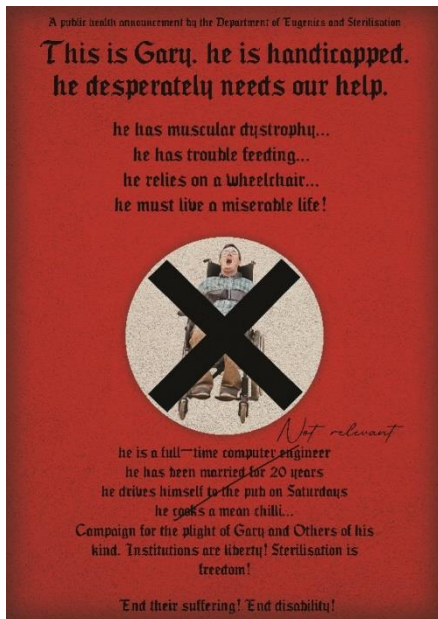


List of Works

1 Not Relevant



Arguably one of the more contentious posters in this exhibition, 'Not Relevant' is a take on the Nazi-era propaganda that highlighted the concept of a 'perfect' master race, placing those who did not conform in ideological cells – Jewish people, gays and lesbians, Roma and those with disabilities – all portrayed as both pathetic specimens of life and threats to Nazi society.

Whilst the inevitable attempts to 'cleanse' 1930s and 40s Germany of Jewish people is well documented; the volume of disabled adults and children is equally hard to digest – only records of deaths from 1940-1941 exist but they already tallied 300,000 by then...

So how does this relate to modern perceptions of disabled people? Whilst mercifully the concept of euthanasia (literal meaning "beautiful death") has long gone, one could argue that the far-right notion of

eugenics is echoed in modern times: and what are the relations between new prenatal diagnostic techniques and those earlier ideas?

The presented image directly links Nazi misinformation campaigns to prevailing views of those with disabilities to be suffering; whilst often their achievements and levels of contentment with life are underplayed as 'Not Relevant'. Gary is a real person. When I first met him I'm ashamed to say my initial reaction was of sympathy, I had the same prejudices as many – 'what a terrible situation'! Yet he is happily married, has a successful career and has a great social circle; what if society had taken the same view of him as Hitler in Mein Kampf? *"Those who are physically and mentally unhealthy and unworthy must not perpetuate their suffering in the body of their children"*.

If history has taught us anything it is, with the right attitude and support of those around them, people with disabilities are not 'victims' and they are not a burden. They are, first and foremost, people who contribute and give to society rather than take; and they deserve credit for that. We must never allow the dystopia depicted in the hatred of Nazi publications to in any way influence society, no matter how subtly.



Comrade, this is also your money (1939)

2 Pity Party



Here, we move from one totalitarian state to another, that of Maoist China – another government which made heavy use of propaganda iconography but with a very different stance on framing disabled people as ‘victims’.

China’s take here is more complex...the image focusses on the ‘victim’, easily identified through the loss of a limb, at the back of a mass rally; separated from her able-bodied peers. But why the exclusion from the others? Is she at the back of a rally being shunned as non-conformist (a huge Maoist sin). Or is she walking to the front on a wave of condescending, sentiments - thus excluded by sympathy; an easier response to her disability than empathy... which requires a deeper understanding of the person.

So, what does this tell us about contemporary perceptions of disabled people as victims? Like it or not, modern society is still overwhelmingly ‘ableist’ - reacting to disabled victims with pity and sympathy; however well-intentioned. Pity assumes that the recipient of that emotion is in NEED, that because of their disability they are somehow lacking – reinforcing barriers between disabled and able-bodied people who need to ‘help’ them.

Sadly, the very charities that provide practical support often, in raising funds for service provision, rely on our feelings of sympathy, of wishing to do good and give to good causes. Ironically, in order to do this many organisations portray disabled people as needy and dependent on charity to elicit funds – reinforcing the victim label.



Disability Rights protest at Charity Telethon (1992)

This applies to mental illness equally. Some organisations capture the nuance of this well, others unlock the ‘pity’ emotions that lead to donations, by showing the worst scenarios – homelessness, marital breakdown, suicidal ideation etc. Whilst valid, depicting these extremes belies actual statistics, skewing the victim image further.

Mental health is still tied to victimhood and the need for a cure “for society’s betterment” in China; where Islam has been officially labelled a mental illness – with over three million ethnic Uyghurs being forcibly sent to “hospitals” to be “treated” since 2017. This shows the dangers in seeing disabled people as victims needing state intervention to help them conform to societal norms.

We don’t live in a society of enforced brainwashing but the underlying dogma is there – ‘them and us’ with able-bodied people as the norms and disability the aberration. Note the epidemic of drug use in controlling mental health conditions in the West, with psychotropic prescriptions doubling among children in Australia between 2013 and 2021. A disruptive child on Ritalin may be less likely to upset societal norms but what about the long-term? What are the issues arising from routine medicating and what about the individual themselves?

