

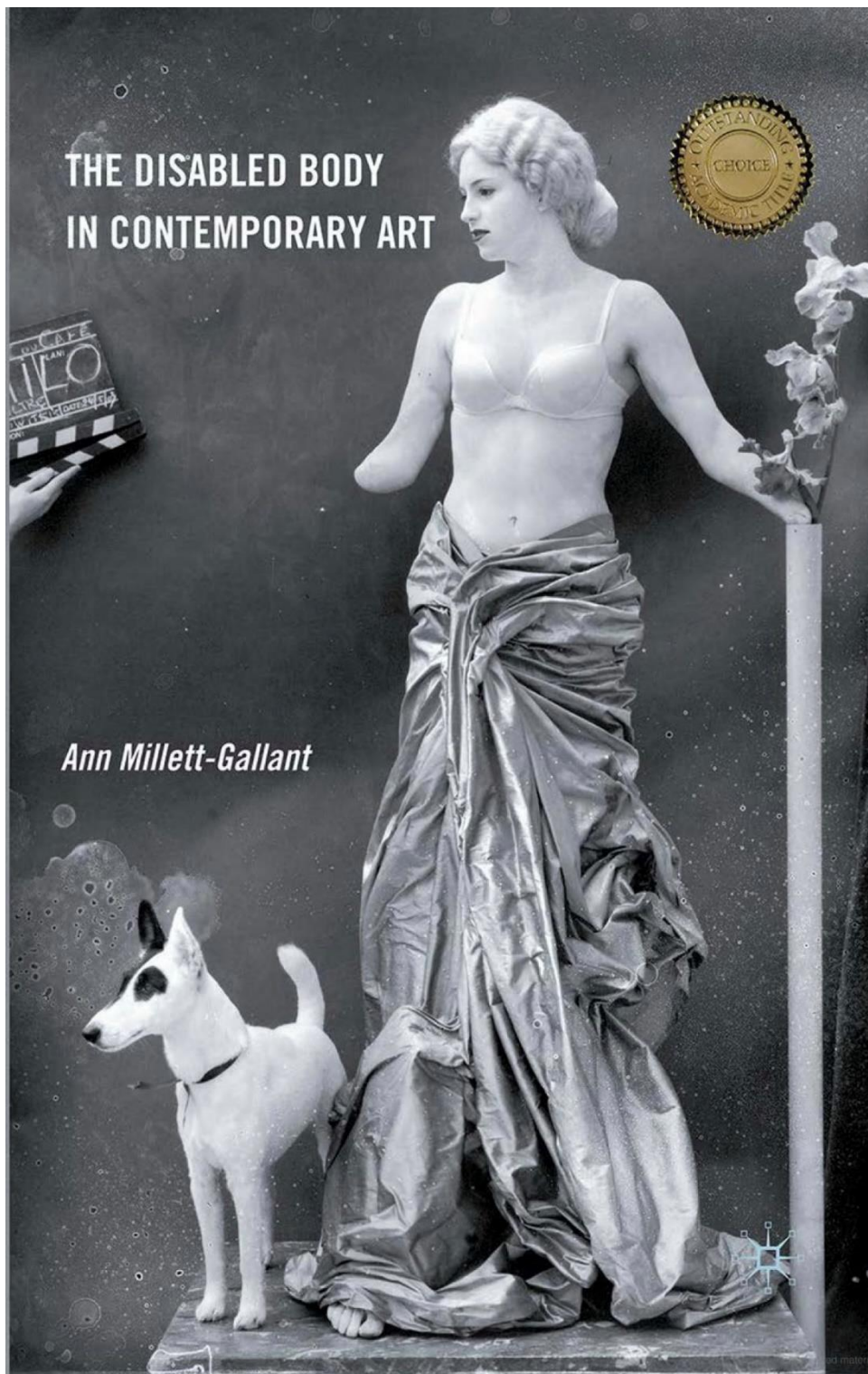
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Can We Finally Be an Inclusive Culture?

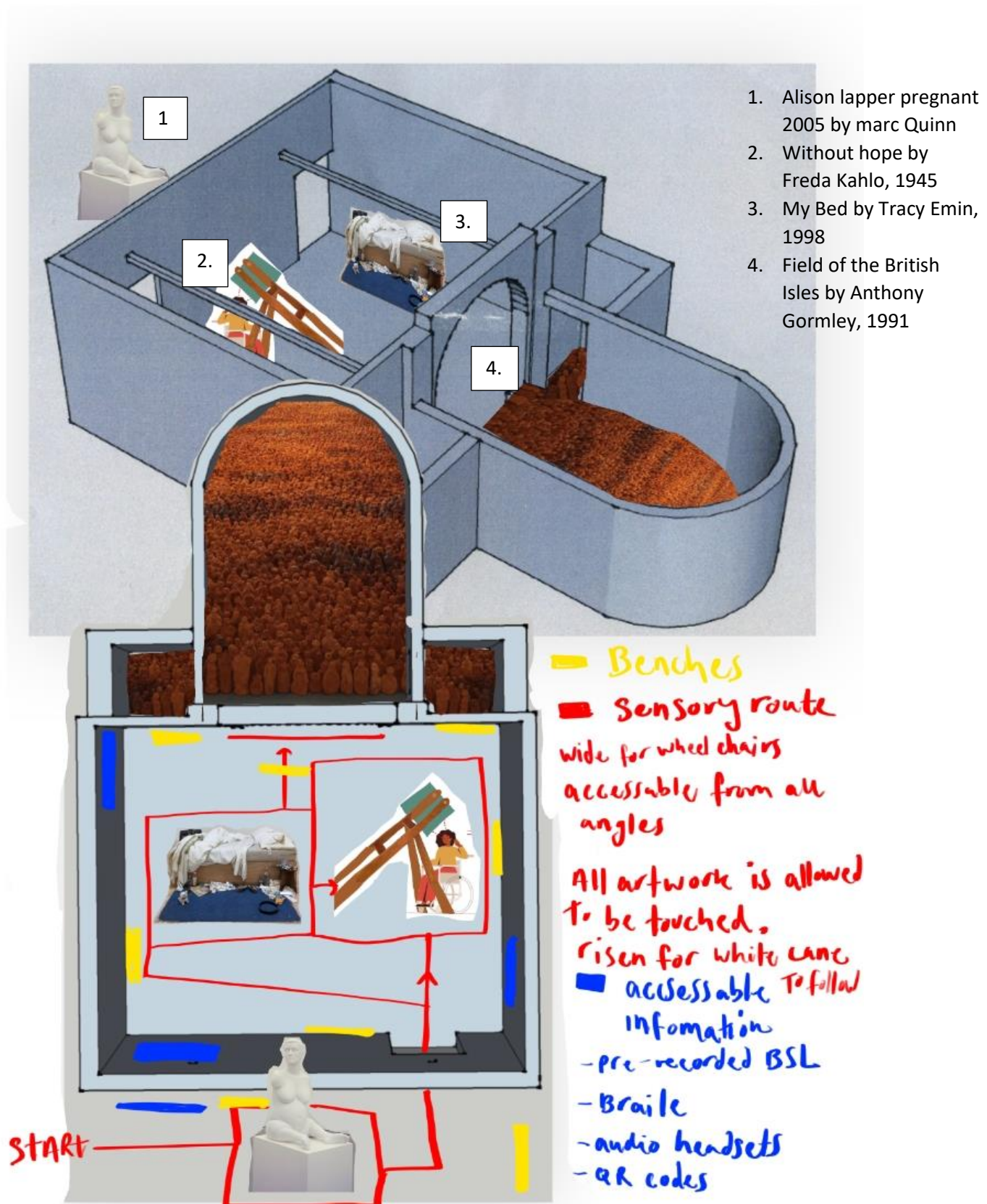


Figure 1, Map of Imagined Exhibition in the Mission Gallery, with accessibility plans. Images from (Mission gallery, 2017)

Can We Finally Be an Inclusive Culture?

The “Can We Finally Be an Inclusive Culture?” exhibition aims to showcase the unique perspective of female disabled artists and highlights questions of inclusivity and community. In this arrangement, the exhibition challenges the audience on how they view disability, and so see the emotional impacts of isolation that these female disabled artists have felt. As well as challenging the viewer, the works also look for a response and suggests an inclusive community could be the answer.

Firstly, the title for this exhibition came from the ideas behind the Social Model of Disability (Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People, 2017) which, conclude that disability is only present when the environment and attitudes are disabling.



Figure 2, (Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People, 2017)



Figure 3(Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People, 2017)

The social model says that an ‘individual impairment differs from the social construction of disability that might surround the impairment... Additionally the social model distinguishes between disabled people as an oppressed group and the non-disabled people that are the causes or contributors to that oppression.’ (Shakespeare, 2017). This exhibition brings to light how female artists with disabilities navigate an ableist profession and a disabling world. The ‘Can We Finally Be An Inclusive Culture?’ exhibition is completely accessible to ensure the physical and social surroundings are not disabling for anyone.

For the venue of this exhibition, I have chosen old Seamans Mission built in 1868, (now called The Mission Gallery). Throughout the exhibition I want to challenge the historical use of this building which is of a men’s refuge for sailors and seamen. The original ‘Mission’ was exclusively for one part of the community and did not consider the needs of women or of those with disability – it was just for able-bodied men. Highlighting the Victorian view of disabled people, (Grant et al., 2013) mentions that ‘the stereotype of disabled people as pathetic and pitiable is given prominence in the portrayal of the character of Tiny Tim in A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens’. In addition, the Idiots Act of 1886 allowed ‘local authorities to build separate asylums for intellectually impaired patients. It also attempts to clarify distinctions between ‘idiots’, ‘imbeciles’ and ‘lunatics.’ (Grant et al., 2013). The Seamans mission, although it was a charitable cause, did not object to these negative views of the disabled and therefore contributed to the oppression of anyone different to themselves.



Figure 4: Seamans Mission now the Mission Gallery, Swansea. (*The Mission Gallery*, 2017)

Now, this exhibition will fill The Mission Gallery with challenging pieces focused on disabled female artists. We often forget how far we have come since 1868 because of how far we still must go for social equality. However, by celebrating artists in the Mission Gallery such as Freida Kahlo, Tracey Emin and Alison Lapper's statue by Marc Quinn, this exhibition showcases these amazing artists and their perspective on their version of the world - which is often very different to what able-bodied people may expect.

For me, filling the exhibition with those who often don't get given the space to shine and show their work is important. In line with the Equality Act of 2010 (section 6), the exhibition will have various accessibility features to make sure it is accessible to everyone. For example, having artwork descriptions in formats like braille, audio to listen to, pre-recorded British Sign Language descriptions as well as artwork to feel & touch. All exhibits will be at a reachable height from a wheelchair, with space to manoeuvre around each piece and places to sit and rest. The installations will aim to enhance all the senses in order to engage with as many people as possible. There will also be a quiet hour with less sensory distractions i.e. dim lights, quiet white noise and limited capacity.

The three female disabled artists I have chosen to exhibit each provide a unique perspective on the world due to their disability and womanhood. Freida Kahlo's physical disabilities caused by polio and an accident left her bed bound and she painted from her bed. Throughout this exhibition there will be 'themes of the struggle to make artwork about the body in a sexist, racist, homophobic, and ableist world--a world from which a body such as Kahlo's has been largely rejected and analytically misunderstood' (Millett-Gallant, 2010). Tracey Emin was also bedbound but due to severe depression and her work reflects her struggle with mental illness. Alison Lapper however is often not recognised as an artist first, but her perspective is as a disabled mother who struggled to get society to treat her as a capable loving parent to her son. The final piece by Anthony Gormley will ask the question on how we as society or community can change and perhaps be more accountable?

Outside the front of The Mission is a well positioned sculpture by Marc Quinn – Alison Lapper Pregnant 2005. Whilst the sculpture is by Marc Quinn a male artist, the main focus is on female artist Alison Lapper. She is an artist herself, born with Phocomelia, which meant she has no arms and shortened legs. In Marc Quinn's words, the statue is to celebrate "someone who has conquered their own circumstances, rather than someone who has conquered the outside world" (UKDHM, 2023).



Figure 5: Alison Lapper Pregnant, 2005, Marc Quinn

The fact that Alison is pregnant in the sculpture, speaks to the challenges of disability and motherhood. This is further highlighted when you consider her story, challenged by social services who were sceptical of her abilities as a parent, to quote Alison on the messages they gave her “You’re are disabled parent, so therefore you’re going to fail” (Saner, 2014). Through all her struggling, Lapper has put her ‘disability and femininity and motherhood on the map’ exclaiming ‘It’s time to challenge people’s perceptions of these things. I’m hopeful it (Alison Lapper Pregnant, 2005) can make a difference’ (Law, 2019). Even though this is her passion it is chilling how backward society still is about disability and how this has not changed from 1945 in the time of Freida Kahlo.

‘In 1930 Julian Huxley, chairman of the British Eugenics Society wrote: What are we going to do? Every defective man, woman and child is a burden. Every defective is an extra body for the nation to feed and clothe, but produces little or nothing in return.’ (Law, 2019)

When you enter inside the gallery the first work you see is by Freida Kahlo, Without Hope (1945) (figure 7). It is positioned opposite the door, hung from the ceiling at a downwards angle so that guests can view the piece from all angles, but especially from below. Around the artwork will be a wooden structure (see figure 6 for diagram) made to replicate the easel that Kahlo’s mother adapted for her to paint on whilst bedbound. ‘When an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions about art. Assumptions concerning: Beauty, Truth, Genius, Civilization, Form, Status, Taste etc. Many of these assumptions no longer accord with the world as it is’ (Berger, 1972). This exhibition layout is challenging these out-of-date assumptions by introducing positive representation and educating the audience from female disabled perspectives.



Figure 6: Diagram of easel structure for mounting 'Without Hope' by Freda Kahlo 1945

Described as by Hayden Herrera the piece shows “the steely determination with which she transformed pain into a fuel for art, and art into a means for survival, is evident in every brushstroke” (Herrera, 1976). Having the audience stand / sit under the easel, would also look to recreate a sense of how Kahlo had to paint this from her bed, lying in a horizontal position with a specially built easel. Hence to view properly, guests would need to look up at an uncomfortable angle, acknowledging this would be how Kahlo saw and felt the piece as she did it.



Figure 7: *Without Hope*, 1945, Frida Kahlo

'Without Hope' (1945) symbolises Kahlo's pain and solitude. In the painting she has placed her bed in the foreground of a desert, within a Mexican landscape and a burning sun. "I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am (therefore) the subject I know best" (Kahlo, 1945). This speaks of her feelings of loneliness and solitude in a harsh environment, very much reflecting where she was at the time – bed bound, unable to move in a poor Mexico struggling post war (info from <https://www.fridakahlo.org/without-hope.jsp>). The most powerful feature in this painting is the funnel into her mouth, the foul looking animals and skulls and her arms that appear unable to move. This reflects the period where her doctor ordered her to be force fed a fatty diet against her will, the painting draws on this and conveys a deep sense of helplessness and a lack of hope.

As a disabled woman, Kahlo was unable to move, unable to choose what to eat and her fate decided by others. The emotions and feelings portrayed in this painting are a far cry from modern day principles such as the values of the NHS (see figure 8) – people first, respect, commitment to quality of care, compassion, improving lives (NHS, 2023).

Against all this, 'Kahlo has become an icon whose art packs a punch as compelling as her own fight with adversity' (El Paso Times, 2018). Having this piece in this exhibition encourages the audience to stick up for themselves and one another and keep fighting oppression against women with disabilities as well as educating themselves on how hard it is to be a disabled woman in society even now.



Figure 8, 6Cs of the NHS (NHS, 2023)

Alongside Kahlo's bed, the exhibition will show 'My Bed' 1998 by Tracey Emin. Whilst Emin did not have any of the physical disabilities of Kahlo at the time, she was still bed bound and unable to move. This piece, which was her actual bed at the time, draws the audience into her addicted, depressed and manic mind. The sheets stained with menstrual blood and used condoms are a hint towards her loss of control on her body and femininity. As 'one of the most controversial artworks of the 1990s, (My Bed, 1998) is still perceived as a powerful manifestation of vulnerability, My Bed is a specific self-portrait that offers everybody a chance to identify or project one's own painful experience' (Takac, 2019). It is not often that women with hidden disabilities like addiction and



Figure 9:
My Bed,
1998,
Tracey
Emin (Tate,
1998)

depression let an audience into such a personal experience because of a fear of judgment and misunderstanding. 'And when she says darkness, I realise, she is being both literal and metaphorical. "There is darkness. For every ounce of light, there is darkness. There's black holes in space. In every nook and cranny, in the recesses of our mind, there's darkness. Maybe it's inside us like the cancer, gnawing away"' (Jones, 2022). Emin is no less of an artist or a human being because of her mental health struggles. Showing this piece is important for education of hidden disabilities as well as self-reflection into one's own life.

In 2019, Emin battled cancer, and as a result now has a stoma (a bag directly from her intestines to catch urine). As always, Emin is real and open with her new disability and wants to share her story to

help others. In an Instagram post (see figure 10) in 2022 she states she doesn't want to hide her disability and feels gratified to be able to have evidence of a disability when people question her compared to hidden disabilities that people 'don't believe' (Emin, 2022).

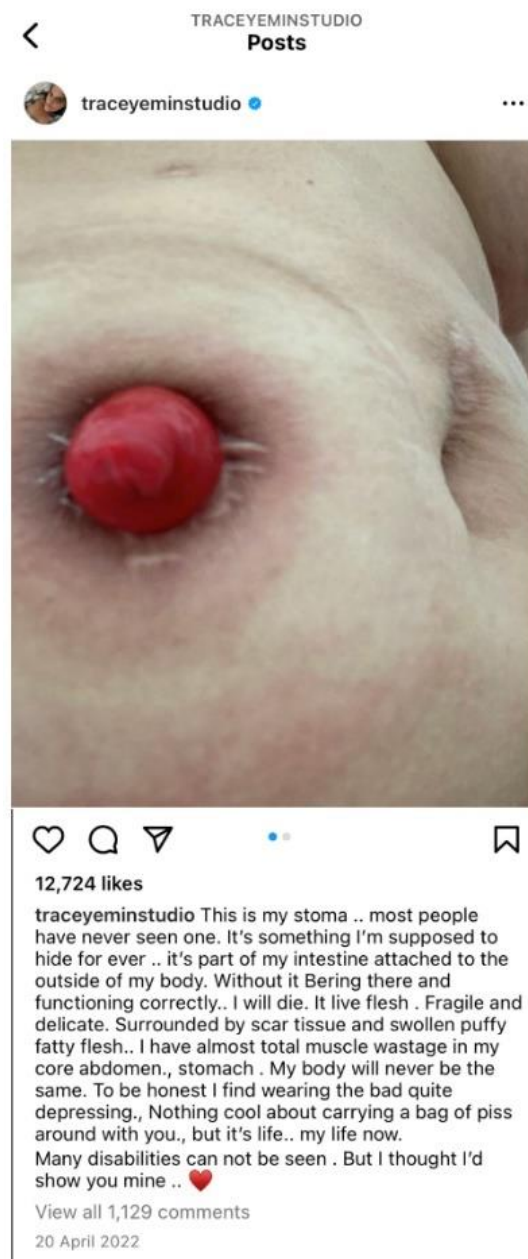


Figure 10, Emin's Stoma Instagram post, (Emin, 2022)

Finally, in the back space, under the dome, stands the 'Field for the British Isles 1993' by Anthony Gormley (figure 11). This piece brings in the element of community and how important it is for those with and without disabilities to work together for the better of all. This challenges Margaret Thatcher's words 'so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing!' (Margaret Thatcher, 1987). As we have seen in the other pieces in this exhibition, community can work against the isolation of our culture and help stop the isolation and separation felt by those with physical and mental disabilities. A Dictionary of Critical Theory states that 'Society is always greater than a single individual...and is... also used in more affirmative terms to classify the ensemble of institutions, organizations, and relationships that give support to the individual' (Buchanan, 2010).

This definition supports this exhibition in its aim to bring community together for the benefit of everyone.



Figure 11: Field, 1993, Anthony Gormley

Field was made by the community to show the community how important it is to work together. 'Field's figures have been made, in this instance, by a community of families, in Humberside, under Gormley's direction, using brick clay. Other versions of Field have been made by families of brickmakers in Mexico, by children in the Amazon basin, by students and families in Sweden.' (Searle, 1996). Even the making of this piece embraces everyone and notices how important community is for human beings.

This piece is particularly powerful as the 40,000 small figures are arranged looking back at the audience with deep hollow, hopeless eyes. Rather than the audience looking at this work, the pieces look and challenge the audience to do something and act. Perhaps it is to build community that is inclusive for all? Anthony Gormley says the figures are asking: 'What kind of world are you making?' (Brown, 2019).

Bringing this message together, the layout of the exhibition will start with Marc Quinn's sculpture of Alison Lapper, challenging the visitor to see disability and femininity differently. We then go into the main hall that will display the two beds of Freida Kahlo and Tracey Emin, looking at physical and mental disability, and the isolation that so often comes with disability. Finally, in the back of the space, Anthony Gormley's 40,000 terracotta figures look back at the visitor and asks the question 'Can we build a better society that is inclusive and supports all?'

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