Tom: Hello, my name's Tom Walker. Welcome to the latest in a series of podcasts I'm recording for DaDaFest, which is a disability arts organisation very much based in Liverpool, but which works across the North West and even further afield. Now just in case you haven't heard yet, DaDa is celebrating its 40th anniversary and as part of this year's festival, DaDa's Chief Executive Zoe Partington has put together an exhibition of neon sculptures depicting some of the slogans campaigners for improved disability rights used during protests, particularly in the late 1980s and 1990s. Love Not Pity, which is one of the slogans in Zoe's neon sculptures is on display at the Williamson Art Gallery in Birkenhead, which is where I met Zoe and the gallery manager Sam Howes to talk about the Painting in Lights exhibition.

Sam: Hi Zoe. Shall we walk through to where your artwork is and have a quick chat about it?

Tom: Those are the voices of Sam Howes, who's the Museum's Manager at the Williamson Art Gallery in Birkenhead, and Zoe Partington, who's the Chief Executive of DaDaFest. We're standing now in front of the neon installation. It says Love Not Pity. Zoe, this is the first time you've seen it in situ. What do you think of it?

Zoe: It's fantastic, Tom. It's quite emotional actually, just to see it here and to know the type of exhibition that it's in and the space and the gallery. It works. It's superb. It just works in such a magical way. And I'm quite taken back actually. I'm just so pleased that Sam and the gallery wanted it here.

Tom: What kind of exhibition is it in, Sam?

Sam: So, Love Not Pity is in Gallery 4 at the Williamson Art Gallery, and that gallery this year is dedicated to the artist Philip Wilson Steer. So the paintings on the wall around us are very typical of Philip Wilson Steer. They feature a lot of women, a lot of nudes and a lot of typical poses of a period. I think the reason we put Love Not Pity into this space is it juxtapositions questions around traditional female poses and what people think about women and societal perceptions with a huge question mark in a contemporary neon artwork.

Tom: Because it does look very contemporary and very modern in relation to the rest of this particular gallery, doesn't it?

Sam: It does indeed, and that's actually something that we wanted to achieve because actually it's a question within the gallery that when you look, I'm now looking to my right, at the traditional images on the wall there of female nudes. Do you love that picture? Do you pity them? What is your perception of the lady in that picture? Did she have any choice? Who painted the picture? What were the decisions around it? Is she comfortable? There's a whole load of question marks around it and I think this is the first of many works which we hope to bring in which will actually question a lot of things within the collection and sort of tease out those conversations. So I am thrilled to be hosting it and actually just blown away with it. It's just quite beautiful actually.

Tom: For me as a visually impaired person I noticed it the minute I walked into the gallery and we've got some noise going on in the background so we'll try and compete with it. Zoe, explain the thinking behind the Love Not Pity slogan.

Zoe: I think for me as an artist and I think Sam has said it, it's about that translation. The disabled community have been pitied, they have had images taken of them that make you look helpless. All of these political statements, these slogans are about changing perceptions, making people realise that disabled people like women need equal rights and that's what we should be driving forward. And we can look at things from the past and we can now see the differences in how those things would be recreated. So this is sort of very contemporary and it's been taken from over the last 40 years there's been all sorts of disability slogans that people have used to campaign like Piss On Pity, one that people really know about from Barbara Lisicki and Johnny Crescendo. People also know about things like Nothing About Us Without Us, Access Now. There are a lot of slogans around that people keep generating and keep having to say to get noticed really because we still have to fight for these things to get things changed and it's still a big struggle. And I think I wanted to create something in a gallery that would challenge people's thinking, they'd find out a little bit more about disability history and disability culture because it's still not in our schools, it's not in our art schools. We still don't hear very much about this in art literature and in the critics and in the conversations that go on behind the scenes. It's always I think talking about disabled people without them being present and talking about how they want to create art.

Tom: Nothing About Us Without Us for instance.

Zoe: Yes, yes, I mean that is in the palm house at the moment as we talk. But again it is really about people being at the heart and at the centre and helping people make decisions that include everybody.

Tom: I mean I can probably not appreciate this to the full extent as a fully sighted person would but nonetheless I can see that this is very detailed and you will have spent a lot of time actually creating this. Talk me through the process if you would of how you went about coming up with the idea and then getting it down so that it's now in this format.

Zoe: Well the same I think for me Tom, I'm visually impaired so a lot of my very, you know, my detailed vision I just don't have that. So I tend to come up with concepts, so create conceptual art and I'll work with fabricators and makers. I'll explain to them how I want things made. You know I really believe in working with, you know, really talented makers that can craft things technically for you. So it's that translation. I can explain to them the types of things that I want and they can create those things physically for me and it's a negotiation and it's working with the right groups of people I think or the right organisations. And City Neons, I mean they're from Tyseley in Birmingham but they were really welcoming. They showed me how they did all the making and we discussed the style of lettering because I really wanted a sort of handwritten style which is what we've got on all of these signs because those are the things that were on the placards in the demonstrations. Those handwritten messages were the things that were on the, you know, on the t-shirts. So it's really important that it links back to that.

Tom: Sam, how close can I get to this? I'm not going to burn myself if I touch it am I or anything like that?

Sam: No, so the artwork is actually encased within a Perspex box so it is actually safe to touch. There is also a barrier in front of it.

Tom: And there's a big heart in front of me I can see as well here.

Sam: Yes, and I think one of the things I've really learnt about sort of visual impairments through this piece of artwork and sort of working with Zoe has been what sort of colours and things people can pick up depending on their level of visual impairment.

Tom: Well this is great for me.

Sam: It's just, I mean, as a fully sighted person this is fantastic for me but I think myself and the team have actually learnt a lot from Zoe about what is actually visible and what isn't in terms of light spectrums and that has actually pushed our learning and our understanding around what we do and how we present things and how we make things accessible.

Tom: Tell me a little bit more about the art gallery itself for people who don't know it. What's it like? What have you got here? Obviously lots of art.

Sam: So the Williamson Art Gallery is coming up to its 100th birthday in 2028. We are a local authority gallery. We've got a mix of contemporary art and behind us you can just hear the noises of The Subterranean Elevator.

Tom: I wondered what it was.

Sam: Yes, so we've got an immersive experience behind us which is sound and noise called The Subterranean Elevator but we're a mix of contemporary art, traditional oil paintings and things which come out of our own collection dotted in with temporary exhibitions that reflect the community and sort of current thinking within the region.

Tom: And how do you go about making your services, the artworks, on display? How do you go about making them accessible and making the place more inclusive generally?

Sam: I think we've learnt a lot about, as a team we've learnt a lot about what works and what doesn't within the spaces. Our audience, we have some traditional audience from Birkenhead who we'll particularly like Gallery 4 and now I've put Love Not Pity in there so I think that's probably going to challenge them. In terms of making the space accessible I think later in the year we're going to do some work with a visually impaired photography group and also a deaf group and look at issues around that. We're also doing some work currently with TransMB around trans issues and how people feel comfortable in spaces. So we're pushing the boundaries quite a lot in what the gallery has traditionally done that's learning for us as a team but also making our collections more accessible.

Tom: I then asked Zoe to read a description of the Love Not Pity installation.

Zoe: Love Not Pity stands as a beacon of hope and change, by embracing love over pity we challenge and change the narrative around disability, fostering a more inclusive and understanding society so that we can transform people's lives and move forward Tom.

Zoe: Thanks then to Zoe and Sam for the time being.

Tom: We'll be hearing more from them before the end of this podcast. But I also wanted to share with you part of a conversation I had with Barbara Lisicki on Zoom. Barbara is a veteran disability rights campaigner and knows the history of the slogans Zoe has depicted on her neon sculptures.

Barbara: The first and obvious one is the piss on pity slogan and I don't think there's any room for misunderstanding of that and especially when, well I think when anybody's wearing it but when a disabled person is wearing that shirt or is associated with that slogan then we're making it very clear that the pity that I think is endemic in how a lot of social attitudes towards disability exist is it bashes it square in the face. It's saying you know we're not having it and we don't want it and it's been a theme. I mean I have a book by an American author, a disabled author, called No Pity you know and it's a recurring theme for disabled people that this is something that we just need to eliminate this notion that you feel sorry for us and we don't want it. It's so destructive. It's actually really a destructive approach. So that's that one and then I think the other one, well I kind of like lots of them but the other one I really like is Nothing About Us Without Us which we took, it was used as a slogan in apartheid South Africa and Black people who were massively, massively discriminated against by apartheid. You know they didn't have the right to vote. They couldn't, they were segregated and kept out of all sorts of places, you know places to shop and places to visit and when they were challenging apartheid that was one of the slogans. They said when these changes happen you can't exclude us from those changes. We need to participate in how the change occurs and I think what has happened historically for disabled people is that often things are imposed on disabled people without any kind of thought as to what it is we actually want and so Nothing About Us Without Us, again very clear, you can't interpret it in any other way other than what it means which is don't even think about trying to make decisions about us unless we're at the centre of it.

Tom: Are there any slogans, and apologies if there aren't, but are there any slogans that are a bit more nuanced and need some explaining and would you be happy to pick one out and do that for us?

Barbara: Well I think Access Now, although it's very clear, I think what we've been trying to do as disabled people and that's across the board is to extend the meaning of accessibility so that people understand accessibility not just to be sort of physical access for mobility impairment or for wheelchairs, you know like a dropped curb or you know a lift on a bus or whatever, but it's actually about accessibility for a whole range of disabled people with different impairments. And I make the distinction between impairment and disability so that impairment is the kind of what's wrong with your stuff, you know, it's what you've got, and then disability is the social construct, so that disability is what is imposed upon us that makes it unfair. So if you have an impairment it's very likely that you will experience disability and unfairness and discrimination because of having that impairment. And so Access Now, we're talking about accessibility in so many different ways and not just for physical access.

Tom: You've alluded there to the social model of disability very much. For people who be listening to this podcast and maybe aren't as familiar as you would be with the social model, what's your view on it? I mean how would you explain it in relatively accessible terms and use that word, how would you explain the social model to people?

Barbara: The social model is the key to everything really. People were sort of thinking in social model terms without having, I suppose, a description of it, but people like Vic Finkelstein, Mike Oliver, Jenny Morris expanded the thinking around the social model, which is the very straightforward concept that we aren't disabled by our impairments, we are disabled by a society that doesn't take into account what we need and doesn't cater for it. So it can be any number of things from not being able to get on the bus because there are no lifts on the bus to not having accessible information for people, not just the kind of print but also the way it's written. So often people with learning difficulties are completely excluded from being able to get information that is good for them to understand because it's written in a way that just makes no sense to them and actually using a lot of jargon and stuff like that is something that most people really dislike. I'm trying to say that the social model of disability is basically saying that we look around us, we look at what, the key word is barriers, we look at what creates the barriers and say that needs to go, that needs to change and that's what we insist on.

Tom: And Zoe's slogans in so many ways articulate the social model of disability, I get the feeling.

Barbara: Well that's their origin, I mean the origin of those slogans is the social model of disability and the people that evolved them.

Tom: And I'm guessing you've seen a version of the exhibition of Zoe's Painting by Light exhibition. Do you have any thoughts on them because they look great to me. I had a look at them this morning and I was like wow that's fantastic.

Barbara: Well it is because I think that alongside the disability rights movement we evolved lots and lots of people who were also artists and creatives, evolved disability arts. And disability arts is basically about having an art movement that uses as its core the experience of disabled people. And so create, but one of the things that I need to emphasise is that it's not just sort of pragmatic, boring images, you know, we're looking at something that looks amazing, like the sort of handwritten script and neon signs. And we need to, disability arts and those, the kinds of slogans in the way they're presented in Zoe's exhibition is exactly what we're talking about. We're talking about something that is eye-catching, that looks great and that people will relate to on a lot of different levels. And that means disabled people but also non-disabled people, you know, a non-disabled person can see that any of those slogans and it will make them think and that's also what we want because a lot of the time non-disabled people will be part of the problem, whether they know it or don't know it and whether they do it intentionally or unintentionally. And in that way, you know, we can describe it as similar to other forms of discrimination.

Tom: Thanks very much then to Barbara for her time and for sharing her knowledge of these slogans. My conversation with Barbara lasted for well over half an hour and we're hoping to publish that as a separate podcast in the near future. In the meantime, back to my conversation with Zoe and Sam. Zoe, you've got some other artwork around the place which are also neon structures, I think I'm going to call them if that's okay.

Zoe: Okay, yes.

Tom: They're around the place, around Liverpool and Merseyside. Just talk us through a couple of them and what they actually mean.

Zoe: Well there's two at FACT, so there's Piss on Pity and Rights Not Charity. There's also boards next to each of the artworks with QR codes on which go to our website, so dadafest.co.uk where there's more explanation about, you know, the meanings behind each slogan, the meanings behind the whole project. And it's really about, I think it was for me to translate, you know, as a visually impaired person, translate images and paintings into a different format that might be more accessible to some people, not to everyone, but I think it was playing with that to get it, you know, to get those things on the wall and to get, I think like Sam's saying, you know, audiences that might know nothing about disability history or disability culture to find out a lot more and to get people to start thinking about programming disabled artists and their work into spaces. So it's all really important, you know, for moving forward and for DaDaFest it's just a way of, you know, capturing different audiences' perspectives really.

Tom: Are there any other slogans in particular that really leap to mind and you think really encapsulate everything that you're trying to say?

Zoe: Well I think Shakespeare North has got one with Access Now, so I think that's really important and I think it's that, it's, you know, for a very long time disabled people were fighting just purely for functional access and I think now we've really shifted in trying to make sure that disabled artists are, you know, in our art schools, in our educational environments learning and developing their practice and working with artists, so I think it's about opening up that representation as well. So things like, you know, the Rights Not Charity, it's really important because disabled people, they want to be in those art schools, they want full access, they want to be in the architecture schools, they want to be in the theatre settings, so I think that one as well is really, yeah, quite dear to me.

Tom: The one that really jumped out at me was Tight Control. Can you talk me through that one?

Zoe: Well yes, I mean, @TightControl is one that I've developed since developing all of these pieces. That is really around the sort of support I suppose I had as a younger person, you know, with a chronic condition and with diabetes. @TightControl is a sort of term that's used to get you to look after your glucose management, and it was really, it was never really explained properly, it was one of those terms that the medical professionals say to you without explaining it, you know, with, I suppose without the information that makes you understand what you need to do, and I had to find out, really battled to find out, and for me it became quite a funny thing to do, to try and, rather than that being a sort of controlling thing, that I could turn it on its head, you know, have it printed on a t-shirt, and it was really around me having children, so lots of disabled women are told not to have children, or it's not a good idea, or people can be a bit sniffy about you having a disabled child, or you, yourself, you know, being a disabled person. So @TightControl was really about me being controlled by other people, sometimes the medical profession, not all, because some people are absolutely fantastic, but it was relevant for me, and I, when Twitter was around, I used to have that as my Twitter handle, it was @TightControl, and it was to make light of it really, and to make me, rather than feel, I suppose, absolutely exhausted by the things that go on, it gave me a bit of a lift really, to get my own back, I suppose.

Tom: Sam, could I just ask you then, you've told us about the work you're doing with groups, disabled groups and other groups, going forward, do you have any plans to display any other artwork by disabled people?

Sam: We're open actually to that suggestion really, it's what is visible disability and hidden disability, and I'm completely open to suggestions and further conversations with Zoe, I don't think this is the end of our project and our sort of working relationship, I'd like to investigate not only the collection but access to the venue and how I can improve that and look at ways of going forward. I'm very keen that people have full access to the collection and people live to their full potential, so I think it's the beginning of a great working partnership and exploring where we go forward with this.

Tom: That's great news isn't it Zoe?

Zoe: That's fantastic and that's why it's so lovely to develop new partnerships, so we can look at all those issues and yes, the 40 year history of DaDaFest, it's really important, we've built a lot of partnerships and we're still building new ones, so this is fantastic with the Williamson Gallery to look at those opportunities.

Tom: Could I just ask you finally then, you're fairly new to DaDaFest, so maybe people listening to this who don't really know you, and I'm going to ask you to do something that's almost impossible, can you sum up your working life in about two minutes?

Zoe: Yes, okay, I can try Tom! I think, well for the last 30 years I've worked in disability arts, so I've been working with disabled artists and fighting behind the scenes, discussing with Arts Council England about how we commission disabled artists, how we make sure that they're part of everything, the funding, the processes, the decision making, so a lot of my work has been behind the scenes. That is quite exhausting because lots of disabled artists like myself really just want to make art or to be curators, but they end up having to make sure that functional accessibility, representational access is in, and disabled people are present and visible, and those stories from those people are visible and present. So I think I've spent the last 30 years doing an awful lot of that behind the scenes, and I think this has just been a perfect opportunity for me to create some artwork and do what I'd really like to be doing, but also supporting the infrastructure because we still need it, we still need disability led art organisations like DaDa.

Tom: Well Zoe and Sam, the music's finished, bang on cue, thanks to you both, thank you.

Sam: Thank you.

Zoe: Thanks Tom.