partially sighted people. I designed creative workshops developed as part of the festival called, '**Talking images**' that have provided sessions which enabled exchanges of ideas about interpreting and translating visual images into words. This has supported my international work in Brazil, Iceland, Australia and enabled me to continue to develop, '**Talking images**' for all audiences in the cultural and heritage sector in progressive ways. The photos created for the festival centred around these conversations with disabled artists across the Americas and world wide, about 'The American Dream' and its relationship to disabled people. The outcomes were a progression of the consequences of descriptions and perceptions of visual imagery through the eyes of individuals. I am fascinated by how we interpret images for others and convey information.

Many photographers programmed in the festival held beliefs similar but different to the concept and notion that inherent flaws can be constructed to create a land of dreams and idealised state. I used words to change meaning in my photos. The language that relates to the photo is shown below and I built this in as part of the creative process to enhance the images for all using creative audio description. Involving disabled people in the creative process provides a welcome change to the 'mainstream' another perspective and significantly an equal society.

Background of Tu Fewn:

Tu Fewn is an exciting new development opportunity for arts organisations in Wales to commission new high quality work by Disabled visual artists from across the UK and Internationally. Working in partnership with Disability Arts Cymru with funding from Arts Council Wales.

The aims of Tu Fewn are:

- To increase the number of Disabled visual artists :
- Exhibiting in mainstream galleries in Wales
- Developing Curatorial skills with Mainstream galleries in Wales
- Working with Arts Organisations in Wales
- To change working practices of galleries and arts organisations through a practical partnership and network
- To increase the number of Disabled people as an arts audience.



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