

Written Transcript of a talk presented by Professor Simon McKeown of the School of Computing at Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK.

Presented at MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) on the evening of the 26th of March 2026 at the MIMA Social 4.30-7pm. In this talk, which followed an introduction to the evening by Dr Laura Sillars (Director of MIMA) McKeown introduced the *Images of Disability* exhibition which he curated for MIMA and was presented during March 2026.

Please see www.imagesofdisability.org and www.simon-mckeown.com

Good evening and thank you all for being here.

This exhibition, *Images of Disability*, begins with a collection, but it is not really about the past.

At its centre is the Würtz Collection, assembled in the early 20th century in Berlin, Germany, by Hans Würtz, who set out to gather visual representations of disability across Europe. What he created is extraordinary: thousands of objects spanning centuries, different materials, and many contexts.

But more than that, he created something active.

An archive.

An encyclopaedia.

And crucially, a resource.

Not something to be stored away, but something to be used. Tested. Argued with. Reimagined. And that is where this exhibition begins.

Disability is not a niche subject. It is not marginal.

Today, 1 in 5 people identify as disabled, that's from the UK census.

So if disability is everywhere in life, why has it and is it so absent in culture?

Historically, it wasn't.

Before the NHS, before modern medicine, disability was visible, embedded in everyday experience. If we look back through our own family histories, disability is there, present, part of life.

And yet, somewhere along the way, particularly in the 20th century, it becomes hidden. Medicalised. Removed from view.

So what you see in these panels is not a discovery, it's a return. A return to ways of seeing that were once common, but have since been overlooked or pushed aside.

Disabled women here are not passive or symbolic, they are shown working, travelling, participating in everyday life.

In caricature, disability is not erased, it is amplified, often used to make political points, placing disabled figures visibly at the centre of public debate.

And across the exhibition, certain figures repeat, moving from print to porcelain, from exquisite and expensive figurative ivory carving to everyday porcelain sculpture, an icon persisting across centuries and materials.

So this is not a story of absence.

It is a story of something that was always there, but gradually suppressed, edited out of view, and forgotten.

And that matters, because what is hidden culturally is harder to imagine, harder to value, harder to include.

So, this exhibition does something quite direct: it puts disability back into cultural vision, and insists that it belongs there.

But it also goes further.

Because this is not just historical material. This is a cultural resource, one that has barely been explored.

The artist Yinka Shonibare has suggested, disability may be one of the last true avant-gardes.

And we've seen this before.

If you think about the Feminist Art Movement, or the Black Arts Movement, there was a moment when entire histories, bodies, and experiences were excluded from cultural institutions

And then artists didn't just ask to be included they reshaped the terms of culture itself and we can look here to the work of Sonia Boyce and Steve McQueen for instance.

They didn't just add new content.

They changed what counted as art, whose voices mattered, and how culture operates.

Disability is at that point now.

Not behind those movements, but alongside them.

A vast, complex, underrepresented field of experience that has not yet been fully claimed, fully authored, fully transformed.

In other words, this is not a closed history.

It is an open territory.

And that is why the contemporary work in this exhibition matters so much.

Through collaboration with Teesside Ability Support Centre, Henshaws of Knaresborough, Smart Arts Sunderland, and Buzz Hub St Helens, learning disabled artists have responded directly to the collection.

Not cautiously. Not illustratively. But creatively, critically, and on their own terms. And the scale of that response has exceeded all expectations.

What emerges is not interpretation, it is expansion.
A 17th-century image becomes a starting point for something new.
A historic figure is reworked, challenged, reimagined.

The collection stops being historical and becomes generative.
Alive.

And in doing so, it fulfils Würtz's original ambition: that this material should be used not preserved as a curiosity, but activated as knowledge, as culture, as practice.
This exhibition has only been possible through collaboration.

Our thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for supporting the project, and to MIMA for hosting and championing this work.

To Katherine Barnett, Dr Alexandra Morris both of whom helped design and curate the exhibition, to Andy Barnett who helped hand the works and to my lead partner, Professor Oliver Musenberg for all his enthusiasm and support over many years; thank you for your insight and commitment.

To our Czech partners, especially Petr Kolar of the JI and Simon Kryl of the NML for safeguarding and sharing this collection.

And finally, to the contributing artists.
Because ultimately, this exhibition is not about objects.

It is about who gets to shape culture.
If disability has been hidden, then bringing it back into view is not just an act of recovery it is an act of change.

Not just looking again but building something different.
Thank you and I hope you enjoy the exhibition.