

On Our Terms

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1. Where we are now: ablebodied arts

There is a joke amongst disabled people that non-disabled people listen to music, do the gardening, hold down jobs, but disabled people do music therapy, horticultural therapy, occupational therapy. Where disabled people are involved, almost every activity of life seems to have to be justified in terms of its medical and therapeutic benefits.

This approach is based on a couple of engrained assumptions about disability. Disability is largely regarded in medical terms, as a body or mind gone 'wrong'. Lack of ablebodiedness is considered to be a personal tragedy, the overriding feature of disabled people's lives and one which we would gladly escape given the opportunity. Encounters with professionals are dominated by medical and therapeutic interventions designed to return us to ablebodiedness or to assist our physical and psychological 'adjustment' to personal limitations.

This perspective is so prevalent that it has spread far beyond medical, health and welfare agencies to influence fundamentally most people's approaches to disabled people. When a medical condition is taken as central to disabled people's lives, everything is tinged with therapeutic objectives. The approach to disabled people of the arts community does not escape this conditioning. This issue of *Women's Art*, for example, groups together art, health and disability, and emphasises the role of art therapy.

Art therapy, for many disabled people, becomes the only involvement in the arts, and gives rise to a different experience of the arts from that of non-disabled people. It is a narrow experience focusing on alleviating medical conditions. It is largely controlled by non-disabled 'experts' and frequently run in segregated settings such as adult training centres, hospitals and 'special' workshops. These overtones of differentness and specialism inhibit much of the mainstream arts community from working to include disabled people and thus perpetuate a whole cycle of exclusion and presumption.

Underlying this whole approach is the fact that no account has been taken of disabled people's own understandings of disability or priorities for the arts. Asking us what we think about being disabled generally produces an entirely different perspective which has major repercussions for arts involvement.

Being disabled can be divided into two distinct strands: impairment and disability. For most

disabled people, individual medical conditions, regardless of whether they are physical, sensory, learning or emotional, are of relative unimportance. What is important is that we all live in a society organised in a way which routinely excludes people who have impairments. We are dis-abled not by impairment but by a range of discriminatory practices which remove or restrict our abilities and limit our opportunities. Disability works against people with impairments in the same way as sexism works against women.

The key value of this interpretation is that it separates the internal (impairment) and external (disability) causes of disadvantage. It shows that exclusion is not an inevitable part of having an impairment, but is socially-created and can therefore be socially-changed. It shifts the focus from 'adjusting' to impairment, onto bringing an end to discrimination.

This leads to a different understanding of all areas of disabled people's lives, the arts included. Art therapy is applied arbitrarily to disabled people and has often been used, less to benefit disabled people, and more to minimise disruption to the able-bodied world. Art therapy can be of immense value to some disabled people, as it is to some non-disabled people, but it has no intrinsic link to disability and offers no solution to the problem as disabled people perceive it.

The real problem is disabled people's exclusion from the many areas of social life. The overwhelming priority for disabled people is no different from that of non-disabled people. We want access to the same range of opportunities to participate in and contribute to the society in which we live. Our primary interest in the arts is no different from that of non-disabled people: put simply, we want to create art. We want full and equal access to all facets of art: art for leisure, art for employment, art for education; art for self-development, art for cultural and political statement and art for sheer enjoyment.

2. Where we want to be: integration v disability arts

Disabled people's main aim may be just to create art, but for many the current scale of discrimination makes that goal unreachable. We find our arts opportunities restricted at all levels, from lack of physical access to arts facilities and regulations which bar us from training courses, to our invisibility and misrepresentation in the images produced and promoted. The ultimate aim may be the same as non-disabled people's but until discrimination is removed we find much of our creativity must be redirected towards achieving the most basic access.

There are different opinions as to how those rights are best achieved. Much of the focus has so far been on integration, instigated predominantly by non-disabled people, as a means for all sections of the community to be involved on an equal basis, in a way which makes no differentiation between disabled and non-disabled participants. Although the intention of this approach is genuine, in practice it often transmutes into another form of

exclusion and discrimination.

The problem arises primarily from the desire to treat all participants similarly. It overlooks the fact that people with impairments have different needs from people without impairments, and the uniformity it introduces means that individuals' specific needs and characteristics often go unrecognised. This not only restricts physical access, but can also undermine personal experiences and priorities which differ from the majority. Discrimination against disabled people, in the arts or other areas of life, creates experiences, needs and priorities which are qualitatively different from those of non-disabled people. Not only may access to training and development opportunities have been restricted, but the focus of disabled people's creative work may differ. Unquestioningly treating disabled and non-disabled people the same may obstruct disabled people's access to recreational, training, employment, funding and promotion opportunities.

Overall, this approach risks a half-way integration in which disabled people are 'invited in' to participate on non-disabled people's terms. Truly-integrated arts is not simply about providing suitable facilities, but about involving disabled people as equals at all levels of decision-making and practice, and recognising the experience of disability throughout the arts structure.

The problem underlying all of this is the tendency either to group people rigidly on arbitrary features, such as impairment, or to treat people uniformly. In reality, of course, we need to set up structures which allow us all to be our selves. Once again, this approach to involving disabled people in the arts is flawed primarily because disabled people have not been consulted about what is wanted. Asking disabled people produces a quite different approach.

The emergence of an international movement of disabled people over the past decade has enabled millions of disabled people to pool experiences and to find new ways of working towards a form of true-integration in all aspects of life. More recently, in an offshoot of that movement, the disability arts movement has combined these new ideas with an interest in the arts, for the dual purpose of achieving true-integration and using the arts as a medium to promote its campaigns.

Disability arts belongs to disabled people allowing the creation of art to be paramount, without the more usual digression into issues of inaccessibility.

Much of the art we produce is qualitatively different from that of non-disabled people. At its most distinct, it includes work which could not physically be produced by a non-disabled person (for example, drawing as seen by someone with a specific visual impairment, or using muscle spasm to create a particular photographic quality). Disability arts includes art which directly represents the experience of disability, as well as documenting and

promoting disability rights campaigns. It also includes and promotes work produced simply by people defining themselves as disabled. By reflecting all the aspects of disabled people's lives, new images of disability are created. These serve to provide disabled people with a positive cultural identity and impetus for continued campaigning, as well as communicating to the non-disabled arts and general community what being disabled is really about.

This separation from the mainstream arts community is the first stage towards true-integration. In Britain, the National Disability Arts Forum and the number of regional and local forums are expanding rapidly. These create a meeting point where, alongside developing a new arts genre, issues of importance to disabled people can be debated and the skills necessary to achieve equality can be practised.

Disability arts is a circuitous route to the inclusion of disabled people in mainstream arts and wider society. However, whilst other approaches offer superficial change, Disability arts carries the possibility of triggering the kind of fundamental change in mainstream arts that is vital for true-integration. As the worker of one disability arts forum says:

"There's integration on anyone's terms and there's integration on our terms, and on our terms we'll get it right. We're using the arts to integrate disabled people and, hopefully, at the end of it, we'll be able to put disability arts in a little glass case and say 'there it is, we don't need it anymore', because we're completely integrated into the community."

3. How we want to get there: changing roles

Making fundamental changes to the way the arts are structured demands fundamental change to the roles of those people participating. This is true for disabled people as well as non-disabled people.

The therapeutic approach has tended to cast disabled people in very passive roles, initiated and controlled by non-disabled professionals. We are needing to learn active roles, to choose what we want and how to achieve it. Whilst making choices sounds simple, constant discrimination or extreme segregation has removed from many disabled people the skills needed to make even basic decisions. Disabled people meet substantial resistance to many choices, and so a range of communication, assertiveness and negotiation skills is needed.

We are also needing to learn to work within the disability community. Many disabled people are wary of being with other disabled people because this is associated with disempowering situations of segregation and isolation. We need to recognise that coming together through choice gives us a positive identity and the collective power to create change. Interwoven with all of this is the need for disabled people to create a new relationship of equality with non-disabled people.

Whilst disabled people need to learn the opposite of traditional roles, non-disabled people need to adopt altogether new roles, away from direction and towards facilitation. Relative to disabled people, it is non-disabled people who hold the social and economic resources, and ways need to be found to facilitate equitable access to them. Facilitation means taking responsibility for making the fundamental changes necessary for true-integration, whilst accepting the direction for that change from disabled people. This can only happen through full consultation with disabled people's own organisations. Are there problems with the current structure? What do disabled people need and want changed? How do disabled people wish to be involved? Do non-disabled people have a role in supporting and promoting disability arts?

True-integration involves facilitating disabled people's representation throughout an organisation and facilitating full access so that all resources can be used on equal terms with non-disabled people. It also means ensuring that the full inclusion of disabled people is integral to an organisation's structure, rather than a peripheral concern easily surrendered to other interests. Ten fairly random examples of facilitation in practice include:

- Ensuring full physical access to facilities is not compromised because non-disabled people's arts take precedence
- Developing funding criteria which are sufficiently flexible to support qualitatively-different or less established arts
- Employing disabled artists, workshop leaders, etc
- Making information available in print, on tape and in Braille
- Informing people about resources and services
- Providing sign language interpreters and audio descriptions
- Introducing positive action measures to redress imbalances in staffing, participants, trainees, etc
- Instating ticket concessions which reflect many disabled people's lower incomes
- Agreeing flexible working hours and conditions to accommodate health and other needs
- Compiling exhibition and performance programmes which represent disabled people's perspectives and priorities

True-integration rests on non-disabled people ensuring their arts practice is fully and equally accessible to disabled people ready for as-and-when we choose to become involved.

4. Conclusion: on our terms

So much remains to be done if we are to achieve true-integration in the arts and wider society. At the same time, we are now quite possibly reaching our greatest potential for that change. As more disability arts forums emerge and the involvement of disabled people and non-disabled allies increases, this is the most rapidly shifting and most exciting time to be working towards this aim.

The priority of the disability arts movement is the full and equal inclusion of disabled people in the arts and wider society. However, our work carries immense potential, even more far-reaching than our own lives. Ultimately we are campaigning to be allowed to be our selves, with all our differences and similarities, and such an aim can only be to the advantage of us all.