

Us and Them: Repurposing Asylum Photography in Disability Activism

Alana Harris (Department of History), Eight members of Freewheelers Theatre and Disability Company supported by Karl Newman as CEO and Gary Thomas as media tutor, Julian Pooley (Surrey History Centre), Emma Brown (Portrait photographer), Laura Mitchison (Co-Director and Oral Historian, On-the-Record).





19th century glass plate negative © Surrey History Centre



Photo by Emma Brown (2023).

PROJECT SUMMARY

The *Us and Them* project, led by Alana Harris (Department of History), creatively re-imagined 19th-century asylum photographs to highlight issues surrounding disability and challenge how people with disabilities have been portrayed over time. This powerful collaboration brought together eight disabled artists from Freewheelers Theatre and Disability Company to explore how historical images of people with disabilities can be reinterpreted to interrogate past and present stigmas.

In partnership with Surrey History Centre, the project unearthed archival photographs taken in local psychiatric institutions and paired them with newly commissioned portraits of the disabled artists. Guided by portrait photographer Emma Brown and oral historian Laura Mitchison, the artists used historical photographic techniques to create new images that provoke questions about ableism, mental health, and representation.

The project culminated in a public exhibition at The Horton Arts Centre in Epsom, where the new and historical photographs were displayed side by side. The exhibition opened to great public interest, sparking important discussions around disability and inclusion. Looking ahead, the project aims to expand with further exhibitions and creative outputs, continuing to explore the intersection of disability activism and historical memory.

HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

The project originated from a previous collaboration between Alana and Surrey History Centre. During a community workshop using historical postcards of asylum patients, one participant from the Freewheelers Theatre remarked, “100 years ago, this would have been me locked up in the asylum.” This observation inspired Freewheelers’ CEO Karl to propose a new project that would combine photography with disability activism. Alana, in collaboration with photographer Emma and community historian Laura, quickly assembled a team. The project took shape through a series of workshops that ran across September to November, culminating in the exhibition in December 2023.



Photo by Emma Brown (2023).

WHAT HAPPENED?

The *Us and Them* project started with two research sessions at Surrey History Centre, where disabled artists explored 19th-century photographs from asylums and patient records. These sessions gave the artists a chance to reflect on how people with disabilities and mental health issues were treated in the past, and inspired them to create their own modern portraits based on these historical images.

Next, the artists worked with photographer Emma Brown, using the wet-plate collodion technique, a challenging 19th-century photographic process. This method required careful handling of chemicals and precise lighting, but it allowed the artists to recreate the old images in a way that was both artistic and historically accurate. For the participants, it was not just about learning a new technique, but more importantly taking control of how they were represented, challenging stereotypes about disability.

The project finished with a public exhibition at The Horton Arts Centre, where the old asylum photos were displayed alongside the new portraits co-created by the artists. The exhibition invited visitors to think about how attitudes towards disability have changed—or stayed the same—over time. Viewers were encouraged to engage with the stories behind both sets of images, fostering a dialogue about the ongoing need to challenge ableism and promote a more inclusive understanding of disability. By directly confronting both historical and contemporary portrayals, the exhibition invited the public to reconsider their own assumptions and biases, fostering a dialogue around the progress still needed to achieve true equality and inclusion for disabled people.



Still by Steve Rosam (2023).

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The *Us and Them* project had a deep and lasting impact on the participants. For the disabled artists from the Freewheelers Theatre Company, the co-creation of their portraits gave them both visibility and a voice. The project built their confidence and self-esteem, allowing them to document the entire process through film and audio, which will be used in future work. The project also fostered conversations that helped deepen understanding of each other's disabilities and abilities, and laid the groundwork for future creative projects, including a possible theatrical production.

For the other collaborators, including the photographer, oral historian, and curators, the project provided valuable insights into their professional and creative practices. They gained a deeper understanding of the ethics of portrait photography and how it intersects with disability representation. The process also highlighted the need for accessibility in areas like audio production (accounting for speech difficulties), hanging exhibitions (with consideration for wheelchair users), and working with historic visual source materials. These insights not only improved the collaborators' work but also enhanced their ability to communicate the history of disability and mental health to the public.

The *Us and Them* exhibition at The Horton Arts Centre was very well received by visitors, many of whom left thoughtful and reflective comments. One visitor noted, "We learned a lot about changing attitudes towards mental health and were profoundly moved by reading these stories." Many praised the exhibition's sensitivity, curation, and the powerful comparison between the lives of the Freewheelers and the historic asylum residents. Over 300 people visited the exhibition during its two-week run, and 60 people attended a public discussion event hosted by the project team, allowing them to explain what they learnt through the project to family members, friends, local residents and members of Surrey's disabled community.

The project team is currently working on publishing these reflections, along with the photographs, in an academic journal to share the project's insights more broadly with academic and professional audiences. Through this process, the project has not only empowered participants but also made meaningful contributions to academic discussions on disability, mental health, and visual representation.

ALANA'S TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT

1. Involve your community partners from the very beginning of the project and allow time to build friendship and trust. Regular communication ensures the project is aligned with everyone's needs and goals, making it mutually beneficial and fostering a sense of shared ownership and commitment.

2. Be flexible and turn glitches into opportunities. Unexpected challenges are common in impact projects, but they can lead to new creative possibilities. Whether it's adapting the venue or working with limited resources, being flexible allows you to make the most of the situation.

3. Prioritise accessibility and inclusivity at every stage - from first ideation to delivery. Find ways to involve all participants from the outset, considering their specific needs and abilities and thinking proactively about any necessary adjustments. Incorporating 'experts by experience' in the design phase will ensure the project leads to more meaningful and impactful outcomes for all. As disability activists have long maintained: 'not about us, without us'.

FURTHER READING

1. Katherine D. B. Rawling, 'Patient Photographs, Patient Voices: Recovering Patient Experience in the Nineteenth-Century Asylum' in *Voices in the History of Madness. Mental Health in Historical Perspective*, ed. Rob Ellis, Sarah Kendal, Steven J. Taylor, London, 2021, pp. 237-262.

2. Jan Walmsely, 'Healthy Minds and Intellectual Disability' in *Healthy Minds in the Twentieth Century: In and Beyond the Asylum*, ed. Stephen J. Taylor and Alice Brumby, London, 2020, 95-111.

3. Susan Sidlauskas, 'Inventing the Medical Portrait: Photography at the "Benevolent Asylum" of Holloway, c.1885-1889'. *Medical Humanities* 39/1 (2013), 29-37

Photo by Emma Brown (2023).



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For further information:
Email: ah-impact@kcl.ac.uk
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