

# BEYOND ACCESS

THE CREATIVE CASE  
FOR INCLUSIVE  
ARTS PRACTICE  
LITERATURE REVIEW



This Literature Review, compiled and written by Sarah Austin, with assistance from Chris Brophy, was produced as part of the *Beyond Access* research project 2014, an Arts Access Victoria initiative delivered in partnership with the University Melbourne and funded through an Innovation Grant from the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation.

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# PREFACE

With a 40 year track record of delivering exemplary arts programs for people with a disability, Arts Access Victoria has often found itself leading the arts and disability sector in practice, policy and advocacy. This responsibility can weigh heavily on our organisation, as aspiration almost always trumps capacity. We know that people with a disability desire increased opportunities for cultural participation, as artists, arts workers and audiences. We also know that the barriers to participation are significant and require the commitment of many to overcome.

Arts Access Victoria is dedicated to building an inclusive arts sector, free from barriers, where people with a disability can participate on an equal basis. Central to this mission is building the creative case for inclusion of people with a disability in our cultural life.

Across our diverse, multicultural community, we tell stories through the arts. The arts provide a lens for cultural introspection with often powerful and lasting consequences. People with a disability have important stories to tell; stories that reveal much of our nature as human beings.

The creative case recognises that we need artists with a disability to tell their own stories. These are, by and large, unique and untold stories, with the potential to move, provoke, educate and entertain. We also need artists with a disability to lead and shape creative practice, introduce new and diverse aesthetic forms and open new dialogue about what we think and what we know about artistic practice.

In undertaking this research project, we were motivated by a number of factors:

1) that we cannot progress our aspirations until the wider community collectively understands and values the work of artists with a disability; 2) that the significant body of work by artists with a disability, largely undocumented, should be a matter of public and academic interest, and 3) that we cannot wait for others to undertake this work, nor should we. Artists with a disability and the organisations that support them are the custodians of an important history and therefore the architects of a new future in which the work of these artists is understood as a vital and valued part of the Australian cultural landscape.

This research would not have been possible, or as successful, without the contribution of its many champions, contributors and supporters. On behalf of Arts Access Victoria, I would like to thank the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation for funding the project, our research partners at the University of Melbourne, the Melbourne Social Equity Institute for hosting a one day Beyond Access symposium last November and the City of Melbourne for its support of both the symposium and the launch of the Beyond Access resources.

I would also like to thank lead researcher Sarah Austin for all her work, Chris Brophy who managed the project, videographer Akash Temple who did such a great job filming and editing the best practice case studies as well as the other members of the Beyond Access research team and steering group. Finally, my thanks to the many artists with a disability who so generously gave their time and input to the case studies.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Veronica Pardo".

**Veronica Pardo**  
Executive Director  
Arts Access Victoria

“I think the issue is not whether inclusive practice can be part of the mainstream or part of the art world, or part of culture. It’s more about how to get it there and how to support it so that it is shining and as fabulous as it can be.”

**Jane Trengove**

Visual artist, Beyond Access case study participant

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# INTRODUCTION

## Background

*Beyond Access: the creative case for inclusive arts practice* was a one-year research project undertaken in 2014 by Arts Access Victoria, the state's peak body for arts and disability, in partnership with the University of Melbourne. The research was funded by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation. This literature review is one outcome from the project.

The project investigated the field of inclusive arts practice in Victoria, as it relates to people with disabilities, by examining both published literature relevant to the topic and the practices of a range of Victorian arts companies and artists working in this field.

The study, which was led by research officer Sarah Austin, is multi-disciplinary and the research team included three University of Melbourne academics: Dr Lachlan MacDowall from the Centre for Cultural Partnerships at the Faculty of Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music; Dr Eddie Paterson from the School of Culture and Communication; and Dr Winsome Roberts from the Department of Social Work in the School of Health Sciences.



3D Incarnation (detail), 2013, Dawn Lim

This literature review aims to identify any significant gaps in the research, policy and methodological approaches to the notions of aesthetic innovation and creative production within the field of arts and disability in Australia by examining available literature on current Australian and international thinking and trends in the multi-dimensional field of arts and disability. It also seeks to contextualise these practices within a framework of the history, policy, social attitudes and understandings of disability.

The review examines the way the literature presents and discusses the following:

1. Key definitions and distinctions between terms such as 'inclusive arts practice', 'arts and disability', 'disability arts', and 'artists with a disability'.
2. Historical social and academic approaches to disability and, specifically, to disability arts theory and practice.
3. Current British, American and Australian policies in the area of arts and disability. context.
4. Current artistic practice of key companies and contemporary practitioners working in the field of arts and disability in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia.



# Defining disability

This research uses the term 'disability' as it is currently defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which states that:

*... a person has a disability if they report they have a limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and restricts everyday activities.*

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012)

The ABS definition acknowledges both the medical and social implications of disability in accordance with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICFDH) which defines disability as:

*... an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. It denotes the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual's contextual factors (environment and personal factors).*

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012)

The ABS definition of disability is therefore informed by both the physical and social impact of disability and is also in keeping with the earlier definition of disability, outlined in 2006 in the United Nations (UN) Convention on Rights of Persons with a Disability, which defines disability as including:

*... those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.*



*Frog in a Cage* at Frankston Arts Centre, 2014, Get Out! Photo: Paul Dunn

## Scope

The review analyses English language material, and included both academic texts (journal articles, conference papers, commissioned reports, evaluation and research papers) and non-academic texts (video, sound files, exhibition programs, books, newspaper and magazine articles, festival programs, interviews and reviews). It also considers material from policymakers, arts and disability peak bodies, governments, artists and companies working in the arts and disability sector in Australia, the UK and the US.

The decision to focus on English language materials, creative work and scholarship from the two major English speaking countries (the UK and the US) was based both on their relevance to an Australian context and the lack of resources to extend the research further afield.

The arts companies and artists examined come from the fields of theatre, dance, music, live art, community art, writing and visual art. Film and film theory were excluded from this review due to limited resources.

The terms 'person with a disability' or 'people with a disability' are employed throughout the text as the preferred terms in common usage in the disability sector in Australia.

# INCLUSIVE ARTS PRACTICE



The Ripple Effect workshop, 2014. Photo: Pippa Dodds

## Use of the term ‘inclusive arts’

This research uses ‘inclusive arts practice’ to refer to a multi-dimensional field encompassing a range of creative practices and aesthetic strategies as they relate to the artistic practice of people with a disability.

In the UK, the term ‘inclusive arts’ gained momentum in connection with the flagship Creative Partnerships Policy for education introduced by New Labour in 2006. This policy foregrounded the economic importance of cultural activity and its social inclusion agenda (Thomson and Hall, 2007: 13).

In this context, the term was applied to arts practice that championed social inclusion and was mainstreamed into curriculum with an emphasis on the enjoyment of cultural participation for all, rather than being used for any form of social critique (Thomson and Hall, 2007: 13).

‘Inclusive arts practice’ has particular currency in the UK for specifically defining the practice of working with learning-disabled people in a facilitated collaboration model. For example, UK academic and artist Alice Fox defines inclusive practice as:

*[S]upporting creative opportunities between marginalised and non-marginalised people through artistic facilitation and collaboration as a means of challenging existing barriers and promoting social change. (Fox, 2010)*



Fox is responsible for introducing the Inclusive Arts Practice Master's degree at Brighton University in the UK. This course provides students with support from specialist arts practitioners who work collaboratively with "diverse and marginalized groups" and the course includes a module where students work with Rocket Artists, an ensemble of performers with learning disabilities.

Fox's use of the term 'inclusive arts practice' is reflected in the approaches and methods used by a range of other UK arts companies working with artists with a disability—companies like Chicken Shed Theatre, Candoco and Lung Ha Theatre, which all work with performers with and without disability to create high quality work.

In contrast, there is less evidence of the use of the term 'inclusive arts practice' in the US, although 'physical integrative practice' certainly features as a descriptor of applied methodology for a range of companies working in arts and disability, particularly in dance.

Australia's Restless Dance Theatre, the UK's Candoco and Axis Dance in the US are all examples of dance companies who work within an integrated context (with performers with and without disabilities) and in each of these companies—either through the use of dramatic metaphor or choreographic language—the lived experience of disability is centralised.

In Australia, the introduction of the Victorian Disability Act in 2006 is largely responsible for the term 'inclusive' becoming part of the Australian arts industry vernacular, the first objective of the Act being to 'advance the inclusion and participation in the community of persons with a disability.' (Disability Act 2006: 14)

Thus, in a mainstream Australian context, inclusive arts practice is about ensuring equal access to the arts for all marginalised groups, including people with a disability, as audience, artists and participants<sup>1</sup>. Increasingly, arts organisations and artists recognise the creative opportunities that exist when there is an equitable framework that supports an exchange of ideas between a diverse range of artists, and the transformative potential of this artistic practice to provide new aesthetics and social critique<sup>2</sup>.

Myfanwy Powell, Artistic Director of the Port Phillip-based City of Voices Community Theatre, argues in her reflective essay, *The Inclusive Aesthetic*, that an inclusive aesthetic is one "that provides a more accurate reflection of the wonderful spectrum of our human existence, not merely a selective or superficial one" (Powell, 2010: 199). Similarly, organisations such as Footscray Community Arts Centre in Melbourne, Victoria and Octapod in Newcastle, New South Wales have embraced inclusive practice as an element that underpins their programs and forms a key part of their organisational aims and goals.

Similarly, Melbourne's St Martins Youth Arts Centre foregrounds an inclusive theatre practice designed to be implemented across the organisation. The practical elements of the St Martins' approach include visual mapping, tactile exercises, embedded Auslan and the encouraging of marginalized people, including young people with a disability, to be at the centre of the creative process (St Martins, 2014). The company's work in inclusive arts was recognised with an AbAf Arts Access Australia Award in 2012.

Arts Access Victoria, the state's peak body for arts and disability, offers training in disability awareness, disability action planning and inclusive arts practice for artists, arts workers and arts organisations. On its website, drawing on best practice case studies, the organisation makes the point that there is no one-size-fits-all approach with inclusive arts, and that a range of approaches is required to ensure equitable and accessible frameworks are established across the arts industry to eliminate inequalities faced by many people with a disability who wish to participate in arts and culture.

1. See Melbourne Theatre Company website (<http://www.mtc.com.au/your-visit/access/>) for an example of this type of approach to access in mainstream arts context.

2. See Octapod website (<http://octapod.org/program/access/>) for an example of this approach.

It should be noted, however, that there is evidence of some resistance to use of the term 'inclusion' among disability arts practitioners on the basis that it is grounded in a binary power relation model. For Anna Hickey-Moody, such models situate 'inclusion' as an aspiration that sets up notions of exclusion, which can lead to right/wrong, ability/disability comparisons. Hickey-Moody also reflects on how discourses of inclusion in education have largely become a system of 'othering' that can only be dissolved by developing new methods for thinking about identity and embodied difference (Hickey-Moody, 2009: 43).

Similarly, Adam Benjamin, author of *Making an Entrance: Theory and Practice for Disabled and Non-Disabled Dancers* (2002), has written about the perhaps unnecessary labeling of a dance performance as 'integrated' or 'inclusive' when promoting such work, calling it "a bit like a road sign warning the unwary theatre-goer of possible encounters with wheelchairs—it tells us that we can expect to see a disabled person on stage, which can only leave us asking, 'Is that really necessary? Who is it that needs to be warned?'" (Benjamin, 2002:15).

What is less well-documented or discussed is how the term 'inclusive arts practice' is used in applied settings in the Australian arts sector, and whether or not there is a singular or broadly accepted understanding of its meaning and its methodological approach.



# Defining the field of inclusive arts

The multi-dimensional field of what we are terming 'inclusive arts practice' may be further divided into several distinct models/frameworks of production and creation, namely:

- Arts and disability
- Disability arts
- Artists with a disability

Documents examined for this review reveal that while useful and valid, the above categories are not necessarily discrete and that 'slippage' can occur between categories.

## Arts and disability

This term is generally used to describe a 'facilitated artistic collaboration between people with a disability and people with no disability' (Perring, 2005 and Calvert, 2009). It is predominantly used to describe what is known in the UK as 'learning disabled arts', where professional artistic practitioners collaborate with individuals with intellectual or learning disabilities to create new art work (Perring in Auslander and Sandahl, 2005: 187 and Arts Access Australia, 2013). The collaborative approach or methodology used within this category varies widely, with some arts and disability practitioners favouring improvisational or participant-led models across creative forms, and others utilising more structured frameworks of direction in which an auteur or director figure seeks what they are after through script, sequence or dramaturgical design.

In the Australian context, most arts and disability companies sit comfortably within this category of 'arts and disability', and some of the more established of these companies are now building a higher public profile within the arts sector.

In 2014, *RealTime*<sup>3</sup> magazine dedicated a significant amount of their 118th issue to examining Australian companies working in this arts and disability space because, as *RealTime* editor Keith Gallasch explained:

*Although arts and disability organisations have been operating for a very long time, we are entering a period of high visibility as these artists emerge and their works are programmed in arts centres and festivals, as with Sydney's 10-year-old Ever After Theatre in the 2014 Carriageworks program in May.*  
(Gallasch, 2013)

Whilst *RealTime* had featured criticism and interviews with artists and practitioners working in arts and disability in previous issues over a number of years, this issue marked the first time that critical coverage of Australian disability artists and companies involved an extended examination of how the inclusive arts sector was impacting on mainstream cultural output.

## Disability arts

British poet, comedian and disability arts advocate Allan Sutherland defines 'disability arts' as art created by people with a

disability that directly addresses the lived experience of disability, which evolved from the disability rights movement, explaining the intention of the term in this way:

*The relationship between disability arts and disability politics is a two-way one. Our art draws upon our politics, but it also feeds back into it. We are gradually starting to create a shared culture, discovering through our art how much we have in common. It gives us opportunities to see how we may have very different disabilities, yet similar experiences. We talk about 'we', meaning disabled people in general. Our arts, our culture, enable us to understand what that 'we' consists of.*  
(Sutherland, 1989: 4)

According to American disability scholar Carrie Sandahl, in her presentation to the 2009 National Summit on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities:

*Disability art has played a key role in articulating what disability means – politically, personally and aesthetically. As such, disability art is considered an integral aspect of both the disability civil rights movement and 'disability culture', or the self-consciously*

3. *RealTime* is an Australian critical guide to contemporary arts practice.

*created community of diverse disabled people (in terms of impairment type, race, class gender and sexuality) who nevertheless share certain experiences, values and perspectives.*

(National Endowment for the Arts, 2010: 29)

In addition, Sandahl maintains that this general understanding of disability arts may be applied in differing ways across art forms:

*New disability theatre aims to explore the lived experience of disability, rather than the usual dramaturgical use of disability as a metaphor for non-disabled people's sense of outsidership.*

(Sandahl, 2008: 256)

The Disability Arts Movement can therefore be understood as producing overtly political work that is rarely part of a mainstream production or aesthetic discourse and which is more likely to be located within an avant-garde, fringe or independent context.

The Disability Arts Movement in the US and, to a greater extent, in Australia remains largely undocumented, but a strong body of evidence and work has been documented within the UK sector.

Reporting on the final Art of Difference Festival at Gasworks Arts Park in Melbourne in 2009, Colin Hambrook, editor of the UK online journal Disability Arts Online, outlined his views on the difference between disability arts

in Australia compared to the UK:

*In the UK, Disability Arts has sprung from a political lobby pushing to counter discrimination. In Australia, the aspiration - beyond a community arts ethos - has been to create work which can stand critically alongside 'mainstream' Art ... As such, it could be argued that it isn't Disability Arts at all if we understand Disability Arts as an art form with the intention of directly challenging discrimination of disabled people.*

(Hambrook, 2009)



**The Feast, 2014, Way Out West. Photo: Catherine Acin**



## Artists with a disability

This term applies to artists with a disability creating work that does not necessarily or directly address the lived experience of disability, but may or may not be informed by it. Very often such artists straddle the world of disability arts and mainstream arts. It is a category relatively absent from the literature examined for this review and work falling within this category is usually neither named as such nor defined.

Yinka Shonibare (UK), Chuck Close (US) and Jane Trengove (Australia) are examples of individual professional artists with a disability practicing at a high level in the field of contemporary visual arts—much of their work exploring complex socio-political issues such as cultural representation, gender, sexuality and power, but not necessarily disability. All three artists demonstrate the notion that while the work of an artist with a disability may not overtly engage politically with disability, it may still be directly informed by the lived experience of disability, either in content or format.

Turner Prize nominee Yinka Shonibare identifies as an artist with a disability but predominantly creates work that explores his Nigerian cultural identity, colonialism and post-colonialism and, because of his physical disability, works with a team of assistants to realise his artistic vision. As he stated in a 2008 interview with Kelly Mullan:

*I identify myself as a disabled artist, I understand it politically, but I would not put myself in a movement.*  
(Mullan, 2008: 67)

However, despite this stance, Shonibare has been known to create works directly informed by his disability such as his series of photographic portraits of himself dressed as a 19th century Victorian dandy which he explained were:

*...about my own body image and power as a disabled black man.*  
(Mullan: 67)

Chuck Close works with ideas of illusion and the hyper-real and the work he makes deconstructs and challenges forms and stylistic idioms. (The Art Story, n.d.). While his works are not overtly about disability, the artist's lived experience informs the creative process and content of his portraiture.

Close speaks candidly of his lived experience of physical disability in interviews and in books—including his 2010 biography by Christopher Finch—and of how he has adapted the way he paints to accommodate the physical limitations of his condition. He also acknowledges his preoccupation with portraiture is connected to his inability to recognise faces, a condition known as prosopagnosia (Yuskavage, 1995).





*The Iron Man*, Graeae Theatre Co. Photo: Patrick Baldwin

Melbourne artist Jane Trengove has been working and exhibiting since the 1980s, appearing in shows at the Monash Museum of Art, Sutton Gallery in Fitzroy and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. When her work is discussed, it is considered within a broader contemporary arts context, not just through the narrower lens of disability arts. For example, in her profile on the Sutton Gallery website:

*Trengove's practice articulates the relevance of contemporary art in wider social political debates and power relationships such as gender, sexuality, race and disability.*

Like Close, Trengove has commented on how her physical disability has allowed her to focus more intensely on the world around her, explaining that:

*Because of my disability I have become, in a sense, a trained observer. Which has given me an interest in the way cultural meanings operate at different levels, and how representation can be used to interrogate these meanings.*

(Reeves, 1999)

As a rule, Trengove's work, like that of Close and Shonibare, does not insist on a direct relationship with disability, but often there are nuanced connections between the artist's lived experience and her critical interventions into cultural memory and place (Reeves, 1999). Like Close and Shonibare, Trengove also has adapted her practice to accommodate the physical limitations due to her disability and, in doing so, has radically shifted her style and artistic form, most notably away from large oil painting toward much smaller canvasses and works (*Artlink* 22 (1) 2002).

# MODELS OF DISABILITY



*Hunger*, 2007, Rawcus and Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Photo: Paul Dunn

## Historical attitudes to disability

Over the past 30 years, there has been a significant shift in international understandings of disability as social theory has moved from the 'medical model', which characterises disability in terms of deficits of the body, toward the 'social model', which separates impairment from the social construct of disability.

In 2006, the United Nations (UN) adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Protocol, marking a global shift from the outdated 'medical model' of 'disability'. The UN stated that the Convention:

*takes to a new height the movement from viewing persons with disabilities as "objects" of charity, medical treatment and social protection towards viewing persons with disabilities as "subjects" with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society.*

(United Nations, 2006)

Where the medical model posits disability as a medical or biological malfunction, according to Barnes, Oliver and Barton, the social model of disability "transformed disability from medical fact into an outcome of relations of power" (Barnes, Oliver, and Barton, 2002).

The social model posits disability as an interaction between an individual's impairment and the inequitable environment in which they find themselves. In their recent report on equality and diversity in the arts for Arts Council England, Consilium Research Consultancy defined the social model of disability in this manner:

*This model distinguishes between someone's impairment, which is their medical condition, and the disabling barriers that they face in trying to participate in the world at large. It places the responsibility for disability on society and the environment it creates, rather than on the disabled person themselves.*

*A disability, according to this model, is not a medical condition, it is the stigma, oppression and stereotyping a disabled person experiences as other people and institutions encounter them, make assumptions about them and do not alter their own attitudes and practices to include them in their standard thinking or service delivery.*

(Consilium Research & Consultancy, 2013: 22)

The adoption of the social model of disability by the Disability Rights Movement in the UK is described by British disability scholar Tom Shakespeare as primarily providing the rights movement with two key things: it enabled the identification of a political strategy, namely barrier removal; and it empowered people with a disability to stop seeing themselves as the problem and start demanding their rights as citizens (Shakespeare and Watson, 2002).

The literature reveals that internationally, the social model has increasingly informed government policy and funding for disability. However, despite this rise of the social model as

the preferred model of disability, the shadow of the medical model still remains with artists and academics such as Petra Kuppers, Giles Perring, Philip Auslander, Neil Marcus, Jaehn Clare and David Roche exploring tensions arising from this legacy and the notions of the visible and invisible characteristics of disability.

More recently, the social model of disability has been critiqued for failing to acknowledge the individual experiences of disability or the stigma attached to the term 'impairment'.

As scholars Flanagan, Munford and Bennie all note, inherent in the social model is the suggestion that once social barriers are removed,

so too would the impairment of the individual be removed (Flanagan, 2010: 6).

Munford and Bennie also argue that the social model of disability "attempts to assimilate people into the dominant model" (Munford and Bennie, 2009: 211).

Critics of the social model suggest that this tendency towards essentialist framing of disability has far reaching implications when arguing the case for medical and social intervention in relation to disability and has significant implications for our understanding of the human experience (Shakespeare, 2013).

## Academic models of disability

Historically, concepts of disability in literature, film and performance have focussed on the creative potential of person with disability as the 'deviant' or the 'outsider'. More recently, attention has been paid to the complex ethical and artistic issues surrounding such representations of disability in the arts.

The use of disability to signify difference, as a corporealised metaphor of 'otherness', has a long tradition in mainstream arts (Sontag, 1978 and Davis, 1995). Performing curiosities, such as the 'freaks' of the P.T. Barnum circus shows of the mid 1800s, indicate that the notion of the disabled body as spectacle has a long history (Millet-Gallant, 2012) and the 1970s photographs of Coney Island sideshow performers by American photographer Diane Arbus continued this freak show aesthetic. Theorist Rosemary Garland-Thomson has argued that the disabled body has repeatedly been situated within a cultural discourse of 'enfreakment' (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

Historical representations of disability that focussed on the transgressive and disruptive potential of the 'otherness' of the disabled body reinforced the dominant Enlightenment medical model of disability and provided the launching pad for the disability activism movement which arose with force in Britain in the 1970s.

In response to normative (mis)representations of disability in the arts, the Disability Arts Movement has created the term 'disability drag' or 'crip drag' to describe able-bodied actors performing disability to highlight such performances as fundamentally offensive to disability culture and community. In his article on disabled roles and disabled performers, film theorist Scott Jordan Harris has said:

*Indeed, if we are okay with disabled roles being played by able-bodied actors, we are okay with disabled actors being prevented from acting at all. Able-bodied actors can play able-bodied roles. Disabled actors cannot. If disabled actors cannot play disabled roles, they cannot play any roles at all—and they are excluded from film altogether.*

(Harris, 2014)





The GIMP Project, Heidi Latsky Dance. Photo: Darial Sneed

**The disabled body is frightening and excessive, always threatening to ooze out of its appropriate containers. In a culture that works so anxiously to control the body's functions, desires and physical boundaries, the disabled body is immediately positioned as deviant, simply because it is a little messier or because it takes a little longer and diverges a little more to get to its destination.**

(Albright, 1997: 34)

## The disabled body as aesthetic strategy

Within disability studies scholarship, there is a significant amount of literature that reflects on the disruptive potential of the disabled body and representations of disability. Corporeal theory posits the body as a discursive site, capable of depicting and subverting historical, cultural and social exigencies (Grosz, 1994: x). Sandahl and Auslander position the disabled body as a potentially subversive and transgressive site, in which dominant understandings of disability, and of ability, can be contested and reconfigured (2005). Similarly, scholar Petra Kupperts argues that the disabled body is a political aesthetic strategy, at once transgressive and intimate and able to offer "new constellations for movement" (Kupperts in Auslander and Sandahl (eds), (2003: 43, 60). Kupperts suggests the disabled body must negotiate two areas of cultural meaning "invisibility in the public space, and hypervisibility and instant categorization". She argues that audiences assume that "the disabled body is naturally about disability" (Kupperts, 2001: 26). In response, Kupperts contends that artists with a disability must "recapture their bodies

and remobilize their meanings in new forms of performance encounters" (Kupperts, 2003: 11).

Anna Hickey-Moody's book *Unimaginable Bodies: Intellectual Disability, Performance and Becomings*, reflects on the work of Restless Dance Theatre in Adelaide and the politics of intellectual disability, philosophy and dance. Hickey-Moody contextualises thinking about disability and the disabled body within multiple cultures and multiple environments. She confronts the aesthetics and ethics around understandings of disabled bodies, and, through sophisticated analysis of the political and ethical frame that surrounds understandings of these bodies, she affirms the capacity of the disabled body to challenge power structures, embody senses, affects and ideas.

Thus, Hickey-Moody suggests that the physical assumptions about ability, disability and intelligence that are carried within the term 'intellectual disability' need to be moved beyond the common understanding of that term in order to re-think the specific nature of both

corporeal and artistic becomings of performers with intellectual disabilities.

*In Restless...while intellectual disability can not be regarded as a singular personal deficit, during a performance, intellectual disability can be actualized as a changing set of limits. It can be a fear, a turning away from fear, and an immanent strength that emanates from a dancer. A turning away can be an atmosphere of revolution.*  
(Hickey-Moody, 2009: 55).

Kupperts, Hickey-Moody, Albright, Sandahl and Auslander all foreground the disabled body as a potential means for reinscribing social and cultural understandings of disability. Significantly all these scholars come from the field of performance studies and dance. Far less theoretical material on the creative potential and aesthetics of the disabled body has been produced in visual arts, music or creative writing where the artist's body may not be apparent as a key element in the artwork produced.



# Outsider art

The term 'outsider art' was coined by Roger Cardinal as a title for his 1972 book on the topic. Originally the book was to be called *Art Brut*, but in a 1998 interview Cardinal revealed that his publishers had wanted an English language title, so he obliged with *Outsider Art* (Volkersz, 1998: 24).

Art brut (raw art) was proposed by Jean Dubuffet in 1945 to describe art created by artists working outside established art academies and traditions, art that was seen to be more intuitive, spontaneous and visionary; the type of art Dubuffet had encountered through his interest in artwork produced by people living in institutions—predominantly institutions for people with mental illness (Murrell, 2005).

The exact definition or meaning of both these terms, 'art brut' and 'outsider art', has been the subject of much debate in the art world. The terms are often used interchangeably, although 'outsider art' has more currency in English-speaking countries. Cardinal (2009) describes 'art brut' as resting on "a model of the creator being somehow insulated from all social and cultural influences, devoid of all schooling in the arts, and unaware of traditions or preset compositional formulae ... [which] ...should furthermore be made without thought of financial gain or public recognition."

Tate Britain has defined 'outsider art' as art made by "individuals who belong to no movement or school, who are mainly self-taught, have no knowledge of other art or artists and are adept at exploring their own psyche" (Tate Britain, 2005).

Sydney-based arts, culture and music writer Hugh Nichols views 'outsider art' as a "dubious category" whereby artists included in this category are "fetishised as practitioners allegedly operating beyond the despoiling influence of commercial professional concerns" and, moreover, that "Outsider art is an outdated method for framing non-normative cultural production" (Nichols, 2012: 29).

There is evidence in the literature that the outsider art movement and philosophy has informed the development of supported visual arts studios for artists with a disability, particularly those artists with intellectual or communication disabilities, or those living with mental illness, who require specific supports to enable their creative engagement and development.

In October 2014, as part of its 40th birthday celebrations, Australia's oldest supported visual arts studio, Arts Project Australia, co-presented an international conference on outsider arts in partnership with the University of Melbourne, *Contemporary Outsider Art: the global context*. The role of supported visual arts studios for artists with a disability was a major focus in the conference program, with presentations from supported studios in the US (Art Enables , Creativity Explored, NIAD Art Center), the UK (Project Ability), China (Nanjing Outsider Art Center) and Australia (Studio ARTes in New South Wales and Arts Project Australia and NEAMI's Splash Studio in Victoria).

Colin Rhodes, in his 2008 article on the rise and global spread of supported visual arts studios for artists with intellectual disabilities, disputes the representation of the artists in these studios as being 'outside' contemporary arts practice because they do not appear to meet the accepted model of a professional artist. This model defines the professional artist as someone who has been formally trained in the visual arts and who participates in the public discourse about art, a discourse where artists communicate with other artists, dealers, critics, curators and collectors. In his conclusion, Rhodes proposes that the supported studios are, in fact, a new and different kind of academy that supports and produces excellent artists, an academy which recognises the need for enablers (support artists) to facilitate the personal artistic practice and growth of the studios' participants.

Nichols counters Rhodes' argument for viewing artists with a disability in supported studios as simply a different kind of professional artist working within what Nichols condemns as "the apparitional or 'so-called mainstream art world'". Instead, he sees "the concept of a professional outsider artist as a contradiction in terms" (Nichols, 2012: 30).

# Creative and aesthetic strategies within the field of inclusive arts

Giles Perring's 2005 article on facilitated collaborations in learning-disabled contexts articulates 3 distinct artistic and methodological approaches that bring inclusive arts into mainstream discourse:

## **1. Normalising:**

Bringing performers with a disability into a mainstream performance discourse (mainstream production values and aesthetic criteria). Embraces the normative forces of the mainstream arts in terms of using artistic platforms and settings that resonate with popular aesthetic standpoints (Perring in Auslander and Sandahl (eds.) 2005: 185).

## **2. Post-therapeutic:**

Work informed by therapeutic standpoints applied in creative settings that champions personal self-expression and a social inclusion agenda. This work can set itself at odds with organisational imperatives to exhibit or perform work of excellence (Perring in Auslander and Sandahl (eds.) 2005: 185).

## **3. Countercultural:**

Work that challenges mainstream and aesthetic precepts and views about disability and flows from transgressive qualities of the disabled body and often has a concern with addressing marginalization. This work can be further understood by understanding the historical representations of the disabled body (i.e. circus and freak show) and draws on these preconceptions to posit new ways of seeing and experiencing disability (Perring in Auslander and Sandahl (eds.) 2005: 186).

In addition to Perring's categories, Petra Kuppers discusses another category of work being produced that is related to the 'normalising' category. This is work in which the disabled body is 'normalised' and its potentially subversive qualities negated in what could be understood as an attempt to minimize its 'otherness' (Kuppers 2003: 25).

Perring's distinctions help shape an analytical and critical approach to the dramaturgical and aesthetic aspects of artistic work created across the spectrum of disability and the arts. These approaches are useful frameworks for thinking about the field, however it is important not to think of them as discrete categories but rather as interlinked features that exist as part of a rich landscape of cultural product and politics. It is also likely that more categories may emerge as part of the arts and disability field as the research progresses.

# DISABILITY POLICY AND THE ARTS



Greg Muir in *Flock*, 2013, Weave Movement Theatre. Photo: Paul Dunn

The development of the social model of disability, triggered by the disability rights movement<sup>4</sup> and corresponding to the rise of the disability arts movement in both the US and the UK, resulted in a push for artistic practices located outside therapeutic contexts (Murakami 2012).

The disability arts movement, in particular, emphasised the “potential of disability arts as a progressive, emancipatory force at both the individual and social levels” (Barnes and Mercer 2001: 529). This movement is responsible for shifting the

notion of artists with a disability from mere ‘service-users’ to a framework that instead emphasises the personal artistic capacity and aspirations of artists with a disability. Within the Disability Arts Movement, a critical distinction is made between disabled people doing art and disability artists (Barnes and Mercer, 2001). This distinction argues that rather than admiring the capacity of artists with disabilities to make work that is like or as good as the work of people without disability, this type of art is informed by, and engages with, a sociopolitical

discourse about pervasive and limiting non-disabled precepts and constructions of disability.

As Sutherland describes:

*It's what makes a disability artist different from an artist with a disability. We don't see our disabilities as obstacles that we have to overcome before we try to make our way in the non-disabled cultural world. Our politics teach us that we are oppressed, not inferior. (1997: 159)*

4. The disability rights movement started in both the UK and US in the 1960s, spurred by the success of the civil rights activism and women's rights movements. In the US, there were many watershed moments for disability rights, including the Independent Living Movement, which advocated for the removal of people with disabilities from care homes into independent accommodation, and the Rehabilitation Act (1973) which was the first civil rights law guaranteeing equal opportunity for people with disabilities. In the UK, after many decades of activism, the Disability Discrimination Act was passed in 1995. The United Nations proclaimed 1981 to be the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP), and called on all member nations to establish equitable frameworks for people with disabilities and create organisations that could advocate and support their rights. Whilst some in the disability community saw this as patronising and insensitive (see the now infamous song Spasticus Autisticus by Ian Dury—performed recently by Graeae Theatre Company at the London Paralympic Opening Ceremony 2012—it is generally acknowledged that IYDP marked the beginning of many countries recognising the rights of people with a disability, and subsequent enshrinement of these rights in legislation.

# United Kingdom

Arts Council England, the government funded public body charged with supporting and promoting the arts in England, has shown significant leadership in developing and funding equitable frameworks for arts participation and the critical evaluation of work created across the arts and disability spectrum. Its Disability Equality Scheme 2010-2013 and *Creative Case* initiative (which situates diversity as an integral part of the artistic process, a catalyst for innovation and a driver of culture and change) are forward-thinking documents the like of which is not evident in other countries.

*We are conscious of the growing call to bring art back into the centre of the discussion and thinking on diversity. We have already acted on this impetus, so, for the first time our ambitions for diversity and equality are knitted into those of excellence, reach, engagement and innovation. This is articulated in our 10-year vision for the arts, 'Achieving great art for everyone: a strategic framework for the arts'. Here we set out an artistic-led approach to diversity in the arts as the driver for change.*

(Arts Council England, 2011: 7)

It should be noted that the *Creative Case* policy and initiatives were not restricted solely to disability but addressed inclusion and diversity in the arts in its broadest sense, including considerations of disability, race and gender. The *Creative Case* website ([www.creativecase.org.uk](http://www.creativecase.org.uk)), a joint initiative between Arts Council England and Disability Arts Online, is a portal for research, criticism, history, and resources. It invites a conversation with the wider arts sector, and maps the diversity of creative practice, celebrating the rich cultural offering that this diversity provides<sup>5</sup>.

Arts Council England also supported the *Sync Leadership* initiative<sup>6</sup> in 2011/2012. This leadership development program focussed on the interplay between disability and leadership. The program was open to any person with a disability interested in aspects of cultural leadership and provided bespoke development, networking and training opportunities and more. The program was established by two freelance practitioners with disabilities, Jo Verrent and Sarah Pickthall, and was designed to be radically different to other training programs. A number of high profile UK cultural leaders with a disability accessed aspects of the program, including Jenny Sealey, the Artistic Director of the London 2012 Paralympic Games Opening Ceremony and Graeae Theatre Company.

Historically, the UK has also been a leader with disability-led arts organisations. Established in 1976, Shape Arts is a cornerstone organisation for disability and the arts in the UK, a disability-led organisation born out of the Disability Arts Movement. Today Shape works across London to develop opportunities for artists with a disability, train cultural institutions to be more open to people with a disability and delivers participatory arts and development programs.

# United States

In the United States, VSA (originally Very Special Arts) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1976 by Jean Kennedy Smith. Today it is an international organisation for arts and disability with 52 international affiliates. Based at the Kennedy Centre, the organisation has 7 million people of all ages and abilities participating in its programs across the country each year. VSA is also affiliated with LEAD (Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability), a professional network of US organisations dedicated to improving accessibility of cultural experience for people with a disability.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the independent federal agency funding and promoting cultural excellence in the US, has an Office for Accessibility. The office has a number of advocacy, development, leadership and education initiatives, as well as providing support directly to funding applicants who have a

5. It is still unclear what the 2012/2013 cuts to the Arts Council England have meant for the *Creative Case* policy although Tony Panayiotou, who initiated the *Creative Case* study, and 150 of his staff were made redundant as part of recent UK government austerity measures.

6. Evaluative data from this program indicates that it was highly successful and has launched new thinking about intersections between disability and leadership and championed the careers of diverse range of cultural leaders with disabilities.

disability—although in contrast to Arts Council England, the NEA Office for Accessibility does not have a Strategic Plan or Equity scheme which embeds the principles of access for all.

In 2009, the NEA hosted a National Summit on Careers in the Arts for People with a Disability, the first since 1998, and created a framework to improve the career prospects of people with a disability in the arts and cultural sector. A key recommendation from this summit was the development of a series of statewide forums on careers in the arts for people with disabilities across the United States. The proposed forums were held in 27 US states between 2002 and 2013.

In December 2014, the National Arts and Disability Center in Los Angeles published a report (Hayward & Raynor, 2014) on these statewide forums. Led by state arts agencies, the forums were attended by over 9,000 artists (with and without disabilities), educators and representatives from disability service providers and arts organisations. Little attention, however, was paid in the forums to the creative case for inclusive arts practice.

The emphasis was primarily on the 'business' side of a career in the arts for people with a disability, with workshops and presentations on marketing and promotion, networking opportunities as well as some capacity building for arts organisations to enable and encourage them to employ more people with disability. The summary of topics covered in the forums (Hayward and Raynor, 2014: 25) reveals that the main outcomes were tools for building arts careers rather than opportunities for exploring, showcasing or nurturing creative developments by artists with a disability.

In 2012, the Office of VSA and Accessibility at the Kennedy Center hosted 'Assessing the Future of the Field', a three-day international meeting of thought leaders in theatre, dance, disability, education and inclusion. International delegates included four Australians: Emma Bennison, CEO of Arts Access Australia; artist Kath Duncan; Morwenna Collett from the Australia Council for the Arts and Kate Larsen, Director of Writers Victoria and former CEO of Arts Access Australia.

In contrast to the NEA/VSA statewide forums previously mentioned, this Kennedy Center event engaged strongly with notions of leadership in disability arts and "the thorny polemics surrounding the field's nomenclature" (John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts 2012: 2) with most of the three days spent in meetings and workshops that encouraged exchange of ideas and discussions on the qualities, aesthetics and intentions of artwork produced within the international disability arts sector.



# Australia

In Australia, the disability rights movement gained momentum in the early 1980s leading to significant reshaping of policy and the passing of the federal Disability Services Act (1986). This reshaping focused on the increased participation of people with disabilities in their communities and a social integration agenda (Murakami, 2012: 5).

There is a distinct lack of recorded evidence about the impact of the Disability Arts Movement—which had been well-documented and critiqued internationally, particularly in the UK, and which has had such a significant impact on disability culture in both the UK and US—in Australia. The lack of a cohesive, national, artist-driven movement in Australia has placed Australian artists with a disability at a significant disadvantage.

According to the 2012 Arts Access Australia submission to the National Cultural Policy, the lack of documented evidence in Australia for the important contemporary art movement known as ‘disability arts’ creates a barrier for development of artists with a disability in this country and makes it difficult to position our artistic history in relation to international contexts:

*While there are now a few universities offering Disability Art history courses in the UK, Australia’s historical*

*and ongoing contribution to this body of work, as well as the work of other Australian artists with disability, is greatly undocumented.*  
(Arts Access Australia, 2012: 9)

In 2009, the Cultural Ministers Council, an intergovernmental group of arts and cultural ministers from Australia and New Zealand, released their *National Arts and Disability Strategy (NADS)*. In its foreword, the strategy recognised that “The artistic aspirations and achievements of people with a disability are an important and valued part of the Australian culture” and provided a framework that was intended ‘to promote a more inclusive society and to highlight best practice (Cultural Ministers Council, 2009: iii). However, the document contained no firm financial commitments from any level of government to implement the strategy. Nor did it, despite using the term ‘best practice’ throughout, make any attempt to define any aesthetic criteria for ‘best practice’ in inclusive arts.

The Australia Council for the Arts, Australia’s national arts funding and advisory body, identified people with a disability as a priority group within the Australia Council’s Cultural Engagement Framework (2007) and created a three-year Arts and Disability Action Plan 2008-2010 and then another from 2011-2013.

When the current CEO of the Australia Council, Tony Grybowski, released the 2014-2016 iteration of the Council’s Disability Action Plan, he announced a series of initiatives designed to specifically support the work of artists with disabilities, most notably the dedicated *Artists with Disability* funding program which supports the creation and development of new projects by artists with a disability. The inaugural recipients of this grant were announced in May 2014 (25 recipients from 217 applications). This funding program will continue for the next three years (2015-17) with a further million-dollar commitment from the Federal Government.

In the October 2014 media release announcing the continuation of this fund, Grybowski stated that:

*The extension of this dedicated funding demonstrates our commitment to supporting the cultural ambitions of artists with disability, and to seeing more artists who identify as having disability applying across our funding programs.*  
(Australia Council for the Arts, 2014)

All Australia Council documents relating to this funding initiative suggest its primary purpose is to increase the number of artists with disability applying for and receiving Australia Council funding, but nowhere do these



An Auslan interpreted performance at the Melbourne Emerging Writers' Festival, 2013. Photo: Mark Gambino

documents outline any notion or acknowledgement of separate or different artistic or creative criteria and processes particular to art produced by artists with disability.

The Australia Council has also recently identified leadership by people with a disability as a key area for the arts and disability sector. In response to a question about why he had chosen to take on the Council's Executive Disability Champion role, Grybowski stated that "leadership is very important in changing the existing culture on disability for the better" (Australia Council for the Arts, 2013).

To that end, in 2014, Emma Bennison, the CEO of Arts Access Australia, was awarded an Executive Leadership grant from the Australia Council to research arts and disability leadership in the UK. Also in 2014, the Australia Council offered an Australian version of the UK's *Sync Leadership Program* for arts leaders with a disability. Victorian arts leaders involved in the 2014 Australia Council *Sync* program included Janice Florence, the Artistic Director of Melbourne's Weave Movement Theatre and Sophie Sherriff, Associate Director of Arts Access Victoria's The Other Film Festival.

In 2013, the then-federal Labor government released *Creative Australia*, its national cultural policy<sup>7</sup>, a document created by the Office for the Minister of the Arts following consultation with a wide range of industry, community and agency stakeholder groups.

The first release of this policy urged "*tolerance* [author's italics] of people with disability". This terminology was met with outrage by industry and disability advocacy groups who thought it entirely unacceptable that, in a national cultural policy, the creative work of people with a disability was to be 'tolerated' rather than celebrated for its quality, unique vision and contribution to Australia's cultural landscape. Nor did the draft policy commit to any real investment to support the implementation of the 2009 *National Arts and Disability Strategy*. The word 'tolerance' was removed from later versions of *Creative Australia*.

7. It should be noted that with the release of a new Strategic Plan from the Australia Council in August 2014, *Creative Australia* has been made redundant

In July 2013, Arts Access Victoria hosted *Beyond Tolerance: Disability, Advocacy and the Arts*, a public forum in Melbourne developed in response to the use of the word 'tolerance' in the *Creative Australia* cultural policy. The forum brought together artists, carers, producers, government policymakers and more to debate why Australian artists with a disability are not being recognised and celebrated by the critical mainstream<sup>8</sup>.

The Victorian Government has also displayed national leadership in the development and implementation of policies, initiatives and research in relation to arts and disability. There has been a history of inter-departmental collaboration between Arts Victoria and the Victorian Office for Disability to co-fund arts and disability initiatives, namely the commissioning of research on increasing the cultural participation of people with a disability (Creative Victoria, 2008); initiatives to support the professional development of artists with a disability (ArtWORK, 2013-15) and an arts sector capacity building initiative to increase the cultural participation of people with disability in Victoria (ADAPT: Arts and Disability Action Plan Training) delivered to 118 Victorian arts organisations between 2011 and 2015.

The Victorian Government's 2008 *Picture This* research resulted in two separate publications: an international literature review and a report of a community consultation conducted in Victoria between May 2008 and February 2009. The research question for the project was:

How can participation in the arts for people with a disability, as artists and audience members, be increased?

(Victoria. Office for Disability 2010 – 01: 14)

Given this focus on 'participation', the *Picture This* literature review and consultation report concentrated primarily on physical, economic and attitudinal barriers to arts participation by people with disability as well as policy and funding responses to these barriers, both by government and the broader arts sector.

The only part in the two volumes directly relevant to the creative case for inclusive arts practice was a small section in Volume 2 titled *Time, process and creative space – disability requirements* (Victoria. Office for Disability 2010 – 02: 63-65). This section discussed the critical importance of extended timelines and an adequate access budget to enable the creative development process when working with artists with disability—a process requirement exemplified by the following statement contributed by a representative from Melbourne's inclusive theatre company, Rawcus:

*Our budget lines for our shows don't look the same as another small company. We do not meet for four weeks rehearsal and do a show. Our timelines are considerably longer, often one to two years. So that's different. We have this big cost for transport. We have support workers. We have Auslan interpreters. So we've got all these things in our budget lines that look different to other projects.*

(Victoria. Office for Disability 2010-01: 65)

The ADAPT program was commissioned by Arts Victoria in response to the findings of the *Picture This* research. The program, developed and delivered by Arts Access Victoria, was intended to build "the capacity of the arts and cultural sectors to deliver increased and improved opportunities for arts and cultural participation by people with disability" (Creative Victoria, ADAPT).

The program resulted in the publication of a suite of online resources to support and reinforce the training (Creative Victoria, *Top Tips*), but none of these resources directly engage with, or articulate, the *creative* case for inclusive arts practice involving artists with disability. Rather, their primary focus is inclusion and employment of people with disability in the Victorian arts sector with little in depth attention paid to different creative processes or outcomes that might result from artwork developed and created using the principles and philosophy of inclusive arts practice.

8. A transcript of this event can be accessed here: <http://artsaccess.com.au/news/livingart/beyond-tolerance-forum-22-july-2013-transcript/>

# THE ARTS AND DISABILITY LANDSCAPE TODAY

This section does not claim to comprehensively discuss and examine literature relating to all activities and developments in the arts and disability sectors in the three countries under consideration (United Kingdom, United States of America and Australia). Rather, it is a selective and representative overview of activity in arts and disability in these three countries, highlighting some recent best practice achievements.

## United Kingdom



*Belonging*, 2014, Graeae Theatre Co. Photo: Patrick Baldwin

The UK has a rich history of high quality arts and disability practice, with a range of well-established and well-funded companies committed to artistic excellence and working inclusively. One outstanding example is Graeae (pronounced Gray-eye), the London-based theatre company which has championed the aesthetics of disability arts and challenged prevailing notions of disability since its inception in 1979. In his 2006 history of the company (Shaban, 2006) actor Nabil Shaban, who co-founded Graeae, recalled that:

*...we created Graeae to be a professional theatre of the highest artistic excellence... we saw the need to change and subvert public attitudes, misconceptions, disrupt myths about disability and disabled people.*

Shaban explains that even the name of the company, Graeae, was chosen as a provocation and a commentary on a society that traditionally viewed people with a disability as “monsters, strange creatures, freaks”, ‘Graeae’ being the name of the monstrous three sisters in Greek mythology who had only one eye and one tooth between them (Shaban 2006).



Graeae's current website ([www.graeae.org](http://www.graeae.org)) refers to the 'Graeae Aesthetic', a dramatically distinctive placement of disability and access centre stage in all their work:

*Accessibility is at our core; we progressively define, evolve and redefine the ways in which signing, audio description, sound light and film can enhance the theatrical experience. Graeae implements this philosophy by embedding a range of access features such as audio description and sign language in their productions from the very beginning of the artistic process.*

Another longtime leader in the arts and disability field in the UK, with over two decades of experience, is Candoco Dance Company, an acclaimed ensemble of dancers with and without disability which aims to produce work that broadens perceptions of art and ability.

The company's website (<http://www.candoco.co.uk>) states that Candoco has always been equally as committed to upskilling its dancers through training and professional development as it has been to "live performances to widen participation in dance by disabled people and to showcase the quality and excitement created through difference". The company refers to its approach as 'integrated' rather than 'inclusive'.

From its inception, the company recognised the need to champion a new dance ecology of training and workshop and an inclusive performance aesthetic (Smith in Sandahl and Auslander, 2005; 75). The company's recent work, *Let's Talk about Dis*, also draws on the autobiographical experiences of the performers and the ideas of aesthetic self-representation and new corporealities (Smith 2005: 76 and Jays 2014). In contrast to the Australian inclusive dance company, Restless Dance Theatre, Candoco utilises physical language and expression rather than visual metaphor (Jays, 2014).

It is common now, in publications by or about UK disability arts organisations, to prioritise artistic excellence as the primary goal of these organisations. For example, the website of Mind the Gap ([www.mind-the-gap.org.uk](http://www.mind-the-gap.org.uk)) a theatre company in Bradford West Yorkshire which works with adults and children with and without intellectual disabilities, states that the company 'exists to make great theatre that makes audiences think differently.'

Similarly Glasgow's Project Ability (<http://www.project-ability.co.uk>), a supported visual arts studio established in 1984, now places artistic excellence at the centre of its program, describing itself on its website as:

*a Glasgow-based visual arts organisation with an international reputation for excellence. We create opportunities for people with disabilities and people with mental health issues, aged 5 years to 80 plus, to express themselves and achieve artistic excellence.*

Often, however, in some UK arts and disability organisations, a commitment to artistic excellence still sits alongside an equal or greater commitment to the social inclusion outcomes achievable for people with a disability through the use of inclusive arts practice. For

example, the North London company, Chickenshed Theatre ([www.chickenshed.org.uk](http://www.chickenshed.org.uk)) which was established in 1974.

Chickenshed Theatre promotes itself as “an inclusive theatre company for children and young people, including marginalized youth and young people with a disability”. A 2011 promotional documentary about the company, *Chickenshed Theatre Changing Lives* (<https://www.youtube.com/user/ChickenshedTheatre>), includes an excerpt from *Perfect Woman*, a recent Chickenshed performance featuring a dancer with cerebral palsy, Belinda Sharer.

While the documentary includes some discussion about the way the dance form is changed by the inclusion of a dancer with disability and consequently how *Perfect Woman* challenges notions of disability, the greater part of the video focuses on the positive social impact of the company’s work—an emphasis echoed in the company’s own description of its purpose:

*Chickenshed changes lives by bringing young people from all social and economic backgrounds, races and abilities together to study creatively alongside each other.*

<http://www.chickenshed.org.uk/>

Oily Cart ([www.oilycart.org.uk](http://www.oilycart.org.uk)), a London-based company that works exclusively with children—many with complex disabilities—and Edinburgh’s Lung Ha’s Theatre Company for performers with learning disabilities, were both established in 1981 and both position inclusion at the core of their purpose.

For Oily Cart, positive social inclusion and social justice outcomes appear to be their main priority, based on the six outcomes listed on the ‘Our Impact’ page of their website (<http://www.oilycart.org.uk/impact/>). In a 2014 interview on the BBC Performing Arts blog about *The Hold*, Lung Ha’s recent site-specific collaboration with National Museums Scotland, Lung Ha’s representative stated that the company’s vision is “to be a leading theatre company for people with learning disabilities, in Scotland and internationally.” However, in the same interview, when asked about the chief benefits of the collaboration for the learning disabled actors, while acknowledging the project would allow the cast “to develop their own repertoire of creative skills” the interviewee then outlined a much greater number of social outcomes, for both the cast and the audience members:

*Cast members will directly benefit from having an artistic, social and therapeutic outlet... The project also provides a platform to develop life skills such as team work, independence and self-confidence. Audience members can also benefit from the cultural aspects of theatre and the social aspects of interacting with people with learning disabilities, especially those who may not have previously had an awareness of learning disabilities.*

(Cotroneo, 2014)

In addition to literature about the work of UK disability arts companies and ensembles, there is a significant amount of documentation, including published reviews, interviews and video clips in both

*For life today is cold and  
grey and ghastly*



*The Threepenny Opera*, 2014, Graeae Theatre Co. Photo: Patrick Baldwin

mainstream and disability arts forums, on individual UK artists with a disability with relatively high levels of public recognition and advanced levels of practice. These include Turner-nominated Yinka Shonibare (visual arts), Julie McNamara (writer/performer/filmmaker and a 30-year veteran of disability arts), Mat Fraser (musician/performer), the Australian-born, and now UK-based Caroline Bowditch (performer/maker/dancer) and Marc Brew (choreographer/dancer).

Brighton University in the UK appears to be the only educational institution offering specific training in inclusive arts at a postgraduate level, a Master's degree in Inclusive Arts Practice. The course aims to equip students already working in the arts with the skills necessary to work with a range of diverse marginalized groups, including people with disability, asylum seekers and refugees,

young people, elders, youth offenders and those experiencing homelessness. Their collaborative projects are delivered across a diverse range of settings including schools, galleries, photographic studios and day centres (University of Brighton Arts and Humanities, 2015).

Leicester University does not offer tertiary courses in disability arts or inclusive arts but its Attenborough Arts Centre (formerly Embrace Arts) for visual and performing arts is part of the University's College of Arts, Humanities and Law and has been championing the promotion of 'disabled talent' and 'disability-led companies' for 18 years. The Centre also offers arts workshops and professional development for teachers.

The UK has long been a pioneer in the development and promotion of accessible live performances tailored to accommodate audience members with a

specific disability<sup>9</sup>. These accommodations have sometimes led to modifications which may alter the production's aesthetics or delivery, both for performers and the wider audience. For example, the introduction in 2013 of 'relaxed performances' at the National Theatre in London (Rubin 2013), designed to meet the needs of audience members who have either a learning disability, Down's Syndrome or who live with an autism spectrum disorder (*Access London Theatre* 2015); these performances have a 'relaxed' attitude to noise made by audience members during the show, make appropriate changes to lighting and sound levels to meet audience needs and provide 'visual stories' prior to each performance to assist audience engagement. Relaxed performances, now widely available in the UK, are gradually becoming more common in the US and Australia.

9. Evidence of the wide range of audio-described, captioned, signed and relaxed performances now regularly available in London can be seen in *Access London Theatre*, London's comprehensive online guide to accessible theatre, which is published three times a year and also available in large print, Braille, on audio tape or CD.

The UK has also led the way in providing national showcasing opportunities for works produced by artists with a disability, an essential element for raising the public profile of artists with a disability and for developing audiences for the creative work produced by artists with a disability.

Following its first one-off disability arts festival in 2001, DaDaFest in Liverpool has since delivered 12 festivals celebrating art made by artists with a disability and Deaf artists. Formerly staged annually, since 2010 the Festival has become a biennial event featuring UK artists with a disability and Deaf artists and a growing number of international artists with a disability.

Like Graeae, DaDaFest receives recurrent annual funding from Arts Council England as a National Partner Organisation<sup>10</sup>. Established in 1984 as Arts Integrated Merseyside (AIM) DaDaFest claims to be “one of the first disabled-led [arts] organisations in the UK”, and on its website states its vision to be “to inspire, develop and celebrate talent and excellence in disability and Deaf arts”. In addition to the increasingly high profile and well-attended DaDaFest (an audience of 105,000 in 2012 to see 160 artists with a disability from 17 different countries), the organisation presents other disability arts projects year round and undertakes research into disability arts (DaDaFest, 2013).

The creative achievements of British artists with a disability came into sharp focus with the 2012 London Paralympic Games Opening Ceremony and its accompanying cultural program, *Unlimited*, “the largest ever celebration of arts and disability

culture in the UK” (Rodenhurst 2013: 9).

*Unlimited as a festival was an example of myriad ways of being in the world, making and experiencing work ... a model for presenting and experiencing work pointed towards alternative.*

Luke Pell, Performance Curator (Pell, 2013)

*This was a story of the arts as a human right in terms of engagement, participation and leadership. It was and still is a story of empowerment and excellence and ambition. ... Unlimited gave us the much needed visibility and exposure in the mainstream world and the support to make some lasting relationships in this world.*

Jenny Sealey, Graeae Artistic Director (British Council Brazil, [2013]: 61)

*Unlimited* was funded primarily by Britain’s National Lottery and delivered in partnership with the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) together with the arts councils of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

*Unlimited* offered funding for professional development of artists, mentorships, producer capacity building, international collaborations, project management and, most significantly, funds for the commissioning and presentation of new works by deaf or disabled artists. 29 new works by UK-based Deaf and disabled artists were commissioned through the initiative, including new works by Australian choreographer/dancers Marc Brew and Caroline Bowditch.

Some of the commissioned works were directly or indirectly

informed by disability, for example, Marc Brew’s *Fusional Fragments*, which brought together Brew’s choreography and the music of acclaimed Deaf percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie, and explored themes relating to imperfection. In an interview for *The Independent* newspaper (Duerdin, 2012), Brew explained that “I wanted to focus the show around certain words—dislocated, broken, shattered”.

Other commissioned works, such as ceramicist Paul Cummins’ *The English Flower Garden*—a series of site-specific installations of ceramic flower gardens at English historic houses, the Houses of Parliament and on Southbank as part of the 2012 *Unlimited* Festival—made no reference at all to disability, but were the work of an artist with a disability.

Paul Cummins provides an excellent example of the career boost possible for artists with a disability who received commissions through *Unlimited*. Cummins, who lives with a rare form of dyslexia, does not communicate in writing so the administrative side of project management is always very challenging for him.

Through the *Unlimited* Producer Capacity Fund, he was able to access a producer to work with him on the administrative side of his commission. In addition, he was able to access training in bronze casting through the fund, which added to his artistic skills—and the sheer scale of *The English Flower Garden* was a huge leap compared to anything he had done before:

*Effectively, the project was eight major exhibitions in one year. Usually I would do one or two.*

Paul Cummins (Rodenhurst, 2013: 28)

10. ACE funding in 2014-15 for Graeae is £588,979 or AUD\$1,166,076; for DaDaFest, £204,672 or AUD\$398,728 (Source: Arts Council England website [www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding))





The Limbless Knight, 2013, Graeae Theatre Co. Photo: Patrick Baldwin



Reporting on an interview with Cummins in her 2013 case study *London's Cultural Olympiad*, Kate Rodenhurst observed that:

*The project has increased Paul's confidence in planning and managing larger projects ... He is seeking to take on larger scale commissions (Rodenhurst, 2013: 28).*

Just one year after the 2012 *Unlimited* Festival, Cummins approached Historic Royal Palaces (Hardman, 2014) with an idea for a major public art installation to commemorate the centenary of World War I. This resulted in Cummins' acclaimed *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, a field of 888,246 ceramic red poppies gradually installed outside the walls of the Tower of London over a four month period, culminating in Armistice Day 2015 and attracting crowds of between 4 and 5 million (Jones, 2014).

The word 'unprecedented' occurs regularly in the literature about *Unlimited* 2012 (Arts Council England, 2012; Rodenhurst, 2013: 5) and indeed, within the global disability arts sector, the levels of funding applied (£3 million or AUD\$5,844,393)<sup>11</sup>, audience size (96,000)<sup>12</sup> and scale of many of the projects were unprecedented.

In her case study of the arts and disability component of London's Cultural Olympiad, Kate Rodenhurst found that despite some concerns about the level of media coverage for *Unlimited* due to competition from other Olympic events, outcomes from the initiative were considered to be overwhelmingly positive for both the artists with a disability involved and for the wider arts sector.

In summary, Rodenhurst found that *Unlimited* definitely raised the profile of artists with a disability, increased public awareness of their work, improved essential skills in the sector (project management, finance, marketing and accessible interpretation) and strengthened networks and partnerships between Deaf and disabled artists and the wider arts sector (Rodenhurst, 2013: 3). Artists interviewed for her case study felt their involvement had 'pushed personal boundaries' so they were able to develop 'much more ambitious work' and 'showcase their work on bigger stages in more prestigious venues', experiences which led to a growth in their creative confidence (Rodenhurst, 2013: 6).

Jo Verrent, now a Senior Producer with *Unlimited* 2014-2016, sees one of the real strengths of the *Unlimited* funding model as its recognition of the need to provide funds for appropriate resources and support (mentorships, training, collaborators) to enable artists with a disability to realize their creative vision (Verrent, 2014).

The success of *Unlimited* in 2012 led to a further £1.5 million investment by the British Government to continue this commissioning and mentoring program for three more years (2014- 2016) and support two further *Unlimited* festivals on London's Southbank in 2014 and 2016.

In a clear statement that indicates support for the creative case for disability arts as opposed to a social inclusion agenda—with this second iteration of *Unlimited* funding, Arts Council England specified that the commissioning program was intended for 'established artists ... with a demonstrable track record' and was 'NOT aimed at emerging artists or artists and organisations whose remit is primarily social' (Arts Council England, 2013).

The British Council has also been instrumental in promoting and building on the gains made through *Unlimited*, organizing international forums and touring some of the commissioned works from *Unlimited* 2012 to Brazil and Qatar. In April 2013, the Council held the Cultural Olympics and Paralympics Forum in Rio de Janeiro, followed by *Unlimited: Arte Sem Limites*, a festival featuring some of the artists from *Unlimited* 2012—a linking project to ensure the legacy of *Unlimited* 2012 is passed on to the organizers of the 2016 Rio Paralympics (British Council Brazil & People's Palace Projects, 2013). For the 2014 *Unlimited* Festival on Southbank, the Council convened an international delegation of over 100 people for workshops and discussion focussing on disability arts (Burns, 2014).

11. (Pratty, 2009)

12. 20,000 people at ticketed and free events and an estimated 11,000 people through digital media; international commissions reached an audience of over 65,000 through websites, exhibitions and performances at venues across the UK. (British Council: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/london-2012/culture-heart-games/unlimited>)



*The GIMP Project*, Heidi Latsky Dance Company. Photo: Darial Sneed

## United States

Compared to the United Kingdom, disability arts in the US does not receive the same level of government support and, perhaps because of the geographic size of the US, appears to be a more dispersed sector than is the case in the UK.

For example, although the US has several well established national industry development initiatives for arts and disability—such as the previously mentioned Office for Accessibility at the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Arts and Disability Center at UCLA and the Office of VSA and Accessibility at the Kennedy Center—there was no evidence in the literature of a regular national showcase for art produced by American artists with a disability akin to Britain's DaDaFest or *Unlimited Festival*.

The US is, however, home to several long-established and

acclaimed 'mixed ability'<sup>13</sup> contemporary dance companies, or as most of the companies describe themselves, 'integrated dance companies'.

California's Axis Dance Company, a disability-led company, was established in 1987 and grew from a movement class for women who used wheelchairs. The company has toured extensively in the US and internationally, and also delivers an outreach program for schools and community organisations. The company's work has a preoccupation with new kinesthetic forms and the explorations of how wheelchairs, crutches and 'differently-abled' bodies can create new forms of movement that can shift audience perceptions of ability and disability (Male, 2005). In a 2013 article about Axis, Erin Donohue describes the physically integrative dance approach

employed by the company as "a dance form that uses physical limitations as a means to push choreographic boundaries, rather than viewing differences as an obstacle" (Donohue, 2013).

Judith Smith, Artistic Director since 1997, was disabled in a car accident at 17 and is now a wheelchair user. The Axis website provides a long list of Judith's achievements and recognition in the US dance sector ([www.axisdance.org/judith-smith](http://www.axisdance.org/judith-smith)); since 2008, she has also worked with California State University East Bay to develop a degree program in Integrated Dance and in 2014 received an Isadora Duncan Dance Award for Sustained Achievement.

Smith was also the subject of one of four extended oral history interviews of American professional artists with a disability recorded in the 2004

13. 'Mixed ability dance company' is the term used in the National Arts & Disability Center's online database of arts and disability organisations (<http://www.semel.ucla.edu/nadc/resources>).

NEA-funded Artists with Disabilities Oral History Project, an interview which documents, in detail, Smith's own transition from teenage champion equestrian to disability activist and choreographer, as well documenting the evolution of Axis and its underpinning philosophies (Ehrlich, 2006).

For Smith, disability is a central concern of the work of Axis and an identity and theme the company actively claims. She says:

*If we try to be just a dance company, we are missing a vital aspect of our work. There are people who would never see a dance concert, but come because we are part of the disabled community.*

(Male, 2005)

The company's FAQ web page ([www.axisdance.org/faq/](http://www.axisdance.org/faq/)) describes what they do as 'physically integrated dance', also known as 'mixed ability dance' or 'adaptive dance', and explains that when first formed, "People were confused about whether we were doing 'art' or therapy" and that "some people still don't consider what we do to be real dance." Axis came to popular attention in the US with its two appearances on the hit television series, *So You Think You Can Dance* in 2011 and 2012 and has worked with a number of high profile choreographers including Marc Brew and Bill T. Jones (Passmore, 2012).

Unlike Axis, Atlanta's Full Radius Dance Company (established in 1990) and New York's Heidi Latsky Dance (founded in 2001) are not disability-led companies, but are widely recognised for their achievements in integrated dance and both have toured works nationally and internationally.

Originally known as Dance Force, and beginning as a traditional dance company for non-disabled dancers, Full Radius has been working with dancers with physical disabilities since 1993. The company also has an outreach program, offering dance intensives and masterclasses, teacher training and arts-based disability awareness training to schools. Although the vast majority of its works do not directly address disability, Artistic Director and founder Douglas Scott has said that "a wonderful offshoot of what we're doing is art for social change. We are making a political statement every time we take the stage" (Renault, 2013).

The mission statement on the Heidi Latsky Dance website ([www.heidilatskydance.com/mission](http://www.heidilatskydance.com/mission)) firmly positions the company within the field of contemporary dance and makes no mention of disability. However, it does point to the company's intention to challenge traditional notions of beauty and ability through works performed by a diverse range of performers:

*The mission of Heidi Latsky Dance is to redefine beauty and virtuosity through performance and discourse, using performers with unique attributes to bring rigorous, passionate and provocative contemporary dance to diverse audiences.*

Heidi Latsky came to international prominence in the arts and disability sector with her *GIMP Project* ([www.heidilatskydance.com/gimp-project/](http://www.heidilatskydance.com/gimp-project/)), a series of dance works and outreach programs



which developed from a 2006 commission from the late Lisa Bufano, a bilateral amputee who often used prosthetics and props in her works. *GIMP*, which was promoted and recognised as “an edgy stereotype-shattering performance” (FISA Foundation, 2011) toured for years; in 2014 Richard Move’s documentary on the project, *GIMP: the documentary*, premiered at Lincoln Center’s Dance on Camera Festival in New York<sup>14</sup>.

In her artist statement on her own website (<http://alicesheppard.com/artist-statement>), Alice Sheppard—a dancer and wheelchair user who trained and worked with Axis and who has also performed with New York’s Infinity Dance Theater and Full

Radius—articulates in detail the philosophy and aesthetic that underpins her artistic practice while at the same time embracing the power of this practice to challenge prevailing perceptions of disability:

*My work emphasizes the movement that arises from my particular physicality and from my curiosity about line, form, and dance craft. I am passionate about virtuosity, strength, simplicity, and beauty. I am drawn to the moments when my personal aesthetics collide with societal and social norms.*

The US also has a number of supported visual arts studio working predominantly with

artists with developmental disabilities. The websites of these studios reveal that, like their British and Australian counterparts, each of them, to a greater or lesser degree, now promote the work of their artists as a legitimate part of contemporary arts practice, while at the same time acknowledging the contribution their programs make to community connection and social inclusion for their artists. These include: NIAD Art Center (Nurturing Independence through Artistic Development) in Richmond California; Creativity Explored in San Francisco; Creative Growth in Oakland, California, and Art Enables in Washington D.C.

14. For an excerpt from the film: <https://vimeo.com/82745767>



The GIMP Project, Heidi Latsky Dance. Photo: Darial Sneed

# Australia

In Australia, in comparison to the UK and the US, there is little published discussion about, or analysis of, the aesthetic and creative processes of disability arts practitioners, with the notable exception of the acclaimed theatre company Back to Back, arguably the most successful disability arts company in Australia, with an impressive record of well received international tours and a host of awards for their productions.

Back to Back is a Geelong-based theatre ensemble whose performers are described as 'perceived to have intellectual disabilities' (Arts Victoria, 2014), a description which immediately challenges notions and perceptions of disability. Established in 1987 during the era of de-institutionalisation of people with a disability, the company grew from a series of theatre workshops to engage people with a disability, led by artists working with what Back to Back's Artistic Director, Bruce Gladwin, has called 'the "outsider" aesthetic' (Arts Victoria, 2014). Gladwin explains the transition of the company from a community engagement initiative in the 80s to an internationally renowned theatre company in this way:

*I think in the company's early history, the company would have been seen more [by the media] as being a benevolent organisation that is doing something for the welfare of people with disabilities. Increasingly, the company's being seen as having an artistic voice that is creditable and making interesting work ... just a group of actors trying to make fantastic art.'*

(Arts Victoria, 2014)



The company's own website (<http://backtobacktheatre.com/about/publications-interviews/>) provides an impressive list of academic publications and articles analysing and discussing the intentions and aesthetics of its productions including the recently published monograph, *We're people who do shows: Back to Back Theatre Performance, Politics, Visibility* (Eckersall & Grehan, 2013).

An examination of reviews of the company's most recent and much lauded production, *Ganesh and the Third Reich*, reveals the degree to which this company is recognised internationally as a significant contributor to contemporary theatre.

*Ganesh and the Third Reich* was developed as a co-production with Malthouse Theatre for the 2011 Melbourne Festival and took away the Melbourne Festival Age Critics Award that year. Over the next three years, the company toured the production internationally, to the US, Canada, Britain and Europe—tours which resulted in further awards and widespread critical recognition (for a full list of touring destinations and awards for the production, see <http://backtobacktheatre.com/about/performance-awards-history/>).

Reviews of *Ganesh* frequently refer to the challenging and confrontational nature of the piece (Gardner, 2014; Hoyle, 2014) and the way it makes audiences unsettled or uncomfortable. (Woodhead, 2011; Crawley, 2014; Bailey, 2011). Reviewers comment that the show forces audiences to question both the nature of theatre (because the company comprises actors with intellectual disabilities) and the ethics of the issues and representations they are viewing on stage—a reaction the company intended to provoke<sup>15</sup>. Despite this discomfort, the reviews are almost universally positive, ranging from *The Age's* "courageous, confronting, intelligent and magisterially considered" (Woodhead, 2011) to the five star review in the *New York Times*, "vital, senses-sharpening tonic for theatergoers who feel they've seen it all" (Brantley, 2013).

It is also pertinent to note the level of financial support Back to Back received from the Australian and Victorian government and philanthropic sources<sup>16</sup> which allowed them to realise and tour this high quality production—a level of support for the company that has been in evidence for many years and which has not been the experience of other Australian disability arts companies.

As previously stated, most available literature on the work of other Australian disability arts companies and artists with a disability comes from their own websites or from print and online reviews of their work. While there is some reference to the creative process in this literature, very little of this published Australian material supports or articulates the creative case for inclusive arts practice. What follows

15. The Back to Back web page about the production states that the show: "invites us to examine who has the right to tell a story and who has the right to be heard. It explores our complicity in creating and dismantling the world, human possibility and hope" and that it forces both the actors and audience to "question the ethics of cultural appropriation" (<http://backtobacktheatre.com/projects/ganesh/>).

16. On the same web page as above, Back to Back lists the following financial supporters of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*: Australia Council; Arts Victoria; City of Melbourne; Sidney Myer Fund; Keir Foundation, 2009 Kit Denton Fellowship; National Theatre Studio (London); Geelong Performing Arts Centre and Goethe-Institut (Melbourne).





Icon I, 2012, Kristy Sweeney

are some examples of other exceptional work in the field of inclusive arts in Australia, based on published documents.

Gaelle Mellis's 2012 production for Vitalstatistix, *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk*, was widely acknowledged as breaking new ground in inclusive theatre practice as a multisensory theatrical event led by an artist with a disability. It was a collaborative performance featuring an outstanding cast of women with a disability which incorporated Auslan, audio description, captioning, animations, pre-show tours and other accessibility features into the core aesthetic of the work.

Speaking about the production in *The Australian* newspaper, Mellis discussed the challenges of working as an artist with a disability in Australia, compared to the more receptive environment for disability arts in the UK:

*We've got a lot of fantastic Australian artists with disability that are working overseas because they can't get work in this country, particularly in performing arts and dance ... A lot of artists with disability (in Britain) are crossing over into the mainstream as well.*

(Cormack, 2012)

In 2013, Mellis was awarded one of the Australia Council's inaugural Fellowships for Outstanding Artists.

In a 2012 *Ramp Up* interview (Pascale, 2012), Mellis explained how working with the UK's Graeae Theatre Company, as part of her Churchill Fellowship, had opened her eyes to new ways of incorporating disability access into the aesthetics of a performance:



*The idea was you take those access elements like audio descriptions, captioning sign language and you put them in to the work so the work becomes accessible to everybody and so that people with sensory impairments in particular can come to any show they want ... You can incorporate it into the work and it can add to the work. It can add texture and layers and different experiences.*

Similarly, Janice Florence, co-founder and artistic director of Melbourne's disability-led inclusive dance company, Weave Movement Theatre, acknowledges on the company's website (<http://weavemovementtheatre.com.au/>) and elsewhere (Slightly.net, n.d.) the impact on her practice of a residency in 1996 with Candoco in the UK. Weave's stated aim of producing work that "subverts audience's expectations and challenges conventional ways of seeing dance and disability" through a combination of "dance, physical theatre, spoken word and humour" very much echoes Candoco's practice.

Restless Dance Theatre works with artists with and without a disability and describe themselves as an integrated dance company where the art is made by young people for a diverse audience ([www.restlessdance.org/who](http://www.restlessdance.org/who)). Led by Artistic Director Michelle Ryan (who identifies as a person with a disability), the company's work has been described as "demonstrating enduring excellence and global impact" and the "backbone of disability arts in Australia" (Hickey-Moody, 2011). Many of Restless's works are drawn from the autobiographical experiences of the performers or creative team, and the company uses both dramatic performance and physical metaphors to unify the work on stage (Thompson, 2014).

Other Australian arts and disability companies working innovatively in performance include the Australian Theatre of the Deaf, Rawcus, No Strings Attached and Tutti Arts.

Occasionally, the above Australian disability arts companies (particularly Back to Back) have been included as part of a mainstream festival or programming of mainstream arts organisations (including Melbourne and/or Adelaide Festivals, Sydney Opera House, Arts Centre Melbourne), however, research into past programs and websites of Australian arts festivals and venues reveals that it is more common for these companies to be included in independent festivals, such as Fringe, or to be programmed by small independent venues such as La Mama and Dancehouse in Melbourne or Carriageworks in Sydney.

Established in 1974, Arts Access Victoria (AAV) historically focused on the delivery of arts programs to provide respite for people with a disability and their carers. Such respite arts programs are still provided by AAV (for example, the visual and performing arts weekly programs *Get Out!* and *Way Out West*) but in the past decade the organisation has moved increasingly into the delivery of programs where talented artists with a disability can pursue a professional arts practice in a supported environment, such as its Pathways professional development program or through studio programs like *Satellite*, based at the Monash Gallery of Art.

Arts Project Australia is another long-running Melbourne arts and disability organisation providing a unique supported studio environment for visual artists with an intellectual disability. While the studio seems to fit neatly into this review's 'arts and disability' category, as defined by Perring and Calvert ("facilitated artistic collaboration between people with a disability and people with no disability") the website of this organisation also indicates a commitment to: "Promoting the work as integral to the broad spectrum of contemporary art" and ensuring that "Work is promoted on its aesthetic and artistic merits amongst the wider arts community, and many of the artists enjoy participation in mainstream exhibitions and events" (Arts Project Australia, n.d.).

Despite the commitment of both Arts Access Victoria and Arts Project Australia to presenting the work of their artists as part of wider contemporary arts practice, none of their online or hard copy publications attempt to articulate or discuss in any depth the aesthetic or creative case for inclusive arts practice—the exception being, perhaps, the Arts Access Victoria online publication, *Living Art!*, edited by Akash Temple (<http://artsaccess.com.au/news/livingart/living-art-3-simple-text/>), which offers an extensive range of interviews with Australian and international artists with a disability discussing their creative practice.

Programs like *Write-ability* at Writers Victoria (also an Arts Access Victoria initiative), *ArtLife* at Footscray Community Arts Centre or Queensland's Diversity Officer initiative (a position funded by the Australia Council to work across the major Queensland performing arts

companies advising on diversity, access and inclusion) indicate a small but growing culture of mainstream Australian arts companies embracing accessible, inclusive programming and practices.

Unlike the UK, Australia currently lacks a regular platform or funding support to showcase to the wider public art produced by Australian artists with a disability, either within Australia or overseas. Since 2007, Accessible Arts New South Wales has delivered *Arts Activated*, a

national conference about arts and disability held every two years in Sydney, an initiative firmly aimed at, and attended by, artists and arts workers within the Australian arts and disability sector.

The 2014 conference was described as "the leading arts and disability conference in Australia [which] showcased the accomplishments of people with disability, as artists, leaders, audience and advocates" (Arts Activated, 2014). Despite this claim, the bulk of the 2014



Arts Project Australia artist Anthony Romagnano. Photo: Penny Hunt



conference program (Accessible Arts, 2014) comprised professional development workshops and discussions on arts and disability rather than providing an opportunity to showcase the work of the sector to the public or the wider arts sector.

Launched in 1998, Adelaide's *High Beam* Festival claimed to be Australasia's first international disability arts festival (Doyle, 2013); High Beam mounted its last festival in 2004.

Between 2001 and 2009, the *Art of Difference* Festivals at Gasworks Arts Park in Melbourne did regularly present a public program of performances, exhibitions, workshops and discussions featuring Australian and international artists with a disability, Deaf artists and inclusive arts companies. However, due to lack of funding, the last festival was held in March 2009.

Established in 1997, the annual *Awakenings* Festival in Horsham Victoria, which promotes itself as an "all-abilities" festival, has been the only regular regional arts and disability festival of note in Australia. However, by 2012 the festival organisers, Wimmera Uniting Care, reported difficulties with funding and 'community fatigue' (Lawson, 2012); as a consequence, *Awakenings* was suspended for a year and is now delivered as a smaller, local community arts event in partnership with, *Art is...*, another annual community arts festival in Horsham.



# CONCLUSION

This literature review looked at documents relating to the field of inclusive arts practice; discussed the definition and usage of relevant terms; examined historical, social and academic approaches to disability and disability arts practice; considered current and recent American, British and Australian policy relating to arts and disability; and surveyed and compared current artistic practice and key practitioners working in the field of arts and disability in Australia, US and the UK.

In doing so, it hopefully sets the stage for framing a more sophisticated conversation across government and the arts sector about inclusive arts practice as it relates to people with a disability, and how we might begin to think about, document, value and critique the cultural product that is the outcome of this practice.

Through a comparison of historical documents and current artistic manifestos, philosophies, visions and strategic plans, the research established that there are a number of leading Victorian arts and disability organisations (Arts Access Victoria, Back to Back Theatre and Arts Project Australia) which now display a shift away from their original founding purpose of providing arts programs purely for respite or therapeutic purposes. Such organisations once strongly embraced a social inclusion agenda and are now more commonly expressing their primary purpose as the pursuit of creative excellence through inclusive arts practice<sup>17</sup>—a shift which is also, to an extent, reflected in recent developments in the vocabulary and perspectives of Australian arts funding bodies.

Whilst the intrinsic benefit of arts participation for people with a disability is not a key focus of this research, the review of the literature in this area has provided critical evidence of the origins of many of the contemporary models for arts and disability and explains why, in the fields of disability and the arts, the social inclusion agenda is still a key driver for many organisations and artists and has, until recently, dominated funding policy agendas.

The literature revealed how government disability policy has historically focussed on assimilation and integration and may have restricted the capacity of people with a disability to play an active part in the arts and creative industries. Also evidenced in the review was the lack of universally-agreed definitions for key terms that frame the arts and disability sector, terms such as ‘inclusive arts practice’, ‘arts and disability’ and ‘disability arts’.

In addition, the review also revealed that in the field of what we are calling ‘inclusive arts practice’, the UK is clearly a world leader in championing the creative case for disability arts, with Australia’s disability arts sector—funders and arts companies/practitioners alike—influenced by, and modelling, UK initiatives.

The review uncovered extensive evidence of the success of Britain’s *Unlimited* commissions and festivals in raising the public profiles, creative confidence and skills-base of UK artists with a disability, and in developing international audiences for the art they produce. It also established that Australia currently lacks a regular national platform to showcase Australian disability arts to the wider public.

One aim of this review was to identify significant gaps in research related to the creative case for inclusive arts practice in Australia.

17. It is interesting to note that in the Arts Victoria Organisations Investment Program 2014-2016, arts companies applying for funding were asked to respond to an assessment framework that had two differentiated pillars: artistic excellence and social benefits. Companies needed to operate in both areas and provide outcomes that met both criteria, but the framework did not appear to recognize that these goals could potentially have interdependent outcomes.



The review clearly establishes that:

- the disability arts movement in Australia has not been adequately documented, researched, evidenced or supported.
- with the exception of Back to Back Theatre, there is very limited critical review or scholarly review/ reflection on companies and/or artists in the arts and disability field in Australia. Even more limited is published critical thinking around how arts and disability practice might innovate contemporary creative practice in Australia and potentially create new models of making, receiving and distributing cultural product.
- the increased visibility of some Australian arts and disability companies, such as Back to Back Theatre and Rawcus, in mainstream arts contexts has not yet led to a corresponding growth in the critical discourse that surrounds the creative output and aesthetic strategies of other Australian companies and artists operating in the arts and disability sector.
- there is also a lack of documentation around the methodological approach to creation of new work by Australian arts practitioners with a disability.

These findings mean that Australia and its artists with a disability do not have access to the narrative and history of our own disability arts culture—a reality that engenders a lack of understanding about how overt political engagement through art which is informed and shaped by lived experiences of disability has challenged the existing artistic terrain and resulted in new creative practices that have shifted the discursive margins around arts and disability. It follows then, that there is little to no available literature on the subversive potential and impact on socio-political understandings of disability that can be made, or has been made, by artists with a disability in Australia.

The framework we present in this review should not be understood as a ‘progressive’ history with the creative case for inclusive arts practice as the pinnacle or logical endpoint of the history. Our research suggests there is a strong interrelationship between the benefits and conditions of making a creative case for inclusive arts and the social case for the practice, which to a greater extent, is already recognised by both the academy and the arts industry.

Overall, there is evidence of a growing culture of inclusive arts practice across Australia, as it relates to people with disability, and the existence of creative and strategic initiatives that would suggest that this practice is increasingly recognised as integral to the development of a diverse creative landscape. For example, the recent policy shifts at the Australia Council for the Arts, which proactively and specifically support artists with a disability. It is too soon to evaluate the impact on the wider arts sector of this policy shift, which prioritises creative excellence in disability arts above community inclusion, but it is a strong indicator of a growing recognition within government and the arts sector of the contribution artists with a disability can make to Australia’s artistic practice and its cultural and creative output.

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# Disability Arts Organisations

- **Accessible Arts**  
<http://www.aarts.net.au>
- **Art Enables**  
<http://www.art-enables.org>
- **Arts Access Australia**  
<http://www.artsaccessaustralia.org>
- **Arts Access Victoria**  
[www.artsaccess.com.au](http://www.artsaccess.com.au)
- **Arts Project Australia**  
<http://www.artsproject.org.au>
- **Attenborough Arts Centre (formerly Embrace Arts), UK**  
<http://www2.le.ac.uk/hosted/embracearts>
- **Australian Theatre of the Deaf**  
<http://artsaccess.com.au/deaf-arts-network/atod/about-atod>
- **Axis Dance Company, US**  
<http://axisdance.org>
- **Back to Back Theatre**  
<http://backtobacktheatre.com>
- **The British Paraorchestra, UK**  
[www.paraorchestra.co.uk](http://www.paraorchestra.co.uk)
- **Candoco Dance Company, UK**  
<http://www.candoco.co.uk>
- **Chickenshed, UK**  
<http://www.chickenshed.org.uk>
- **Creative Growth, US**  
<http://creativegrowth.org>
- **Creativity Explored, US**  
<http://www.creativityexplored.org>
- **Culture! Disability! Talent!, US**  
[www.culturedisabilitytalent.org](http://www.culturedisabilitytalent.org)
- **DaDaFest, Liverpool, UK**  
<http://www.dadafest.co.uk>
- **Disability Arts International, UK**  
<http://www.disabilityartsinternational.org>
- **Deaf West Theatre, US**  
<http://www.deafwest.org>
- **Footscray Community Arts Centre**  
<http://footscrayarts.com/>
- **Graeae Theatre Company, UK**  
<http://www.graeae.org>
- **Heidi Latsky Dance**  
<http://heidilatskydance.com>
- **International Inclusive Arts Network**  
[www.inclusiveartsnetwork.com](http://www.inclusiveartsnetwork.com)

- **Lung Ha Theatre Company, UK**  
<http://www.lunghas.co.uk/>
- **Mind the Gap, UK**  
<http://www.mind-the-gap.org.uk>
- **Nanjing Outsider Art Center, China**  
<http://outsiderartchina.org/en/content.asp?id=352>
- **National Arts and Disability Center, US**  
<http://www.semel.ucla.edu/nadc>
- **NIAD Art Center, US**  
[www.niadapt.org](http://www.niadapt.org)
- **No Strings Attached - Theatre of Disability**  
<http://www.nostringsattached.org.au>
- **Octapod**  
<http://octapod.org/program/access>
- **Oily Cart, UK**  
<http://www.oilycart.org.uk>
- **The Other Film Festival**  
[www.otherfilmfestival.com.au](http://www.otherfilmfestival.com.au)
- **Project Ability, UK**  
<http://www.project-ability.co.uk>
- **Rawcus**  
<http://rawcus.org.au/>
- **Restless Dance Theatre**  
<http://restlessdance.org>
- **Rocket Artists, UK**  
<http://www.rocketartists.co.uk>
- **Satellite**  
<http://artsaccess.com.au/artistic-program/satellite>
- **Shape Arts, UK**  
<https://www.shapearts.org.uk>
- **St Martin's Youth Theatre**  
<http://stmartinyouth.com.au/access/inclusive-theatre-practice>
- **Studio Artes**  
<http://www.studioartes.com.au>
- **Take Up Thy Bed & Walk (project)**  
<http://takeupthybed.org>
- **Theater Breaking through Barriers, US**  
<http://www.tbtb.org/aboutus.html>
- **Tutti Arts**  
<http://tutti.org.au>
- **Unlimited, UK**  
<http://weareunlimited.org.uk>
- **VSA and Accessibility at The Kennedy Center, US**  
<http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa>
- **Weave Movement Theatre**  
<http://weavemovementtheatre.com.au>

# Artists with disability

- **Alice Sheppard, US dancer**  
<http://alicesheppard.com>
- **Caroline Bowditch**  
<http://www.carolinebowditch.com>
- **Julie McNamara**  
<http://www.juliemc.com>
- **Mat Fraser**  
<http://matfraser.co.uk>
- **Paul Cummins**  
<http://www.paulcumminsceramics.com>
- **Yinka Shonibare**  
<http://www.yinkashonibaremb.com>







ARTS ACCESS VICTORIA

# **BEYOND ACCESS**

**THE CREATIVE CASE**

**FOR INCLUSIVE**

**ARTS PRACTICE**

LITERATURE REVIEW