

Nothing Without Us: Experiences of Disability

Trail Booklet



Credits + Acknowledgements

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The work of Nothing Without Us and Curating for Change at the Pitt Rivers Museum is still very much ongoing, and we're continuing to work on ways in which we can expand the offering of the trail, including further digital interpretation and an expanded version of this booklet with further reflection. Visit the project website to find out more.

www.prm.ox.ac.uk/curating-for-change-at-Pitt-Rivers-Museum

Today, there are 10.4 million people in England and Wales who identify as disabled. One in four households include at least one disabled member and one in five people will probably be affected by disability during their lifetime. These conditions have been experienced by people across history, but how do we find them and tell their stories? How can we bring more perspectives from disabled people into museum spaces?

Curating for Change, an initiative delivered in partnership with Accentuate and Screen South, exists to create strong career pathways for d/Deaf, disabled and neurodiverse curators, currently seriously under-represented in museums. Trainees and Fellows across the country are producing exhibitions, events and blogs, exploring disabled people's histories – while gaining skills for careers in the sector.

Kyle Lewis Jordan is Curating for Change Fellow at the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Ashmolean Museum.



Introduction

Nothing Without Us is a co-produced gallery trail that shares the lived experiences of disabled people, their stories revealed by objects in the Pitt Rivers Museum.

In the summer of 2023, I led a group of co-producers in researching disability across multiple times and spaces. Their questions grew from asking how disabled people lived throughout time, to interrogating how the objects capture the experience of disability itself. Their ideas covered themes of Form and Function, Precarity and Violence, and Care.

We invite you to reflect on how such experiences have not only shaped their lives, but have a deeper connection and meaning that matters for all of us.

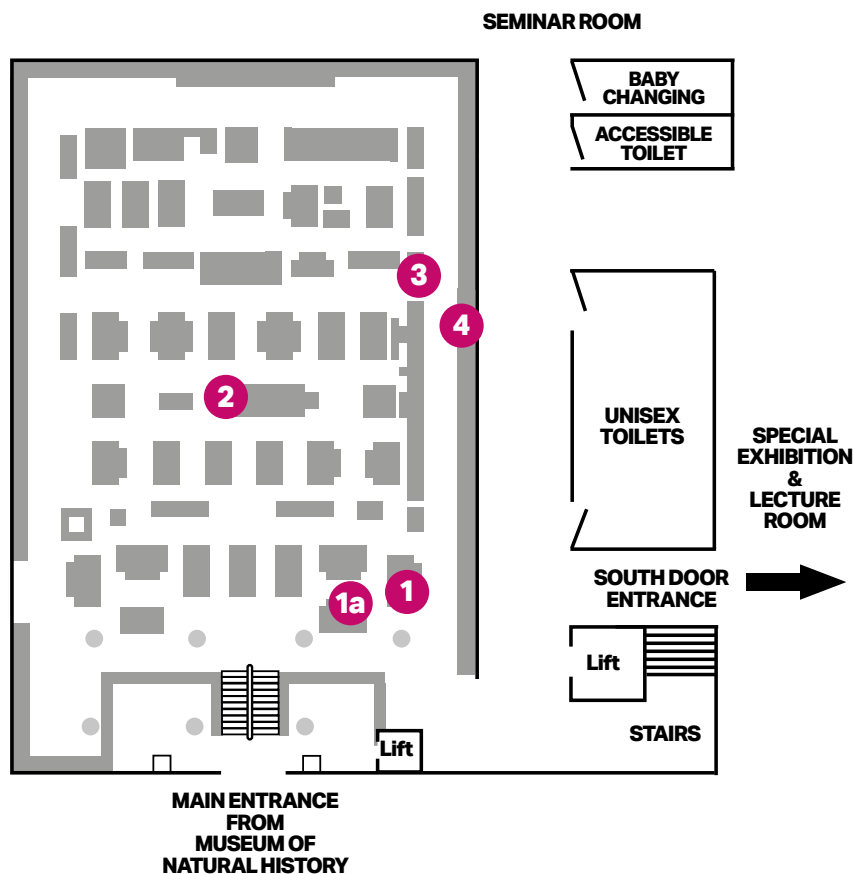
Kyle Lewis Jordan

Curating for Change Fellow
Pitt Rivers Museum & Ashmolean Museum

Trail Map

On the ground floor, you will find stories sharing experiences of the body and the mind; how different forms are depicted, and functions or behaviours are understood.

Ground Floor



1 Shaping the Body and the Mind

1a Discover three stories by Hannah, Sarah and Lucy. Find these in Cases 147, 148A and 149 titled “Human Form in Art”. This stop explores the experience of “masking” and learning social cues, playfulness as a form of expression and learning, and the value of hugs.

2 Communication and Expression

Find two stories by Christopher and Hannah, as well as embroidery artworks by Hannah. Find these in Case 107A “Writing and Communication”. This stop expresses the value of being able to communicate one’s own experiences through a variety of mediums such as artwork, accessible formats like Braille, and more abstract ideas such as the ancient Egyptian “weighing of the heart”.

3 A Prayer for Help

A story by Brenda. Find these in Case 32A titled “Votives”. This stop looks at how votives give us an insight into past people’s experiences of pain and suffering, and how conditions we might not call disabilities can still have disabling effects.

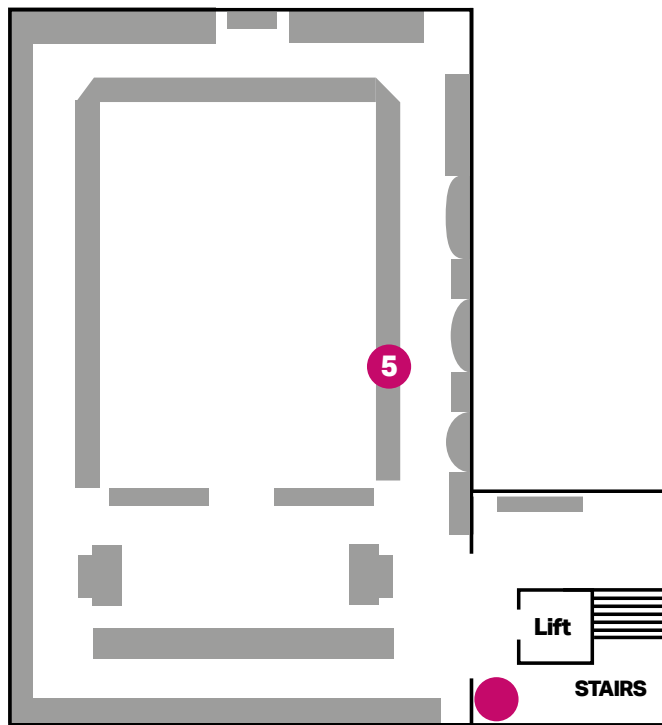
4 Life, Death, (After) Life

Read a story by Rachel, and a translated ancient Egyptian story printed on onion paper produced by Juliet and Kyle. Find these in Case 7A titled “Treatment of the Dead”. This stop illuminates how reframing our approach towards human remains – in this case, Egyptian mummified remains – and their burial provides new ways of understanding ancient ideas of the body.

Trail Map

On the first floor, you will find stories which explore disabled people’s complex relationship with medical intervention and innovation and how seeking care can at times lead to feelings of precarity.

First Floor



Feedback Station

5 Surgical Interventions

Discover stories by Laurie and Brenda.
Case L87A “Surgical and Medical Implements”: Interrogates the historical practice of trepanning, modern innovations in the treatment of neurological conditions, and asks an open question on how do we begin to quantify those disabilities we sometimes label as “invisible”.

You’ll also find a Feedback Station on this floor, where we would be excited to receive your thoughts on the stories you’ve heard and hear your own stories.

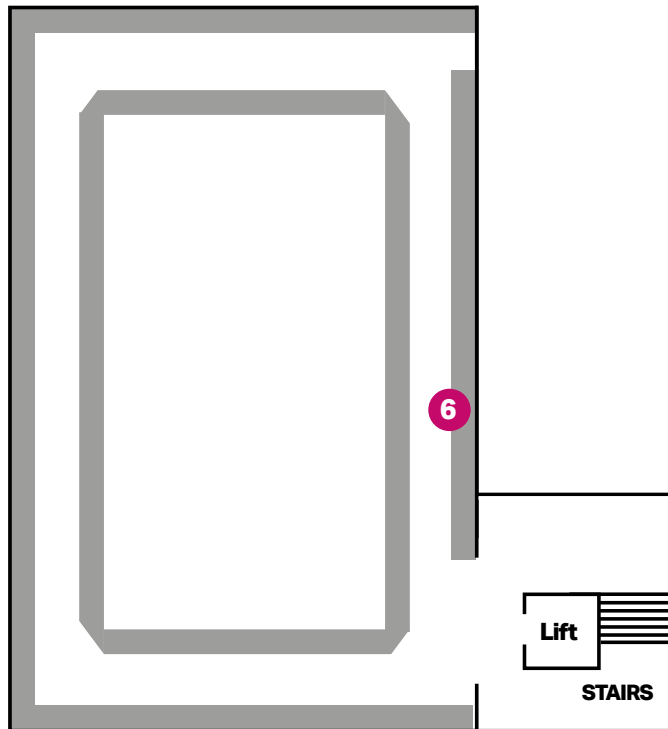
View of trail ‘Surgical Interventions’ display on the First Floor



Trail Map

On the second floor, we've given space to acknowledging disabled people's experiences of trauma and violence. The overhanging ceremonial clubs and maces serves as a reminder of how these symbols of power are also a very visible reminder of the act of maiming, and so we ask visitors: Why do we Maim?

Second Floor



6 Why do we Maim?

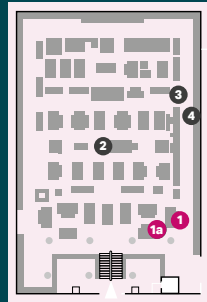
Case U30 - 31A "Clubs": Uncovers the historical significance of depictions of maiming, and shares the personal stories of a family whose member's each individually have faced decisions that caused them harm. The case also holds space for reflections on recovery and safety, with a patchwork piece depicting a personal journey of recovery from trauma and a reflective piece on the effect of rules.

You'll also find Lucy's Rules displayed on this floor. Find out more on page 26 of this booklet, as well as Lucy's Trail of "The Things that Interest Us" on page 54.

Artworks by Juliet,
on display on the
Second Floor



Ground Floor



1

1a

Shaping the Body and the Mind

Depictions of the human body show different shapes and behaviours. Do these shapes and behaviours translate into reality? Where might we recognise disability, and what might that tell us?

Shaping the Body and the Mind

Clowning Around

Charming and mischievous, these Japanese netsuke helped fasten personal items to a man's kimono, perhaps giving us a glimpse of their personalities. Fun and play are really important to me and my daughter. Not only for creating joy, but also in helping us learn and communicate with one another. Both these netsuke and the performance masks across from them caught our eyes and made us wonder about all the games they might wish to play.

Sarah and Lucy S,

A mother and daughter who love to play!

Netsuke of a mask of a man with a pointed beard

Ivory, Japan (made before 1939)
1980.34.161



Netsuke of a child climbing on a sleeping woman

Ivory, Japan (made before 1939)
1980.34.2566

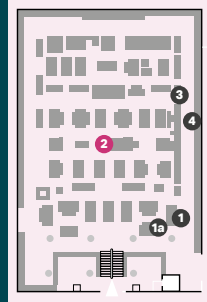


Ground Floor

2

Communication and Expression

In recent history, writing and literacy have been constructed as the most crucial form of expression. How can experiences of disability demonstrate diverse forms of communication? And how do they help us reflect on whose experiences we choose to give value to?



Communication and Expression

Harebrained

To the left-hand side of this case are examples of tallies – information recorded in notches or knots. These are made with the kind of manual and repetitive process that I use to calm myself.

I made this embroidered hare to represent both the calming effect of tactile work and the distress I experience without access to a timekeeping device. Roman numerals suggesting a clockface are only just perceptible in the hare's eye. Autistic people often rely on routine to maintain a sense of control in a world that can otherwise be sensorially overwhelming. Embroidery, wirework and other tactile activities are a fantastic help when I am trying to decompress after dealing with overstimulating environments.

Hannah H, Museum Enjoyer

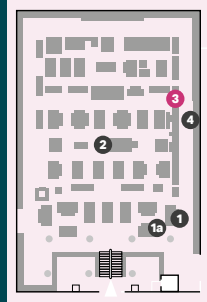
'Harebrained' by Hannah Holden

Embroidered Linen,
United Kingdom.
Loaned to the
Pitt Rivers Museum
in 2023.



Ground Floor

3



A Prayer for Help

A votive offering is made as a request for a cure or as thanks for a recovery. They capture stories of pain and suffering as experienced by individual people. As sensations of pain and suffering are quite often associated with disability, what can perspectives of disability lend to our understanding of votive objects?

A Prayer for Help

Breast Case Scenario

According to the Byzantine monk John Moschus in the 6th century AD, a husband brought his wife to a holy man, hoping she would be cured of breast cancer. Female breast cancer disabled a woman in more ways than one: if a mother, she could not feed her children; if a wet nurse, her job was in peril. In addition to disfigurement, a woman who lost her breasts to cancer would be physically and economically disabled.

Brenda L. I, PhD & HoH (Hard of Hearing)

Votive offerings of a woman's breast

Terracotta Pottery, Roman.
1896.15.4 & 1896.15.21

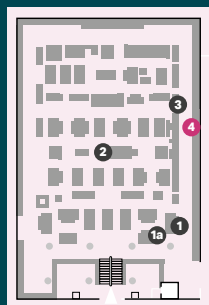


Votive plaque depicting a pair of breasts

Terracotta Pottery,
Iron Age Cyprus.
1884.56.98



Ground Floor



4

Life, Death, (After)Life

Death is not always the end of the body; it can be preserved, repurposed, become something new. Archaeologists study Egyptian mummified human remains as a way of understanding more about life in Ancient Egypt, when in reality the mummification marked a new phase of life altogether. How can the study of disabled Ancient Egyptians, in life and in death, help us re-evaluate our modern attitudes to disability?

Life, Death, (After)Life

Personal Assistants for the Afterlife

Ancient Egyptians were expected to work, even in the Afterlife. As a disabled person who can't work, I am aware of how work is used to give meaning to people. Shabtis were included in Egyptian burials to do their work for them. They were an expression of care and ensured the dead person was able to contribute even if too old, tired or disabled to work. The Egyptians believed that the deceased could bring them to life by speaking the prayer inscribed on their bodies.

Rachel C, in need of a Shabti!

Shabti Figures

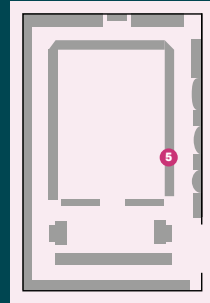
Glazed Pottery, Ancient Egypt.
1884.57.11



5

Surgical Interventions

Surgical interventions are a source of great anxiety for many. They are 'invasive' - a word evoking images of violence and warfare. Disabled people's experiences of surgical intervention can help us appreciate both its successes and innovations, but also its many risks and harms.



Surgical Interventions

Mysteries of the Mind

Implanted in the body with wires that are connected to specific centres of the brain, this tiny device assists with the treatment of neurological conditions with electrical impulses. An expression of modern innovation, at the same time it captures how much of our brains are still a mystery to us. While this device may have many advantages over the other tools in this case, it shares that same sense of fascination and anxiety of the unknown, for both patient and surgeon.

Laurie P

A Deep Brain Stimulation Implantable Pulse Generator

Metal, United Kingdom. Loaned to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 2023.

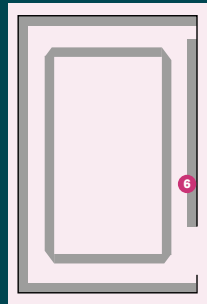


Second Floor

6

Why do we Maim?

Clubs are designed first and foremost to maim, rather than kill. The ones on display here are ceremonial symbols of power and authority. Many people have been disabled by violence or live with the threat. Our focus is so often directed to pitying the maimed, rather than challenging the systems that maim them. How can disabled people's experiences help us reflect on acts of violence both mental and physical?



Why do we Maim?

Battle Scarred

Warfare is and has always been inherently disabling. Some of the earliest depictions of conflict focus on the act of maiming, such as the case with this image of the fragmented Battlefield Palette. Capturing the aftermath of a battle, we witness two bound, captive enemies being led away, their bodies restricted and contorted in unnatural ways. Their captors are abstract representations of the King, emphasising his right to maim.

Kyle J, A battle scarred self-advocate

Fragment of the Battlefield Palette

Plaster Cast, Ancient Egyptian Predynastic (around 3100 BCE). Cast taken from the original fragment held by the Ashmolean Museum.

1917.53.803



Lucy's Rules

Old Rules, New Rules

Rules can be helpful. They can give us guidance, help us feel safe, remind us to look after one another. Sometimes, however, they can also be unhelpful: if they're difficult to understand, use threatening language, or don't accommodate people who may need to do things differently.

Lucy made multiple visits to the Pitt Rivers Museum and came up with some rules to help her get the most out of her visits. She shares them with us here in the hope that they can help others find the same excitement and joy.

Sarah and Lucy S

Lucy's Rules in Easy Read Format

Easy Read Photo Symbols produced by Hayleigh Jutson of the University of Oxford's Gardens, Libraries and Museums Team. Continues on the next page.



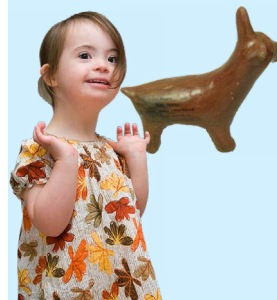
Lucy's Rules

Here are some rules Lucy uses to make her visit more enjoyable.



Take breaks and relax

Find quiet, comfortable spaces that you can think in.



Find objects that give you joy



Surprise yourself

Look for familiar objects and find something new next to them.

Lucy and Sarah's Trail of "The Things That Interest Us"



Take time to be creative

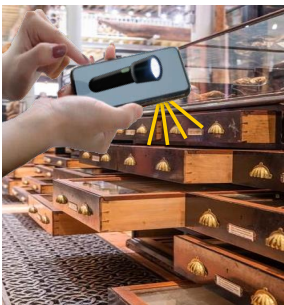
Make drawings.



Write out the labels

Copy the labels and share them with friends and family.

Ask questions.



Open the drawers

Pick beautiful objects to look at.

Use the torch on a phone to see in the drawers.



Share your stories in the museum

Find objects that help to explain your life to other people.

During the co-production sessions in the summer of 2023, Lucy and her mother Sarah spent some time exploring the galleries of the Pitt Rivers Museum and, along with contributing stories to our main displays, got really excited when finding other objects which they felt a connection with through their own lived experience and interests.

Embracing this spirit of joyful self-discovery, both Lucy and Sarah have left their own markers with some of the following objects:

Snake Figure 1995.21.14 – “I like small creatures. This snake is small and has a little smile.”

Roman Oil Lamp 2002.105.1 – “Reminds me of my night light; you need to be able to see where your bed is when it gets dark.”

Medicine Box 1924.6.36 – “You need to keep your medicines safe. This little box helps you do that.”

Plastic Cane Ball 1993.31.1 – “Reminds me of playing, throwing and catching with my family.”

See if you can find them on a visit to the museum galleries, and while doing so, you might also find something that you feel represents you!



If you have any queries regarding access for this trail please email prm@prm.ox.ac.uk or call us on +44 (0)1865 613 000.



This booklet is part of Curating for Change, an initiative delivered in partnership with Accentuate and Screen South, providing opportunities for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, to pursue a curatorial career in Museums.

www.prm.ox.ac.uk/Curating-For-Change-at-Pitt-Rivers-Museum



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