

# Lights... Camera... Attitude!

## Introducing Disability Arts and Culture

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## **Executive Summary:**

### **What is Disability Arts and Culture?**

It is no secret that disability has been grossly misrepresented in popular culture, as it has often been used metaphorically to symbolize criminality, tragedy, pity, fear, charity and ridicule. Thus, we are faced with the challenge of countering these negative constructions and redefining disability as a valued human condition. It is here that the political and cultural significance of Disability Arts and Culture emerges, as disabled artists and performers are empowered to challenge cultural misrepresentation and reshape the disability narrative. As such, Disability Arts and Culture marks the growing political power of disabled people over their narratives, as disabled artists use it to counter cultural misrepresentation, establish disability as a valued human condition, shift control to disabled people so they may shape their narratives and bring this disability controlled narrative to wider audiences.

### **How Extensive is Disability Arts and Culture**

Although the Disability Arts and Culture movement remains young in Canada there are two notable organizations facilitating its growth: Ryerson Universities' Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education, and The Society for Disability Arts and Culture. Individual artists, however, continue to find it difficult to advance in the current climate. From the growth of the more developed Disability Arts and Culture movement in the U.K., we learned that the movement must be led by disabled artists and arts groups, and that support must be specifically allocated for the growth of this movement. For example, in the U.K., the Arts Council has introduced: an Arts and Disability monitoring committee; an Arts and Disability officer; an Arts and Disability directory; increased and specific funding for individual artists and organizations to raise the visibility of Disability and Deaf Arts and Culture; and a web site linking Disabled artists to various supports.

### **Snapshots From an Emerging Field**

A sampling of Disability Arts and Culture through various media including photography, theatre, performance, dance, autobiography and life writing, poetry, humour, music, and visual arts, illustrates the cultural, educational, and political significance of this movement. These works and the artists who produce them highlight issues of oppression, social constructions of the body, and the quest to build a disability identity grounded in pride by using their work to challenge traditional discourses of disability. This building of culture uniquely contributes to a broader rights movement by packaging issues in

innovative and accessible ways, and giving audiences who may not otherwise engage with these issues the opportunity to explore a radical discourse on disability.

### **How do Audiences Respond?**

Questions of the interaction between audience and performer and the extent to which Disability Arts and Culture influences attitudes toward disabled people remain at this time relatively unexplored. Reflections on a performance evening at Ryerson, solicited from approximately seventy students, comprise a rich base for deepening understanding of this terrain. Thematically, these responses highlight six important effects: creating a new point of entry; engaging emotions; seeing the political; challenging dominant narratives; celebrating epiphanies; and complexifying debates. We observe that a major strength of Disability Arts and Culture lies in countering the dominant discourse of disability. Not coincidentally, audience accounts express strongly that to witness a performance in this genre is to be challenged and made uncomfortable as much as it is to be affirmed and uplifted. What this suggests is that “changing attitudes” is not a simple enlightenment arising from new and better information. Consciousness-raising about a group of people so negatively situated with respect to mainstream culture can be troubling and difficult work. Disability Arts and Culture is here at its most politically potent. We conclude that as the Disability Arts movement grows and matures, audiences must also become increasingly sophisticated in understanding the complexities of what is being enacted. In other words, because these performances are reciprocal, both sides of the relation require attention and support.

### **Addressing Accessibility**

Issues of accessibility are paramount in the Disability Arts and Culture movement. It is important to move our understanding of accessibility beyond structural barriers to highlight the many ways in which attitudinal and systemic barriers prevent disabled artists from producing and/or showcasing their work. To enhance opportunities for disabled artists we must address a range of issues including access to quality training; access to artistic work reflecting diversity and thus creating performance opportunities; access to performance spaces; access to funding opportunities that promote Disability Arts and Culture; and dismantling attitudinal barriers that relegate disabled people to the status of consumers rather than producers of art.

## **Conclusion**

The Disability Arts and Culture movement in Canada is at a crucial stage in its development: it has reached a point where it has produced a fair number of artists who have themselves generated considerable momentum. There is very real interest in this movement and its place in a broad equity agenda, yet it is questionable whether the movement has the funding it needs to raise its profile and deliver its message to a broader audience. In order for Disability Arts and Culture to be artistically, culturally, and politically successful it must be given the support it needs to continue to grow and allow its message to reach beyond the disabled community and into the mainstream. Therefore, the question is not whether there is sufficient talent, interest, or resolve on the part of disabled artists, but rather if disabled artists in Canada will have access to the supports necessary to advance this phase of the disability movement.

## **Bibliography**

An extensive list of Canadian and international sources on the Disability Arts and Culture movement.

## **Web Links**

As the Internet is crucial to disabled artists and the Disability Arts and Culture movement worldwide, this is a comprehensive list of links to websites promoting artists, the movement, and other related sites of interest.

## **Introduction**

The worldwide disability movement has entered a new phase. This new dimension of disability activism shifts from an exclusive focus upon the attainment of legal and citizenship rights toward the creation, exploration and advancement of a Disability Culture. This phenomenon began to be recognized as one of the great 'undiscovered' territories of the late twentieth century. Despite the formidable resistance of a dominant culture largely hostile to or ignorant of disability issues, there are pockets of artistic activity in disability communities across Canada and around the world, as disability artists, activists and scholars take control of words, images and ideas that have until now worked against them.

The advantages are both individual and collective. Cultural work creates a context in which individuals can form social identities that counter popular images/narratives of disabled people as tragic, passive and dependent. It is a sphere in which they can contest the medicalization and marginalization of their lives. Cultural work brings people together in ways that enable them to recognize each other, and to challenge their exclusion from society. In that sense, it is an essential route to collective empowerment. As we intend to demonstrate, it also informs, educates and attracts the non-disabled world.

This report has been prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration by the RBC Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education at Ryerson University. It addresses the definition and scope of cultural activity by disabled artists, scholars and activists through a range of media (print, video/film, performance and other) in North America and internationally. Drawing on contemporary and historical works, active as well as documented sources, it creates a synthesis that -- to our knowledge -- does not currently exist elsewhere. It makes explicit the implications of cultural activities for different sectors of life in Ontario but also for the global movement of disabled people towards full inclusion.

In the course of our research, we have discovered that disabled artists in Canada are producing works that challenge and redefine our understanding of the disability experience and the relationship between the disabled community and the arts. These works have been celebrated within the disabled community in the form of lectures, conferences, workshops, cabaret style performances, and arts based research. As the references for this paper demonstrate, the internet is the front line in the dissemination of Disability Arts and Culture. The phenomenal growth of internet communication has unquestionably made this kind of artistic work widely accessible, given disabled artists the opportunity to showcase and share their work, and allowed disabled artists from Canada to tap into and contribute to the global Disability Arts and Culture movement.

## **Art, Culture, and Political Change**

We take as our starting point for this study that art is both a product of culture and a key mechanism by which the politics of a culturally-sanctioned norm are enforced. It is for this reason that we find ourselves confronting a reality in which the voices, experiences, and struggles of disabled people are either strikingly absent, or grossly and stereotypically misrepresented in mainstream art.

The great social movements that converge in the equality seeking discourse of the late 20th and early 21st century – Feminism, Aboriginal Self-Determination, Anti-Racism, Gay Pride, Disability Rights – have distinctively pursued agendas of social rehabilitation and resistance in significant measure through collective, identity-based claims for cultural recognition. The assertion, for example, that "Black is Beautiful" as Iris Marion Young notes, pierces through racist consciousness, "deeply unsettling the received body aesthetic... of racism". Similarly, the celebration of Gay & Lesbian Pride, parodies the dominant culture's exclusionary claim to healthy sexuality and respectable family life. So too, from the arsenals of disability activism, the taunting slogan "Piss on Pity", situates the disabled upstart in ways that destabilize an ableist grasp upon the moral high ground of assumed benevolence.

Perhaps the most robust exploration of this process whereby culturally marginalized groups use artistic means in laying claim to emancipatory cultural identity, can be found in the feminist art movement. We therefore begin with a brief examination of the links between art, culture, politics and feminism, especially as these relate to themes such as accessibility and representation which are of central concern for the Disability Arts movement.

### **The Feminist Art Movement**

God forbid, the taboo seems to be saying, that the content of art be accessible to its audience. And god forbid that content mean something in social terms. Because if it did, that audience might expand, and art itself might escape from the ivory tower, from the clutches of the ruling/corporate class that releases and interprets it to the rest of the world. Art might become "mere propaganda" for *us*, instead of *them* (Lippard, 1995: 139-141).

Simply put, the world of mainstream art has not only been off limits to women and their narratives, but more problematically, art has served to reinforce women's

oppression. The feminist art movement has not only brought these realities to light, but has in fact used artistic expression to confront, educate, and dismantle this oppression. The primary goal of feminist art is not simply to produce art, or to produce art others will consume, but rather to produce art that resonates with experiences and sensibilities otherwise overlooked or negated.

Accordingly, the feminist art movement not only seeks to increase the number of women contributing to the arts, but also to challenge dominant and oppressive representations of the female body. For feminist artists, changing the ways women have been constructed in the arts is essential:

Since the role of the image has been instrumental in our exploitation (through advertising, pornography, and so on), feminist artists have a particular responsibility to create a new image vocabulary that conforms to our own interests... Such 'good propaganda' would be what art should be – a provocation, a new way of seeing and thinking about what goes on around us (Lippard 1995:143).

As we will see in our analysis of Disability Arts, this notion of changing the character of mainstream art, and infusing it with the perspectives, experiences and voices of marginalized groups, is a key strategy in raising consciousness and activating social change and education.

It is important to note that the nature of feminist art itself, or for that matter any art form that advances a social cause, is controversial in the art world itself. Indeed, there is a prevalent belief that 'political art' is *bad art* (Lippard 1995). Such a position, however, clearly begs the question of what is political and what is not, and may proceed from the tenuous foundation that art that reflects the status quo is inherently *apolitical*, whereas art that seeks to disrupt dominant narratives is *political*.

It has been said that “the goal of feminism is *to change the character of art*” (Lippard 1995:172), a task that involves vigorous and dynamic engagement with the audience. The accessible and emotive nature of art permits direct connection with individual audience members, and can induce fundamental changes in consciousness and perceptions.

It is the way art simultaneously engages our imaginations, emotions, bodies, and intellects that make it uniquely suited to affect us more deeply than other, more purely intellectual, ways of conveying ideas... Art can start an encounter with another, and it can destabilize our terms of reference governing that encounter. To this extent it may enhance the possibilities that we will

emerge from that encounter with changed beliefs and attitudes... (Mullen 2000: 128, 132).

Possibly the best known example of feminist art is the [Guerrilla Girls](#), and their quest to make the art world a more accessible place. The Guerrilla Girls are a troupe of feminist artists who use comedy to highlight inequities of the art world (Demo 2000). The members of this group conceal individual identities with the use of gorilla masks, and produce posters, billboards, and literature that directly challenges the under-representation of women artists. For example, in 1989, the Guerrilla Girls used the image of a naked woman in a gorilla mask with her back to the viewer to ask New York museum goers: “[Do women have to be naked to get into the met museum?](#)” (Demo 2000). This clever and sardonic visual question challenged the museum’s under-representation of female artists (less than 5% in the modern art section), yet highlighted the disproportionate number of works portraying naked women (85% of the museum’s nudes) (Demo 2000:10).

What the Guerrilla Girls in particular and feminist art in general seek to do, is to disrupt the exclusionary nature of mainstream art by provoking their audience to link the inequities of the art world to existing – and often invisible – structures of social injustice and discrimination.

## **Disability Culture and the Role of the Arts**

Evidence of pride in ourselves is also provided by the legacy we leave behind. Our cultural development will provide not only a record of an active journey, a passing view of ourselves as we are, but also perspective on the world for future generations to build and develop (Finkelstein & Morrison 1993:5).

Disability representation in mainstream culture has perpetuated many of the prevailing negative stereotypes of disability. Stereotypical characterizations of disabled figures in popular culture have forced the emergence of positive alternatives to such images, thus fuelling the Disability Arts and Culture movement (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare 1999). The emergence of Disability Culture, and the importance of art forms and representations in this culture, must be seen as a natural extension of the disability rights movement, as the Disability Arts movement is essentially about the growing political power of disabled people over their images and narratives.

## **Disability Culture**

Disabled people have demanded a whole new relationship to art and culture (Barnes et al. 1999:205).

The idea of a flourishing Disability Culture seems to perplex many outside of the disability movement, particularly non-disabled "experts" traditionally in control of disability and its representation. Some question the existence and/or legitimacy of such a culture, either because they fail to appreciate the shared oppression of those marginalized by disability, or because they fail to recognize how/why this culture should be celebrated. We take it as given that this culture does exist and indeed is thriving as it confronts the traditional construction of disability and celebrates the unique narratives of disabled people. Our goal here is twofold: to shed light upon Disability Culture and the celebrations that occur around it and because of it; and to create a record that celebrates this culture, its accomplishments, and its potential.

It is important first to briefly ground Disability Culture as a political entity. Longmore (1995) argues that the disability rights movement began in legal and political spheres with the quest for inclusion and equal opportunity. While this civil rights campaign continues for disabled persons, the disability movement, according to Longmore, has now entered a second phase, centering upon the quest for collective identity. In this phase, the primary task is the exploration and creation of a Disability Culture. Art and imagery are imperative in culture, and cannot, without debilitating consequences, be controlled by those outside of the disability rights movement (Wood 1991). For this reason, Disability Culture recognizes the necessity to reclaim and control the ways in which disability images are constructed and delivered.

Although disabled people may not have a culture in the traditional "physical" sense (i.e., being raised for generations among other people with shared physiological characteristics), disabled people certainly have a culture in an "internal" sense (i.e., sharing experiences common to many other disabled people) (Walker 1998). These common "internal" experiences include: knowing what it is to be cast as the "other"; being raised as someone fundamentally different from other members of one's family; being openly talked about as "different"; having others feel sorry for you; and ultimately, "having the gift of being unique in a world of people who don't stand out in a crowd" (Walker 1998:1). Without a doubt, all of these unique, and exclusionary experiences – and the vital survival strategies developed in response to them – form the cornerstone for a shared Disability Culture.

Disability culture presumes a sense of common identity and interests that unite disabled people and separate them from non-disabled counterparts.  
(Barnes & Mercer 2001:522).

## **Disability Arts**

Art is a political tool in that when disabled people represent themselves they are going against the tradition of being represented by others. The political power is in determining not only who we are but who we can be on our own terms and art provides that possibility. Much more than this, art is a tool for celebrating our lives and taking pride in ourselves. Self-representation itself is a human right  
~Mandla Mabila~  
(Barry 2003:4)

Traditionally, people with disabilities have been treated by the arts in a paternalistic way, such that art has been used as therapy, and taken place in segregated, specialized programs (Barnes et. al. 1999). In a manner entirely consistent with the overall social devaluation of disabled people and their contributions, efforts of disabled artists are frequently diminished as purely '*recreational*' in nature. Even more problematically, art-making processes have been appropriated as tools for behavioural modification and/or rehabilitation. For the purposes of this study it is important to recognize that domain of Disability Art is fundamentally different from – and, in some cases, diametrically opposed to – the domain of art therapy. Under medical or therapeutic scrutiny, art loses its political and cultural edge. Indeed, although the artistic process has therapeutic effects for all, when these effects are seen as primary ones for disabled people, artistic products are robbed of their legitimacy and power in critiquing culture and social meanings. In addition, putting such constraints on work created by disabled artists individualizes the artistic process and detaches it from a broader Disability Culture. The therapeutic domain must therefore be problematized as it serves as yet another means by which disability is segregated and isolated from the broader social and cultural world. This segregation, and the policing of disabled art, is exactly the kind of barrier Disability Arts and Culture is fighting against. Disability Arts and Culture aims not to make the individual better, but rather to address what is wrong in broader society; in essence “curing” the social misconceptions and inequities that have historically policed and harmed disabled people.

Since the 1980's there appears to have been a marked increase in works produced by disabled artists (Barnes & Mercer 2001). Disability Culture has grown and become more organized and political, with disabled artists legitimated as cultural contributors, with new subject matter and media entering the cultural field (i.e., forms, modes, content and styles that emerge from the disability experience, and with the larger disability community increasingly consuming and supporting Disability Arts.

It has been suggested that the Disability Arts movement has three stages: first, the recognition that disabled people are in fact artists despite a social context which until now

has relegated them to “art therapy”; second, exploratory presentations of Disability Arts “in house”, within the relative safety of the disabled community; and third, at its current stage, that disabled artists take their art, their Disability Arts movement, and their message out into the world (Walker 1998). This final stage is particularly significant politically, as this is the space in which disabled artists can challenge the systems that oppress them in front of audiences possibly implicated in this oppression, and/or unwilling to recognize it.

Disability art is not simply about disabled people obtaining access to the mainstream of artistic consumption and production. Nor is it focused primarily on the experience of living with an impairment. Disability art is the development of shared cultural meanings and the collective expression of the experience of disability and struggle. It entails using art to expose the discrimination and prejudice disabled people face and to generate group consciousness and solidarity (Barnes et al. 1999:205-206).

In this vital stage, Disability Arts are most “potentially educative, transformative, expressive, emotionally exploratory, participative, and involving” (Barnes et al. 1999:206), as they challenge traditional and dominant constructions of disability and produce accurate representations that reflect the lived experiences of disability, and disability oppression (Barnes et al. 1999). As such, it has been suggested that disability arts represent the “main contemporary arena in which a positive cultural interpretation of disability is advanced” (Barnes et al. 1999).

Underpinning the Disability Arts movement is a set of fundamental goals (Barnes & Mercer 2001) oriented toward both individual artists and the broader disability rights movement. First, is the demand that both the production and consumption of mainstream art be accessible to disabled people. Second, is an emphasis on the lived experience of disability as a vital reservoir of artistic subject-matter. Third, is a response to and critique of the realities of social exclusion (Barnes & Mercer 2001). In its engagement with these objectives, Disability Arts and Culture dramatically exposes the inequities experienced by disabled people, and celebrates, without sentimentality or stereotype, their authentic stories and struggles.

## **Deaf Culture**

It is important to briefly examine the significance of Deaf culture in relation to a broader Disability Culture. Deaf culture is seen by many as separate from Disability Culture, identifying itself as a linguistic minority rather than an impairment grouping. Clearly, however, the development, origins and political impacts of Deaf culture are closely tied to a discussion of Disability Arts and Culture.

Contemporary Deaf culture “has its roots in the eighteenth century ... and the development of schools for deaf children” (Barnes & Mercer 2001:526). It was in these segregated institutions, where isolated from oral culture, that Deaf people facilitated the evolution of sign language (Barnes & Mercer 2001). Thus “the process of exclusion has been fundamental to the development of Deaf culture” (Barnes & Mercer 2001:526) and Deaf Culture has come to represent a cultural and linguistic minority, sharing a complex language and history (Dirksen, Bauman, & Drake 1997).

Although they share many goals (e.g., confronting and deconstructing cultural norms) and a common history of forced segregation, Disability and Deaf Culture have fundamental points of friction and distinction. There are many who advocate for the continuation of segregated schooling and social arrangements as necessary for the preservation of Deaf Culture. Thus although Disability and Deaf Culture may share a history of oppression based on enforced normalcy, both movements position themselves separately, and have very different goals in relation to segregation and inclusion.

## **Disability, Mis/representation & the Arts**

One of the ways of understanding long gone societies is to look at their 'cultural artefacts'. If historians only uncover images of disability in charity advertising and stories of helplessness or courage, with no alternatives, what will that mean for a future population of disabled people? (Finkelstein & Morrison 1993:5).

Representation is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind (hooks 1995:3).

One of the cornerstones of Disability studies is to question the social construction of disability and to advance an understanding of disability oppression that highlights disabling social structures, rather than individual impairments. As such, the discipline of disability studies seeks to draw attention to the ways in which individualized and medicalized notions of disability are, and have historically been, culturally produced and reinforced. In part, this exploration unfolds through study of disability representation in popular culture, including movies, literature, television, and advertising.

At the center of debate about disability representation are issues of control and social consequences – who controls the cultural construction of disabled people, and what is the role of this construction in disabled peoples' oppression.

The historic problem in representing disabled people's lives has always been the control of that representation. When others speak for the disabled they often point the way to the freak show and the medical theatre, two arenas of human objectification (Cassuto 2000:327).

In other words, popular culture has tended to present a narrow, inaccurate view of disability that either frames disability as illness, or frames disabled people as curiosities to be gawked at or feared. Disability scholars argue that disability is too frequently used in art as a metaphor for negative situations of tragedy or evil, rather than as a recognizable and accurate human element itself. By examining these critiques of cultural misrepresentation, we begin to appreciate how "the representation of disabled people in the media and other art forms, such as literature, film and photography, is then regarded as confirming what it means to be a disabled person in this society" (Barnes et al. 1999:190-191).

## **The Representation of Disability in the Arts**

Historically, images of disability have been generated by non-disabled people, and have been more about the prejudices and delusions of mainstream society than the reality of the disability experience (Barnes et al. 1999:210).

Disability [is] viewed as a restrictive pattern of characterization that usually sacrifice[s] the humanity of the protagonist and villains alike (Mitchell & Snyder 2001:196).

Cultural stereotyping is a form of oppression: with disabled people portrayed as not-powerful and not attractive, and impairment used as a metaphor for evil (Barnes et al 1999:191).

The mass media play an important role in socialization and influence the construction of meaning. They shape the way people perceive the world around them. Many people have no contact with disabled people so gain their knowledge of disability from the mass media. It therefore becomes important [to] understand how the media shape[s] reality (Harris 2002:144).

At its core, the Disability Arts and Culture movement stands in direct opposition to the negative portrayals of disability commonly perpetuated in popular culture. Indeed, since Disability Arts and Culture in part exists to reframe/reinvent the disability experience, it is only natural that an important component of this project would involve some critical examination of the ways in which the arts typically frame disability. Although most analyses focus on a particular medium, such as advertising images, movies, or television, the same problematic constructions of disability run through each of these and other media. Therefore, rather than analyze each medium separately, we will simply highlight common and problematic misrepresentations.

Disability Studies scholars contend that this misrepresentation serves as an important and powerful tool in the oppression of disabled people. For example, in one analysis of movies, it was noted that “its products constitute an important mode of discourse by which the culture perpetuates itself and its perspectives...” (Norden 1994:3). Indeed, visual and literary misrepresentations of disability often serve as the only, or most important, space where the non-disabled world comes to know disability and its perceived place in the social world. Non-disabled individuals are in control of the movie

industry and as a consequence, the images it perpetuates (Norden 1994) reflect and reinforce predominantly non-disabled values and norms.

In Longmore's (1987) research on prevalent images of disabled people in television and film, he notes some dominant themes emerging in the representation of disabled people. First, and foremost, disability is often associated with criminality and malevolence; thus, "deformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil" (1987:66). A brief inventory of images of evil in film, television, and literature confirms that many of the most notable villains in popular culture are marked with/by impairment. (For example the hunchbacked witch in *Snow White*; Captain Hook with his prosthesis in *Peter Pan* (Shapiro 2000); "Shakespeare's murderous hunchbacked king, Richard III; Melville's obsessive one-legged Captain Ahab" (Mitchell & Snyder 2001:196). Not only are these images persistent, but many of our formative artistic encounters are likely to introduce, and then reinforce this negative construction of disability. For example, children quickly become familiar with characters like "the evil giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, or the sly deformed dwarf, in *Rumpelstiltskin* (Shapiro 2000:3).

According to Longmore (1987), assigning a disability to a character, or constructing disability metaphors in this way, reinforces three important stereotypes about disabled people: that disability is a form of punishment for immoral behaviour; that disabled people are poisoned by their "fate"; and that disabled people take exception to the non-disabled world and would like to destroy it. Noting that it is non-disabled society that has historically pursued the elimination of disabled people, Longmore observes that not only are these representations false, but they also perilously invert the non-disabled world's antipathy to disability and disabled people. Much like the portrayals of other marginalized groups, the misrepresentation of disability in film and television expose "the unacknowledged hostile fantasies of the stigmatizers" (1987:68). In addition, in most of these misrepresentations, death, and/or other forms of separation and segregation from the community become the only solutions for dealing with the disabled character (Longmore 1987), thus reaffirming that the non-disabled world's oppressive "solutions" to disability are "just."

In addition to television, movies and literature, these same negative constructions of disability are present in many photographic constructions of disability. Hevey (1997) observes that disabled people are predominantly displayed in this medium through charity advertising. This is also the place where non-disabled people are most likely to see photographic images of their own bodies. Images in this medium:

[rely] heavily on what may be termed the 'pity button':  
drawing on traditional perceptions of being in need of help  
and being the object of both guilt and pity, together with

the portrayal of disabled people being personally tragic and/or dependant and eternal children (Hughes 1998:66).

Paralleling the construction of disability elsewhere in popular culture and artistic representation, charity advertising thus draws upon predominant social responses of pity, fear and the impulse to contain or cure.

These persistent images reinforce that people with “physical or mental differences are to be feared, pitied, trivialized, or ridiculed” (Shapiro 2000:3). As such, those who consume this culture rarely encounter disability as a valued and multidimensional human condition. Instead encounters with disability within mainstream culture often convey a range of negative constructions: “criminality, malevolence, monsters, tragedy, charity, and ridicule...[reflecting] broader social attitudes of pity, fear, ignorance, and embarrassment” (Hafferty & Foster 1994:187).

Persistent misrepresentation yields grave social consequences. Indeed, possibly the most serious consequence of this misrepresentation is that it inverts our social reality, thus allowing the non-disabled world to “disown its anxieties and prejudices about disabled people...[thus] the source of the ‘problem’ is shifted to the stigmatized person... another version of blaming the victim” (Longmore 1987:73). Clearly this misrepresentation creates an atmosphere in which the oppression of disabled people is not only acceptable, but in fact encouraged, as their “problems” are not portrayed as social, but rather as individual in nature, and in fact facilitated by their own bad, foolish, irresponsible, embittered or evil behaviour.

Given the social consequences of misrepresentation, it is essential to the well-being of disabled people that these negative constructions be challenged, and that disabled people find ways and means to take charge of communicating their own realities. Voices speaking back against stereotypic images of disability must continually confront this dominant narrative of disability – a task which, as Lewis (1998) notes, requires not simply introducing disability to non-disabled audiences, but rather introducing disability with honesty and authenticity. Observing that disability is not absent from the art world, but in fact “over-represented”, Lewis (1998:525) argues for strategies of alternate representation.

## **Countering Misrepresentation**

I’m a poet, and metaphor is always, you know, one of my favorite tools. But disability isn’t a metaphor I choose to use. Maybe it’s because disabled characters are too often used to represent some broken aspect of the human condition. So when I write a character with a disability...I

try to make him or her a fully rounded character and not a metaphor for something else. Let the story be about the grander aspect of the human condition, and let the disabled character be for-real a human being, for a change ([Lynn Manning in Tolan 2000:5](#)).

Disabled artists and their supporters are attempting to promote an accurate construction of disability to counter mainstream misrepresentation by various different and often overlapping approaches. One strategy involves changing the offensive aspects of existing representations; another involves advocating for opportunities for a more genuine portrayal of disabled characters by disabled actors; and perhaps most importantly, another involves "balancing the scale" by giving audiences a fresh perspective on disability as it appears when representation is controlled by disabled people.

Changing the composition of existing representations is a strategy that raises important questions of censorship and artistic freedom. However, recently a British theatre company, after consulting with a disability advisor, changed the name of Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, to *The Bellringer of Notre Dame*, presumably in order to avoid any offence to people with similar impairments. The producer explained that this minor revision to the work overcame the offensive metaphor in Hugo's famous work, and explained that the play could change its name while still representing themes of "inner beauty, and the cruelty faced by Quasimodo" ([The Arts Report](#)).

Some disabled artists feel having disabled actors portray disabled characters goes some distance towards dealing with and countering misrepresentation.

When people with disabilities are performing, they challenge the way that a lot of these dramatic metaphors work, because a lot of these usual disability roles go to non-disabled actors. So it is very easy to separate the metaphor from the person, because there is always some sort of distance; the signal that "I'm not really disabled" always seems to leak through (Carrie [Sandahl](#) in Tolen 2000:5)

In the *Bellringer* production noted above, the role of Quasimodo was played by a non-disabled actor, and the character appeared as he did in the original work, marked by a hunched back. In this way the negatively metaphoric use of disability remained central to the work. Notwithstanding the major problem with Hugo's text that the actual lived experience of disability did not inform this representation in the first place, it remains to be seen whether a single disabled actor performing the role of Quasimodo, or a troupe of disabled actors breathing new meaning into Hugo's words and ideas could rehabilitate the piece and transform the meanings that audiences take from it.

Many disabled artists argue that the impact on an audience of having a character who does not become un-disabled for the curtain call is valuable in itself.

When people with disabilities are performing, they challenge the way that a lot of these dramatic metaphors work, because a lot of these usual disability roles go to non-disabled actors. So it is very easy to separate the metaphor from the person, because there is always some sort of distance; the signal that “I’m not really disabled” always seems to leak through ([Sandahl](#) 2000:5)

When you have a non-disabled actor playing the role, the curtain goes up at the end, the lights come up, it’s time for the curtain call... and suddenly everything that has come before is erased. The audience is let off the hook. Suddenly, this isn’t social history; this is just artifice. Whereas when the lights come up and there is someone who is still sitting, and they take a bow in their wheelchair, it helps the audience understand that this is bigger than the topic of a play. This is part of a movement. This is part of social history ([Belluso](#) in Tolen 2000:6).

Arguably, the act of employing disabled actors in roles representing disability is in itself a political act, as it forces the audience to recognize the human elements in disability, and in doing so, compels the audience to connect disability to the social world. In these representational encounters with real disability, audiences do not leave the venue believing disability to be a “special effect”, but rather with the knowledge that disability is indeed a human condition.

The Disability Arts and Culture movement attempts to counter the negative imaginary by infusing the positive and real into the art world and the works it produces. Indeed, at the heart of Disability Arts and Culture is the notion that the “political in aesthetic, disability art...[seeks] to redress the imbalance of dominant ‘negative’ images which represent disabled people as the mythical, tragic ‘other’” (Gowland 2002:121). Thus, while the movement is concerned with countering traditional, negative constructions of disability, it is more actively concerned with promoting disabled artists who produce works that originate from a place of Disability pride and culture. Disability Arts and Culture is primarily about producing artwork that celebrates diversity, reconstructs disability as a valued human condition, has disabled artists in control of art forms and disability representations, and introduces these artists and their works to audiences in forms that counter and reclaim the social constructions of disability.

## **Disability Arts & Culture Snapshots**

### **Photography**

Disabled people often find themselves the subjects of photographers, and often these photographs are taken to elicit sympathy, or to highlight the “otherness” of the disabled body. Disabled people are often not thought of as artists themselves, nor are they in control of their own photographic representations. However, the photography of the Disability Arts movement is produced predominantly by disabled photographers and celebrates the disabled body as a valued subject for photographic attention.

Writing about VIS-ABILITY: VIEWS FROM THE INTERIOR at the University of Michigan, an exhibit that highlighted “works by artists who use their craft to sensitize viewers to society’s ‘frame’ of physical imperfections as ‘dis-enabling’ those who bear them” (1998 426), Kirkpatrick notes the significance in displaying and viewing such photographic works:

The artworks in the Vis-Ability exhibition all in one way or another deal with the experience of living with a body less than physically ‘perfect.’ Many of these works address directly the modern struggle to define/redefine the love-hate relationship with the body that underlines modern Western society (1998 428-429).

The photography in this exhibit, like other photographic representations generated within the Disability Arts movement, neither apologizes for nor makes a gratuitous spectacle of disabled bodies in the manner of more traditional photographic representations. Rather, these images replace pity with pride, and challenge traditional discourses on the body.

Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) introduced an international photo contest in which images of disability and health were submitted into three separate categories: black and white, colour, and digital photography. The winning images can be viewed [on-line](#), and although some of these photos capture disabled people in problematic and traditional depictions, there are clearly some works here that celebrate disabled bodies, highlight abilities, and illustrate encounters with a disabling society. Exhibitions such as “[Images of Health and Disability](#)” raise important questions about contributions to the Disability Arts Movement by institutional players that operate from a place of medicalized or colonized relations to disability. We will return to questions of sponsorship and funding later in the paper.

Highlighting the changing role of disabled people in the production of photographic works are many contributions of disabled artists working as photographers. In Canada, physician/photographer Paul Malon has established a reputation for his unique

perspectives in nature based photography ([Weinberger](#) 2003). Currently based in Vancouver, Malon uses his atypical vantage point to capture nature in a unique way.

An acute appreciation of the subtle beauty and detail in nature is apparent in Paul's photography. Cloud formations, or patterns on rocks and snow in the foreground, balance the drama of the peak itself within images. Photographs of spectacular mountains are interspersed with close-up studies of fragile alpine flowers. Part of this attention to foreground detail is due to Paul's lower camera position [in the mountains, he replaces his wheelchair with a small, plastic toboggan], which brings him closer to subject matter that other photographers might neglect ([Weinberger](#) 2003:3).

Malon states: "You don't conquer mountains. What does that mean, anyway?" ([Weinberger](#) 2003:3). Although neither Malon nor Weinberger explicitly link disability with this lack of desire to conquer or transform nature, one can draw parallels between Malon's standpoint with respect to the natural world, and Disability Culture's opposition to those who seek to "conquer" disability through their interventions.

## **Theatre**

A ragtag Chorus Line confronts a small audience...an apparently normal couple, two men with something odd about their gait, a one-legged woman on crutches, and a man and a woman using wheelchairs. One after another, and rapid-fire, they ask:

*Isn't that a tragedy! Can't you sue?*

*When you go to heaven, will your leg be waiting for you?*

*Are you more sensitive now with your hands?*

*If you really wanted to walk, don't you think you could?*

*Do you cry when you go to the ballet?*

*Do you still get erections? Can you come?*

This was Joe Chaikin's workshop on disability. The nondisabled public laughed uneasily. They were hearing questions they themselves might have asked to cover their confusion on encountering persons with disabilities (Chevigny 1998: 269).

The above example illustrates the power of theatrical productions in the Disability Arts and Culture movement: in this space disabled artists (actors and playwrights) have the opportunity to confront not only the social construction of disability, but also to illustrate to non-disabled audience members their own role in this paternalistic and

medicalized construction. In this space, roles are often reversed, as it is the non-disabled world and its “faults” on display, and disabled artists who control this interaction.

Another example is a play written by playwright HolLynn D’Lil entitled [\*Hello/Goodbye Ada Who?\*](#), available on-line to any group interested in producing and/or performing it. This play provides disabled artists with a powerful tool not only to entertain audiences, but also to teach them about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Although the play centers upon a rights-based approach to disability, it calls for a non-disabled character named Ms. Goody who constantly interjects with patronizing questions and remarks like:

*“Oh my, aren’t you clever! Look at you, working at a big computer like that. You are such an inspiration.”*  
*“It’s so cute how they talk with their hands like that.”*  
*“Oh silly. Nobody ever discriminates against the handicapped. They can’t help it if they are disabled and can’t do anything.”*

Like other forms of disability-inspired arts and culture, this play highlights the discriminatory and offensive behaviour of a predominantly non-disabled society, framing such behaviour as the major barrier facing disabled individuals. Although meant to educate audiences about the ADA and its importance, the play also serves as an opportunity for non-disabled audiences to watch and reflect upon *their* behaviour in the face of disability. The character of Ms. Goody embodies the paternalistic approach to disability, and her words likely reflect the sentiments of many in the audience, yet in this space these sentiments are not framed as necessary and compassionate, but rather as oppressive and problematic. As such, it is non-disabled “knowledge” that is put on display and framed as needing “intervention.”

Illustrating the changing role of disabled theatre artists is the Québec troupe, “Pourquoi pas nous?” (Why Not Us?), comprising seven actors with intellectual disabilities. The National Film Board of Canada chronicled the journey of this troupe as they represented Québec at the fifth European Festival for Mentally Disabled Artists in France (Jacobi 2003). This troupe is distinctive within the Disability Arts movement as artists with intellectual disabilities have struggled to gain recognition, even within otherwise inclusive arts organizations.

## **Performance Art**

By presenting her body before a viewer, the visibly disabled performance artist generates the dynamic of staring, the arrested attentiveness that registers difference on the part of the viewer. In the social context of an ableist

society, the disabled body summons the stare, and the stare mandates the story (Thomson 2000:335).

Central to understanding the significance of performance art for disabled artists is what has been referred to as the “stare-and-tell” dynamic (Thomson 2000), which has historically dictated the interaction between disabled and non-disabled individuals. In every day social encounters, disabled bodies are the recipients of unsolicited stares, often prompting the question: “what happened to you?” (Thomson 2000:334). However, disabled performance artists can use their performances to confront and control this dynamic. For example:

A survey of disability performance art suggests that such performances are platforms for profoundly liberating assertions and representations of the self in which the artist controls the terms of the encounter. In addition to allowing individual expression, this artistic engagement with self-display also provides a medium for positive identity politics and an opportunity to protest cultural images of disabled people. Disabled performance artists manipulate the stare-and-tell dynamic (Thomson 2000:335).

Therefore, this kind of art is uniquely suited to the Disability Arts and Culture movement as it reverses power relations, and enables disabled performers to manipulate the very actions that oppress them in order to introduce a new understanding of disability.

Arguably the most well-known disabled performance artist is Ireland’s [Mary Duffy](#). Duffy uses performance and her body, along with photographs and autobiographical text, “to displace the stereotypical ideas of her viewers about persons born physically different...” (Kirkpatrick 1998 434), reflecting and confronting traditional Western ideals around beauty and the body. For example:

A viewer well-versed in Western culture is suspended between confronting Duffy’s unmistakably living flesh and seeing that body through overlaid memory images of ‘incomplete’ Classical sculptures like the *Venus de Milo*, which have molded our modern conventions for beauty” (Kirkpatrick 1998 435).

In this genre the disabled body is placed front and centre, utilizing the stare to reframe disabled bodies with pride and beauty.

Performance art is a genre of self-representation, a form of autobiography, that merges the visual with the narrative. As a fusion of both seeing and telling, disability performance

art foregrounds the body as an object to be viewed and to be explained. The disabled body is not only the medium but the content of the performance (Thomson 2000:334).

## **Dance**

As a dancer I am a body on display. As a body on display I am expected to reside within a certain continuum of fitness and bodily control, not to mention sexuality and beauty. But as a woman in a wheelchair, I am neither expected to be a dancer nor to position myself in front of an audience's gaze. In doing this performance, I confront a whole host of contradictions both within myself and within the audience. The work was a conscious attempt to both deconstruct the representational codes of dance production and communicate an "other" bodily reality (Albright 1998:475).

This intersection of dance and disability is an extraordinarily rich site at which to explore the overlapping constructions of the body's physical ability, subjectivity, and cultural visibility that are implicated within many of our dominant cultural paradigms of health and self-determination (Albright 1998:478).

Dance plays a major role in the Disability Arts and Culture movement, specifically in the re-construction of disabled bodies and their abilities. Since dance itself, as well as the construction of the ideal dancer's body, have traditionally excluded disability (along with many other marginalized bodies), the very act of disabled bodies performing in this medium is both artistically and politically significant:

Given that Western theatrical dance has been structured by an exclusionary mindset that projects a very narrow vision of a dancer as white, female, thin, long-limbed, flexible, heterosexual, and able-bodied, my desire to stage the cultural antithesis of the fit, healthy body disrupted the conventional voyeuristic pleasures inherent in watching most dancers (Albright 1998:478).

Therefore, when disabled bodies dance they are staking "claim to a radical space, an unruly location where disparate assumptions about representation, subjectivity, and visual pleasure collide with one another" (Albright 1998:475).

Quebec's France Geoffroy is one of Canada's most celebrated and recognized disabled dancers. She was featured in the documentary *Passage*, and has been a pioneer

for integrated dance in Montreal (Art Smarts 2002). According to Geoffroy, her dance is not only artistic, but also highly political:

My art is political in this way: people are always wondering about my wheelchair. When I go down the street in my wheelchair, people see me and think... “I will try to help this person – I will open the door” or “How does this woman get between her house and the university? What transportation does she take? The Metro is not accessible; the bus is not accessible.” You know? It’s political this way. And my dance is political when they think, “This woman is supposed to be paralysed. Ok, she is, and yet she dances. She does something that she’s not supposed to do.” If you think about this issue of my wheelchair, you can find many, many reasons to say that my work is political. Political because I go down the street in my wheelchair and I go on stage and everyone asks themselves, “What is the place of the wheelchair in society? What is the right place, the good place?” (Art Smarts 2002:42).

Goefroy’s words clearly echo the themes that were so important in the early stages of Feminist Art. Artists with disabilities who choose dance as their medium are challenging many of the socially constructed stereotypes of bodies, and in this process, opening up not only the arts, but likely other exclusionary avenues for disabled people.

## **Autobiography & Life Writing**

To sketch a quick contrast between disability in literature and disability in autobiography, I would begin by making two generalizations: in literature disability functions largely as a metaphor of social collapse, while in autobiography disability represents the coordinates of a singular subjectivity (Mitchell 2000:311).

The autobiography and life writing genre includes memoirs, diaries, biographies and autobiographies (Couser 1997), that “challeng[e] the hegemonic discourse of disability” (Couser 1997:181). Artists who produce these works have the opportunity to explore the everyday lived experience of disability – a significant task, as much of what has been written on disability has not only been produced by non-disabled writers and researchers, but has also been heavily grounded in a medical discourse on disability.

Autobiography and other forms of life writing enable disabled people to communicate a more complex and accurate construction of what it is to be disabled in our society.

Based in Newfoundland, writer Ed Smith uses this medium to communicate his experiences as a newly disabled person. He states on his [website](#):

... [writing] is to the mind what callisthenics is to the body. It gets out the kinks and smooths out the wrinkles. Writing *From the Ashes of My Dreams* helped get my emotions about and frustrations with my physical condition out in the open where I could more easily cope with them.

Autobiographical writing also allows disabled artists to explore spaces and feelings that do not have a place in traditional discourses on disability. Take for example Catherine Frazee's reflection on Christopher Reeve embracing the medical discourse, and the social implications of his stance:

For me, although it is far from simple, a few things are clear. Whether as a result of political consciousness, pragmatism, or an aesthetic preference for gliding, I do not share Christopher Reeve's desire to walk. I cannot in conscience begrudge a recent immigrant to the strange and wondrous land of not-walking the wish that I once held so innocently. But I do resent the enormous investment of economic and intellectual resources demanded by quests for cures, the high powered complex put in place to sustain Reeve's dream, a complex that takes on a life of its own and will not be diverted to address political, environmental, and social conditions that are the primary causes of disability around the world (Frazee).

The life-writing form allows disabled artists to explore and articulate disability in a manner that confronts the social construction of disability, without negating, and thus hiding, disability itself. Narrative writing within the Disability Arts movement confronts the problematic underpinnings of the medical model and implicates disabling social structures, yet still manages to validate and celebrate the disabled individual.

## **Poetry**

It is only through difference that we arrive at identity. But it is also through power relations engendered by and through difference that we arrive at oppression. One of the functions of poetry, both in reading and writing, is to help us to remain aware of the fineness of this balance by not

allowing language to be taken over and abused in forms of domination. This is particularly so...for disabled people, who are attempting to generate a new discourse about themselves, one that is in their voice and not in the voice of the oppressor (Casling 1994: 394).

Poetry is one of the sites within the Disability Arts and Culture movement where much work is being produced. This may partly be due to the fact that this art form is so accessible, but also likely due to the power of the medium. For example, in her work *Still life: Reflections on running, walking and standing*, Frazee notes the exceptional role of poetry when describing a certain moment: "Feeling so large and mighty are why we must have poetry. Perfect sentences laid down end-to-end then stacked in paragraphs are woefully inadequate at the extremity of such a moment" (Frazee 106). Indeed, poetry provides a flexible method which allows artists to construct and merge words in more creative and expressive ways.

Based in Toronto, poet Heather Emme showcases her work on-line. Her voice is strong, defiant, and powerful, liberating the reader from traditional medical discourses confronting psychiatric survivors:

[Crazy Gurl](#)

They called me called me crazy gurl  
A crazy gurl who couldn't learn to keep her mouth  
SHUT  
But I was not a crazy gurl  
Just smarter than your average gurl  
No I was not a crazy gurl  
A crazy gurl  
BUT  
Backhanded into crazy gurl  
Will I repeat their crazy world?  
Will I redeem the normal world  
And keep my mouth shut?  
Is it because I cannot cry?  
My ducts are full, my face is dry  
I look you in the face and lie  
My alibi is well rehearsed  
I'm stronger than  
Their fate reversed  
My fate recurred  
Now reimbursed  
Is wholly mine to own

So I am not the crazy gurl  
The crazy gurl  
The crazy gurl  
No I am not the crazy gurl for I am fully grown.

## **Humour**

The best thing I love about performing in comedy clubs is that people have no idea what they're getting into until I walk up on stage. And they're caught there. I suppose they could get up and leave if they wanted to, but that would mean forfeiting the 10 or 15 bucks they had to shell out  
~Alan Shain~  
(Art Smarts 2002:44).

Ottawa comic Alan Shain places an emphasis on his experience with cerebral palsy in his routines (Guly 2003). Some examples of his humour include:

*'I'm not wasted.'* Pause. *'I always talk like this.'*

Or

*'He might toss a few socks into the air, attempting to juggle them but naturally missing all of them. He deadpans; the crowd roars.'*  
(Guly 2003).

Although some in the audience may find his type of humour "gratuitous and limited to his physical condition" (Guly 2003), for Shain, his comedy is merely a reflection of his own reality: "I realize that some people might see my act and feel sympathy... I want people to see that disability is not deadly serious... Comedy is about who you are - and this is who I am... But doing it shows that I'm not limited in doing anything I want to do" (Guly 2003). Therefore, like all artists who draw on their personal experiences for insight, Shain is merely sharing his experience – of which disability is a part – with his audience.

But Shain's comedy is about more than simply reflecting on the lighter side of disability. Shain uses his time on stage to educate audiences about his life as a disabled person:

I work from my own experiences as a person with a disability. I focus on the challenges, the attitudes I come across, and I use comedy to share with people what some of the issues are, how it affects my life. I also use the theatre to show people that I live in the same world. I see the

artist's role in the disability movement as making that connection with the general public...  
~ Alan Shain~  
(Art Smart 2002:44).

Shain can, with subtlety and wit, expose the workings of an ableist society, and reach audiences who might not otherwise think of issues related to disability rights. Shain understands that his audience is primarily there to have a good time, and he also knows that there are better ways to reach his audience with disability issues than "hitting them over the head"(Art Smarts 2002:43). However, according to Shain this is still politically significant as: "I'm just talking about who I am and what I go through. But in a very subtle way, people get the message that I go through things I shouldn't have to go through" (Art Smarts 2003: 44).

Not all humour in the Disability Arts and Culture movement is so subtle in making its point about the construction of disability and the pressure to be "normalized." For example, the website for the [Institute For the Study of the Neurologically Typical](#), at first encounter, an apparently very scientific and serious site, is actually an "expression of autistic *outrage*." This site was created by a man who learned he "was on the autistic spectrum", and after investigating to find out more about autism, was outraged by the arrogance of the "experts" and "professionals."

The site parodies the medical profession and its diagnostic tools by re-framing autism as *the* desired social norm, diagnosing all those who fall outside this norm with Neurotypical syndrome. The result of this tool is the 'tragic' fact that "as many as 9625 out of every 10,000 individuals may be neurotypical", resulting in the following [characteristics](#):

Neurotypical syndrome is a neurobiological disorder characterized by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity.

Neurotypical individuals often assume that their experience of the world is either the only one, or the only correct one. NTs find it difficult to be alone. NTs are often intolerant of seemingly minor differences in others. When in groups NTs are socially and behaviorally rigid, and frequently insist upon the performance of dysfunctional, destructive, and even impossible rituals as a way of maintaining group identity. NTs find it difficult to communicate directly, and have a much higher incidence of lying as compared to persons on the autistic spectrum.

NT is believed to be genetic in origin. Autopsies have shown the brain of the neurotypical is typically smaller

than that of an autistic individual and may have overdeveloped areas related to social behavior.

This site uses humour to illustrate the arrogance and power of the medical profession and their role in constructing undesirable states. Visitors to this site, specifically non-disabled (i.e., 'neurotypical') ones, have the opportunity to see how the characteristics they possess, and likely value, can be framed through discourse as strange, undesirable, problematic, and even dangerous. Essentially, and if only for a brief moment, non-autistic visitors are given insight into what it might be like to be told by "others" who you are, and to appreciate how this kind of arbitrary judgement produces outrage.

## **Music**

I don't 'make light' of my disability, or anybody's disability... I'm making light of attitudes, and ridiculous government regulations that allow us to moose hunt -- although they won't provide WheelTrans  
~ Jane Field~  
(Bendall 2003).

Jane Field is a Canadian singer and songwriter who is outraged with oppression. As a social activist, and a disabled person, Jane uses her music to comment on those conditions she finds socially unacceptable. For example, in *The Fishing is Free*, Jane questions some of the policies in place for disabled people, specifically the practice in Ontario that allows disabled people to fish without licenses (Bendall 2003). This song highlights this and other strange policies, and leaves listeners wondering about the rights of disabled people:

### **[The Fishing is Free](#)**

The fishing is free with your disability  
You don't need a licence like the rest.  
Movies are half the price, well isn't that nice?  
And the parking spots are nothing but the best.  
Well, don't you wish that you were disabled?  
Disabled is the better way to be.  
With crutches, canes and braces, wheelchairs to run races  
Don't you wish that you were just like me?  
The deaf have got sign language,  
the blind have got their dogs  
Their loyal trusted guides are at their sides.

Well everyone has their vices, but we've got our devices  
Oh, don't you envy us our privileged lives?

Well, don't you wish that you were disabled?  
Disabled is the better way to be.  
When we go out it's really neat,  
we're always sure we'll get a seat  
Oh, don't you wish that you were just like me?

No one knows just what to call us  
which label should befall us,  
And they're some dandy terms from which to choose.  
My favourite's "wheel-chair bound" cause it has a  
bondage sound.  
Oh it's fun to guess what term they're going to use.

Well, don't you wish that you were disabled?  
Disabled is the better way to be.  
There are special entrances in stores, they let us in  
through the back doors  
Oh, don't you wish that you were just like me?  
Disabled is the better way to be.  
With all these benefits and perks that's  
how the system works  
Oh, don't you wish that you were just like me?

Oh the fishing is free with your disability  
You don't need a licence like the rest.  
Movies are half the price, well isn't that nice?  
And the parking spots are nothing but the best!

What is brilliant about this song is that it uses both music and humour to directly confront the underlying notion in mainstream society that disabled people get special treatment. Indeed, with respect to rights and “reasonable” accommodations, there is a hostility in mainstream discourse that rejects the notion that any group should receive “special treatment” and is resentful about those “perks” afforded to disabled persons. What Jane does in this song is spell out these “perks”, underscoring their triviality in the grand scheme of equity, and leaving listeners with the clear message about the devalued status of disabled people.

Jane Field’s wry and satirical folk-music approach is only one of many ways in which musicians with disabilities are tapping into this most universal mode of human communication to explore and express their complex relationship with the world.

## **Visual Arts**

Visual Arts are a broad and diverse category within the Disability Arts and Culture movement, and many disabled artists are working within this medium. Of special note is the work of Jane Cameron, a multi-talented artist with Down Syndrome. Jane's artistic work was extensive, although textiles were her principal medium (Schierbeck 2003). Examples of her textile work can be viewed [on-line](#).

While Jane's achievements could be for many the object lessons telling society what can be achieved by people with disabilities, ultimately Jane would stand up and say, "No, I am not a pioneer or a role model." She sees the attention she has received as not owing to her disability but owing to the fact her art deserves it. Jane is not an object lesson for people with disabilities, but rather she is an object lesson for us all. For Jane is the embodiment of life, and she has taken her gift and given her vision of life to us all.  
(Schierbeck 2003).

While Jane did not consider her work to have political implications, it nevertheless made a political statement about the relationship between disability and art. She was an artist, and as a disabled woman entered the arts not as the recipient of therapy, but as an artist with a vision to create and share her work. As such, with every piece she created she challenged the dominant discourses of both disability and art. Her critical success and her visibility as an artist clearly have implications outside her own artistic success.

Another notable disabled artist is Rick Burns, based in Fredericton, New Brunswick. A sample of his work can be viewed [on-line](#), and although there is little reference to his disability on his site, he notes:

My work originates in autobiographical sources, however, its visceral play of bodily absence and presence can hardly be isolated from the larger context of its production.

Rooted in the familiar - clothing, furniture - this sculpture is close to the body, inherently personal in its connotations and scale.

I continue to describe, through drawing and sculpture, the constant fight to become whole, to move away from physical corruptibility and move toward equilibrium.

It is interesting that although disability is not an overtly visible component of his art, Rick indirectly acknowledges that his disability is a part of who he is, and thus influences his creations. Although neither Jane nor Rick promotes their disability in the same way as many of the other artists in this section highlighted in these snapshots, disability is acknowledged by both artists. While Jane's approach seeks to distance disability, Rick acknowledges its presence in a subtle way.

## **Conclusion**

These works illustrate the political power and cultural significance of Disability Art. They highlight how issues of oppression, social constructions of the body, and the quest to build disability pride and identity, are artfully combined to challenge traditional disability discourses. This method of building culture contributes to a broader rights movement by presenting issues in innovative and accessible ways, and by providing audiences, both disabled and non-disabled, with opportunities to engage with these issues and to explore a radical discourse on disability.

## **How Do Audiences Respond?**

So far, this paper has emphasized the artist/performer side of Disability Arts and Culture. It has outlined what individuals intend and hope to achieve with their work, as well as the vision of the Disability Rights movement for this latest phase of its evolution. This direction is not surprising given the nature of literature and other resources in this area. The material emanating from disability communities tends to be descriptive and celebratory while academic writing has been preoccupied with discourse analysis – multiple examinations of the ways in which particular representations of disabled people and images of disability infuse art, architecture, literature and multi-media.

But Disability Arts and Culture has yet to become the focus of systematic empirical research. There are few formal studies to report on in the area. In other words, very few researchers have directly engaged with disabled artists/performers as they ply their craft in order to understand what they are doing and how they are doing it. Also uninvestigated are the audiences. What is the impact of Disability Arts and Culture on different audiences? What happens between audiences and the performers or artworks? Does the interaction between the two “change attitudes” as everyone argues? How? These questions are, in fact, relatively unexplored. Fortunately, the Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education is well positioned to fill this vacuum. What follows is a small start.

### **Who Is the Audience?**

Our working knowledge informs us that disabled arts and performers are in the early days of developing broad appeal and recognition. Current audiences are drawn less from the general public than from people already actively connected to and supportive of disability communities. The audience featured in this section are Disability Studies (DST) students at Ryerson University reacting to a theatre-style event called Art with Attitude. Featuring advanced works, it is one of two regular performance opportunities for Deaf and Disability-inspired art created by the Institute since its inception in 2002. The other is Culture Cauldron, a cabaret-style smorgasbord of short performances. Both are celebratory but their deeper purpose is to foster disability culture as a necessary context for removing barriers to participation and inclusion.

Art with Attitude 2003 featured three performers: a man with a hearing impairment who bills himself as a “geek magician,” a woman with a mobility impairment who is a wheelchair dancer, and an African-American storyteller who was blinded in 1978. The latter performed a one-man autobiographical show with a musical partner

whose contribution was fundamental to the story. However, few people remarked on the musician's performance for its own sake, nor did they interpret the act as a duet (of sorts).

Also on stage were signers who translated everything but the dance into American Sign Language for Deaf/hearing impaired audience members. Dressed in black to blend with the background, they mirrored each performance with one of their own. Again, there is the image of a duet, one that engages the signers' bodies well beyond their hands. It is a doubling of expressions and motions that deserves further investigation particularly around the ways that art/performance constructs and reinforces the notion of the autonomous individual.

The DST students who attended this event are a very particular audience. Their sensibilities are already sharpened by engagement with a program that requires them to critique dominant understandings and representations of disability. More readily than others, they would point out that:

*These performances challenge what mainstream audiences understand about who can be an artist. This challenges in a very direct and political way the dominant paradigm of disability. When done individually, this is a personal political statement, and I would say, an activist action. When artists with disabilities come together as a community, this then can be considered a social movement, and each collective performance an activist production.*

Yet, Disability Art and Culture is rare enough, and these students still fresh enough to current debates that their reactions illuminate points of contact and/or separation between disabled artists/performances and audiences in general.

Some student audience members were veterans of Art with Attitude; others were attending for the first time. For "returners" there was clearly pleasure in the fact that the venue had become less attached to university facilities and more deeply connected to local theatre venues.

*I was impressed with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. No, impressed is the wrong word: satisfied is a more appropriate way to define my feelings. I was happy because the theatre (and nearby café) were not so far removed from the action of the city as it was with last year's performance.*

*I felt as though I had been invited to a sort of underground or secret club. These are not experiences you can find in the workplace nor can you have them in a textbook or classroom.*

Students recognized the event as an important social experience related to building their own community in and around the Disability Studies program. For example:

*The evening offered us all a chance to come together, share experiences, communicate and hopefully gain a little insight into each other. What a wonderful opportunity it was!*

*I found this night to be one of great enlightenment and of great friendship. There was great catching up with old friends and meeting and forming new ones.*

## **Six Strong Themes**

Reflections on Art with Attitude were solicited from about seventy students in the form of written statements. Taken together, they comprise the start of a rich data base for the Institute's community development and activism in this area, as well as its contribution to critical Disability Studies. The data could be written up in a number of ways. For this paper, we have chosen to organize our analysis around six strong themes: creating a new point of entry; engaging emotions; seeing the political; challenging dominant narratives; celebrating epiphanies; complexifying debates.

### **Creating a new point of entry**

Student audience members were no stranger to disability. Through their families, jobs and their formal studies, it was something well-known. But the performance they witnessed broke through this familiarity, giving them a point of entry marked by an unprecedented sense of immediacy.

*Being exposed to disability culture, I think the bulbs have started to light.*

*The reading was interesting in a "learning" way but the impact of being part of the event will be unmatched by any reading that one could do on the subject.*

*As I was reading the articles about disability culture, I wasn't really getting the picture about how the arts connect with culture. The videos and the show opened my eyes! I've never seen such beauty and talent as this before. This was new to me.*

Compared to film or television, live theatre is a "hot" medium. Thus, witnessing an explosion of unexpected talent in a darkened room was a "close encounter" for many people. It enabled audience members to imagine themselves directly into the lives and experiences of the performers at the level of "traumas, infatuations, essences, loves, fears and moments of anger."

*[The performer] made me believe I was there. Every detail was explained to the T. I saw what happened without ever being there. I closed my eyes and saw everything taking place.*

*It was as though you were in that place. If you closed your eyes, you could imagine every detail of the experience.*

*He took you into his world of blindness by painting such a mental picture for you that you didn't even need to watch.*

This was disability from the inside out. And what it sparked was a process of joining or identification. One student named it “falling in love.” Strong identifications with the performers cut through conventional responses of pity and benevolence to create an interesting phenomenon: disability envy.

*[The performer] reached me on many levels including envy. Even if I could, I wouldn't know how to transform my political statements into art.*

*I was moved by watching [the performer's] self-expression and found myself very envious of the talent.*

*I found myself admiring [the performer's] talent. I appreciated the skill, the amazing rapport with the audience and the hours of training that I know from first hand experience go into preparing a show of that calibre.*

## **Engaging Emotions**

It is already evident that the evening's performers worked – individually and collectively – at a deep emotional level. Indeed, one of the distinguishing marks of Disability Arts and Culture is that it engages audiences through feeling – a process that students alluded to as a “whirlwind” or a “roller-coaster.” This is important because negative perceptions of and beliefs about people with disabilities are not just a product of the intellect. They are anchored as well in structurings of the unconscious, of memory and fantasy.

*[The performer] engaged us with such raw emotion and attitude it just made me want to listen more.*

*[The performer] made us laugh, smile, frown, scowl and flinch, all in a relatively short period of time.*

*[The performer] evoked sadness, anger, interest, love and fear.*

Not all of the feelings aroused by Art with Attitude were pleasant. Because there were light and dark sides to all of the performances, discomfort was part of the

experience. Sometimes it was an unintended “side-effect” but sometimes it was fundamental to the performance. Absorbing and working with discomfort was inherent to the work of being in the audience.

*[The performer] pushed the envelope, taking the performance away from the mainstream to the edge, making us uncomfortable -- on purpose I assume.*

*[The performer] made me very uncomfortable. Perhaps by catching the audience by surprise and going for shock value [this person] is testing the limits of what society expects from the disability community.*

Student reactions ran the gamut. They were amazed, intrigued, dumbfounded, fascinated, challenged, moved, touched, captivated, stunned, shocked, shaken, speechless, unsettled, disturbed, afraid, outraged, disgusted. Strong words for a powerful experience.

Nor was one emotion necessarily discrete from another.

*I really enjoyed my evening: was inspired, disgusted and laughed all at the same time.*

*It was powerful, emotional and at times disturbing. I really enjoyed it...*

*I was impressed and horrified, walked away with both satisfaction and discomfort. I both liked the show and had moments I wish I had missed*

Significantly, then, audience enjoyment encompassed mixed emotions, something more complicated than simple pleasure. Viewers experienced contradictions that demanded significant processing and could not necessarily be resolved at the end of the evening.

## **Seeing the Political**

Some students arrived having recently written their own stories as a way of exploring the feminist insight that “the personal is political.” They interpreted much of what they saw as classic political autobiography. The storyteller in particular helped them further understand the activist nature of personal narratives in the public sphere.

*This was the epitome of taking one’s personal and creating a political statement. I would like to have the students at the school where I work hear this man relay his life.*

*The performance was a perfect example of the effectiveness of using narrative as a tool for communicating one’s personal, political realities.*

*Sharing his narrative with us allowed me to realize that we all have stories to be told and listened to. No matter what race/ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, religion, or ability you are, you have the right to share your story through music, literature, poetry, dance comedy or Art.*

Political autobiography as a conceptual framework enabled students to understand that, while emanating from the story of his life and his blinding, the storyteller's account was broadly political. It was about power as it was constituted not just within "disability" but at the inevitable intersections of other categories of oppression. In other words, his performance opened up a space in which students could take in the intersections of multiple identities with great immediacy. Significantly, they made the links between disability, race and poverty. For example:

*A wonderful example of a theatrical political autobiography demonstrating gender, race, social status/class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, geography and ability. His implications of power were significant.*

*This was the most moving performance for me. He taught the audience that people's experience is important to analyze and that power is complicated.*

*[The performer] was able to express his experiences of poverty, racism and disability with great detail and passion. I feel his experiences with extreme poverty strengthened his ability to accept his disability and move forward quickly to explore his options for education, employment and career.*

*Amazing performance: politically strong on the issues of poverty, addiction, race, disability, gender and sexuality.*

*His life is so full of intersections: race, gender, class, ability. It offered us such rich rewarding entertainment.*

## **Challenging Dominant Narratives**

This paper points consistently to the strength of Disability Arts and Culture in countering the dominant discourse of disability by "flipping" it from a denigrated negative to a valued positive. Student audience members were alert to this process. In the lack of bitterness that he displayed over his blinding, for example, the storyteller was understood as someone who strongly resists the narrative of disability-as-a-personal-tragedy.

Similarly, the dance performance worked - energetically - to “shake the myth” or “break the stereotypical mold” of pity and limitation. It countered pervasive images of the disabled woman as an object of revulsion -- ugly, weak, awkward, undesirable -- with fresh images of the disabled woman as object of sexual desire -- beautiful, elegant, graceful, agile, alluring, sensual, and seductive. Capturing the feeling tone of the experience, one student described the performer as “slapping the audience with her sexuality.” And, echoing the African American struggle of the 1960s, the performance begged for the slogan: “Disability is Beautiful.”

*These acts really stood out to me because they made disability beautiful and very strong in their messages and not something to be ashamed of.*

Also transformed by the dance was one of the icons of disability: the wheelchair.

The dancer’s performance insisted that members of the audience engage with it in new and unexpected ways. As they watched, sometimes in confusion and unsettlement, they left behind taken-for-granted perceptions and familiarities. The wheelchair ceased to be a cage or an obstacle -- something demeaning or imprisoning -- and became a prop to be incorporated into (or out of) the dance. Taking it further, some viewers perceived the chair itself as expressive or animate: an intimate companion; a talented partner. Thus, performer and chair danced.

*I especially enjoyed the dance where she was on the floor and had the chair move around her and made the chair have its own dance. She made me see the chair in a whole new way.*

*She showed the chair as a thing of grace, beauty, strength and power for she controlled it, and utilized it in an artistic elegant way.*

*The biggest impact was the section where she was dancing with her chair as if it was a living breathing entity. The dance showed that even though the chair is not a person it has many qualities like one.*

The magic; the dance; the story: these three performances triumphed by blurring the lines between the abled and the disabled body. As a result, despite their immersion in a politicized perspective, many students did not actually “see” the performers’ impairments.

*The magician was quite hilarious. I am still wondering, where did that balloon go? Did he visit his doctor with his hand after the show? In addition, no one had mentioned his disability – was he disabled in any way?*

*There was no thought in my head of her being disabled in any way... It looked as though she could just get up and walk off the stage.*

*I had no idea he was blind until halfway through his performance.*

Disability acts as a “master status.” When it is present, other dimensions of difference are minimized or become subordinate. But here the effect was just the opposite. Theatrical and artistic performances of/from disability caused it to disappear from view. With unexpected ease, it simply slipped away. Instead, audience members became caught up in the abilities and achievements of each performer.

*While watching these performers, you don't focus on the disabilities, but on the incredible talent.*

*The performers were very proud of who they were, and gave me a powerful message that they are just individuals with unique characteristics.*

*The disability of the performers was not what people were looking at. The individual was what came first and I dare say that the message of their performance was more important than their specific disability.*

## **Celebrating Epiphanies**

When a discourse breaks down, the individual loses his/her participation in widely shared ways of seeing, feeling and knowing the social world. This is a moment of immense tenderness that can manifest as uneasy but also useful confusion. “I’m not sure of the purpose.... I wasn’t sure that this fit.... I don’t know how I felt about it.... I do not understand what it had to do with disability.... I don’t know whether this was liberating.... What was his angle?... Why should it matter ?...” These comments illustrate the hesitations voiced by Art with Attitude audience members. They signify the opening up of a space of fruitful wondering about Disability Arts and Culture, the replacement of foreclosed certainties with a fresh openness to exploration and interpretation.

Out of confusion, some audience members came to insights that will expand/enrich their future viewings of performances by this community.

*I don't know how this was a piece of liberation or art. But it opened my eyes that I am an outsider within a culture that I don't completely understand.*

*The only thing I can think of is that the performer's pain reflects the pain that society inflicts on people who are different. It disturbed me, it challenged me and perhaps in the end that's what it's all about.*

Several students had “conversion experiences.” They talked about having been “changed” in some way, or challenged to revise or reconcile some aspects of their identity/place. Some of these experiences were felt as permissive and encouraging.

*To see [disability culture] brought to the forefront through song and dance made me feel empowered to embrace my artistic abilities as a person with a disability, rather than pushing them away.*

Others appeared as direct challenges to a previously held position or view.

*I was jolted to re-examine an important part of my job.*

*My impression is each artist was able to express themselves through very different mediums, but also changed my view on their particular impairments.*

*I see things like this all the time on T.V. shows ... but had never seen it with the naked eye. It was fine with me, but the reaction from the crowd made me realize that, “Oh, maybe I’m the one who is weird!”*

A number of students expressed a hunger for more. Appetites were not satiated by the evening, merely whetted.

*I was shocked by the impact these artists had on me, and I want to see more!*

*I have a dozen friends I wish to enlighten. Please let us know if another event comes up.*

*The one thing that distresses me about the event and the videos is that we need more! I would love to see and be a part of more!*

*Next year I am bringing my boss, co-workers and friends.*

*Why did I not know this existed before? I felt very guilty and robbed to not have been exposed to this before.*

*They are magnificent performers at their art and more exposure to the public of talents such as theirs is needed.*

## **Complexifying the Debates**

In pondering the reactions of just one audience, it becomes clear that all of the themes that emerge from their comments possess a shadowy underbelly. A good example is that while many student viewers identified with the disabled characters they saw on stage, some withdrew from or resisted them.

*I could not help but to think of my own plight and wonder. Am I slowly breaking too? Is that my voice? Will it happen to me?*

*Why is the audience applauding? I sat numb and unmoving while people around me cheered and applauded. I felt that I did not belong.*

In all likelihood, behind these remarks are stories that involve the presence and history of disability in other lives. But this is speculation. Until researchers are in a position to interview audience members in depth, we will not be able to properly understand how and when Disability Arts and Culture triggers fear and alienation.

At this point in their evolution, “soothing” confirmations may be what most audiences want from or can understand of disabled artists/performers. And yet, as we discovered, to witness a performance in this genre is to be challenged and made uncomfortable as much as it is to be affirmed and uplifted. What this suggests is that “changing attitudes” is not an instantaneous and happy enlightenment arising from new and better information. Consciousness-raising about a group of people so negatively situated with respect to mainstream culture for so long can be troubling and difficult work. Disability Arts and Culture is at its most politically potent precisely here, in revealing this fallacy.

The audience for Art with Attitude 2003 was more prepared than most to understand and embrace what they saw on stage. And yet, even their comfort with disabled performers – indeed, their recognition of them as real artists – was constrained. A good example is the way in which performances were consistently read through a lens of “individual achievement.” In this sense, the “slipping away” of disability into ability that we noted earlier is actually problematic. The whole point of the Disability Arts movement – explicitly urged – is to assert and affirm the disabled body/experience rather than to have it simply melt into hegemonic culture.

Obviously, disabled artists and performers are creating and practicing in a controversial field. Their work raises major questions about representation – not just for disability but at the intersection of multiple forms of experience and oppression. As the disabled artist/performer community grows in skill and confidence, audiences must move along with it. They must become increasingly knowledgeable and sophisticated in understanding the complexities of what is being enacted. In other words, because these performances are reciprocal, both sides of the relation require attention and support. As an initial step in this direction, Art with Attitude 2004 will include post-performance forums that offer opportunities for performer/audience exchange and dialogue.

## **Disability Arts & Culture: The Road Forward**

Although the Disability Arts and Culture movement is still young in Canada, there are some notable organizations and developments facilitating its growth. As promising as these developments may seem, however, without the proper supports in place disabled artists will continue to struggle to establish a strong voice in the various genres of Disability Arts and Culture. This section considers the outlook and prospects for the Canadian Disability Arts movement, examining where the Canadian movement stands currently, what lessons can be learned from similar yet more developed movements, what tools and resources will be necessary as the movement develops and what institutional and attitudinal barriers stand in opposition to its growth.

### **Disability Arts & Culture in Canada**

As illustrated in the previous section, disabled artists in Canada are producing works that challenge and reshape our understanding of the disability experience and the relationship between disability and the arts. As a part of this development, culturally 'subversive' works have been celebrated within the disability community in the form of lectures, conferences, workshops, performance events, and arts based research. The Internet appears to function as a virtual 'front line' in the dissemination of Disability Arts, whereas traditional arts venues and organizations have too frequently been closed to the contributions of disabled artists. The Internet affords artists an opportunity to showcase and share their work, and allows disabled Canadian artists to tap into and contribute to the global Disability Arts and Culture movement.

Two Canadian organizations, [The Society for Disability Arts and Culture](#), and [Ryerson University's Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education](#), appear to be making the most organized and high profile attempts to facilitate the growth of Disability Arts and Culture in this country. The Society for Disability Arts and Culture (S4DAC), established in 1998 and based in Vancouver, British Columbia, organized the 2001 KickstART celebration: the first international festival of Disability Arts and Culture in Canada. Planning is also currently underway for KickstArt2, in the fall of 2004. In addition, in 2002 S4DAC produced a handbook for disabled artists entitled, [Art Smarts](#). The handbook includes examples of works, advice, and insights of Canadian artists with disabilities, as well as a comprehensive list of organizations that may assist disabled artists.

In 2001, Toronto's Ryerson University School of Disability Studies received a generous grant to establish the Ryerson-RBC Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education. Since that time the Institute has done much to promote Disability Arts and

Culture and to create opportunities for disabled artists to showcase their work. The Institute currently showcases two regularly scheduled two performance events: *Art with Attitude* is a staged, emceed presentation of three or four high-quality contemporary artistic works representing a variety of artistic modes, forms and styles. And *Culture Cauldron* is an open-mike, cabaret-style smorgasbord of five-minute performances of disability-inspired creative work, in which established artists share the stage with first-timers, polished performances are stacked back-to-back with works-in-progress and improvisational experiments, and individuals better known for their activist or academic strengths share lesser-known artistic talents, introducing new voices and deeper passions. Additional information and the opportunity to view video streams from several of these performances is available [on-line](#). The website's [Culture Zone](#) also contains artists' biographies and links to their works.

Despite clear inroads and growth within the Disability Arts and Culture movement in Canada, it is clear that many barriers still exist for disabled artists and those wishing to promote their work. In order to illuminate those barriers and how they are being dealt with elsewhere in the movement, it is relevant to examine the growth of Disability Arts and Culture in the U.K.

### **Disability Arts and Culture in the U.K.**

The Disability Arts and Culture movement in the U.K. appears to be the most developed in the world. An impressive number of supports and resources, including Disability-led arts organizations, academic programs, advocacy groups, arts-based research, partnerships, and funding sources, have been established in the U.K.

Two important developmental factors must be highlighted: control in the hands of disabled people within the movement, and supportive resources specifically allocated for the growth and promotion of Disability Culture. Closer examination of the development of the U.K. Disability Arts movement underscores an important process of transition, as organizations became identified and differentiated according to the degree of control vested directly in disabled people.

Artsline and Shape, had no history of being controlled by disabled people, no sense of disability culture and were both basically born from an able-bodied agenda. Artsline was all about access to mainstream art and Shape originated from the therapy tradition, where arts have a role in modifying the disabled individual in some way (Vasey 1991:1).

This is not to say that the emergence of these organizations did not benefit the growth of Disability Arts and Culture in some way, but much like other interventions for disabled

people, part of the movement remained just that: initiatives undertaken *for* disabled people, rather than initiatives led *by* disabled people.

Organizations in the UK structured to ensure direct control by disabled artists themselves, like [Graeae](#), have had a very different role in the promotion of the political and social aspects of the Disability Arts and Culture movement:

Graeae, the theatre company of disabled people took a more radical tack early on, as disabled people within it moved the company away from the limited vision of its able bodied founder towards a firm policy that the company would put on plays that in some way reflected the disability experience (Vasey 1991:1).

Already in the Canadian movement (and possibly the American movement as well), it is evident that elements of control are key to the development of a politically and culturally significant arts movement. When controlled by an able-bodied agenda, Disability Art is too often conceptualized as a therapeutic or recreational tool, rather than a political force building a common culture and redefining the construction of disability.

One major difference between Canada and the UK is the level of institutional support given to the movement and the artists within it. In the U.K., far more support is earmarked for disabled artists and organizations. For example, the U.K. Arts Council has established an Arts and Disability Monitoring Committee as well as an Arts and Disability Officer, and has published an Arts and Disability Directory (Peaker 1990). Furthermore, in 2003, in order to coincide with the European Year of the Disabled, the [Council](#) announced increased funding for individual artists and organizations in order to raise the visibility of Deaf and Disabled artists. The council also provides a [web site](#) for disabled artists, linking them to a range of financial, arts, advocacy, and rights links connected to the arts.

While the level of support in the U.K. may remain inadequate, and despite the fact that artists in the UK are still working to resolve issues of non-disabled control, it is clear that many official, government-sponsored supports and opportunities for the promotion of Disability Arts and Culture have been established to foster the growth and development of the movement in the UK. Unfortunately, that level of official support and recognition does not yet exist in Canada.

## **Making the Arts More Accessible**

Let's not forget that access to public facilities for people with disabilities is a fairly recent development in our society. It is this access that has facilitated the emancipation of many people with disabilities, and vice

versa. Access and emancipation are extremely important concepts... (Cohen 2003:2).

While artworks can be powerful... the question of who are most likely to be affected by such work [must be addressed]... First of all, and most obviously, only people who have access to these works have any chance of being affected by them. (Mullin 2000:133).

Things need to change. We need to aggressively recruit disabled artists for the professional training schools (Victoria Ann Lewis 2000:2).

You almost never see a new building that has a *stage* in it that is accessible. The theatre space, the spaces for seating and such, may be the minimum of what the law requires, but the stage itself will not be, which really says to me that we've been accepted as spectators so far, but not as anybody that's going to be part of the show (Ervin 2000:3).

Since the Disability Arts and Culture movement is closely linked to the disability rights movement, it is clear that issues of accessibility play an important role in the growth of this movement. Indeed, with respect to access, it is important to note that many discussions around access have focused on making arts venues physically (and to a lesser extent financially) accessible for disabled patrons, rather than to disabled artists. Implicit in this mainstream discourse on arts and accessibility is the idea that disabled people's place in the art world (if they have a place at all) is as consumers, rather than producers of artistic work. Accessibility to the arts, however, must be conceptualized in a matter that recognizes a complex myriad of issues including: professional training opportunities, funding sources, transportation, cost, and attitudinal barriers that prevent disabled people from producing and showcasing artistic work, as well as collaborating with other artists and taking up their place as members of an informed and selective audience. Indeed, assuming all physical barriers were removed, we would be left with the question of how accessible is an established art world that persistently misrepresents and stereotypes disability? How are disabled creators to be viewed as *artists* in a climate that devalues and/or pathologizes their work and frames it as treatment rather than aesthetic and/or political statement?

Despite legal obligations to ensure artistic venues are accessible to disabled patrons, there are still many high profile providers who not only fail to make their spaces accessible, but also appear to have aggressive policies excluding disabled patrons. In one recent case, a Toronto theatre informed two disabled patrons that they were not welcome

to return, as they posed a potential hazard to other patrons (Cohen 2003:1). This case is far from unique, as many enterprises that fail to meet legal thresholds of accessibility to defend their inaccessible and unwelcoming facilities by situating the “problem” with disabled patrons themselves. Implicit in this defence is that services that exclude disabled people legitimately do so in order to properly and safely accommodate non-disabled patrons. It is interesting to note how this line of reasoning mirrors the exclusion and oppression of disabled people in other social arenas, as frequently the notion of “protecting” the non-disabled population is offered to justify the social exclusion of people with disabilities. Clearly the disability rights movement in Canada has far to go before achieving compliance with both the letter and the spirit of established human rights legislation.

Moving beyond structural accessibility, the question of attaining quality training and performing opportunities are also of fundamental importance. It has been noted that “disabled people are often disempowered, if not excluded, by arts training” (Barnes et. al. 1999:207). Many disabled artists find it difficult to access arts training as much of it remains geared towards a non-disabled population, and is inaccessible to disabled artists financially, structurally and attitudinally.

Both the content of publicly-presented artwork, and the space within which the performance takes place, must become more accessible to disabled artists. A more realistic, more diverse sampling of human experience, including the experience of disability, should be represented in art galleries, on television, in films, in theatres and on performance stages of all kinds. As disabled characters, artists and performers appear more often in their full-bodied wholeness as active creators of culture, the tendency to portray “disability-as-metaphor” will become less and less possible.

Theatres need to recognize disability as part of the diversity agenda. And our casting practices need to reflect those of other minority communities, in which every effort is made to provide employment for qualified actors with disabilities (Victoria Ann Lewis 2000:2).

Disabled artists are ready to take on the task of re-framing their role in the art world to one of pride, empowerment, and active participation in the production of artistic work. In order for Disability Arts and Culture to flourish, quality training opportunities, scripts and stories that start from the lived experience of disability, performance opportunities, and accessible performing spaces must all become more widely available to disabled artists.

## **Funding and the Promotion of Disability Arts & Culture**

Clearly, the lack of robust development of Disability Arts and Culture in Canada, is directly related to the kinds of funding available, other criteria by which eligibility for this funding is available and the extent and nature of artistic projects typically funded. The scarcity of funding with respect to the Disability Arts and Culture movement is an under-appreciated crisis that merits careful analysis and fulsome response.

In the course of researching this project, not one Canadian funding source was found that *specifically* addressed the needs of disabled artists. Disabled Canadian artists can apply for the same funding as non-disabled artists, but there is nothing in place for the development or advancement of Disability Arts and Culture. This lack of specific funding is likely due to a number of barriers within traditional funding schemes.

In its marginalizing of disabled people, the social imaginary directly thwarts the aspirations of disabled artists seeking to establish viable livelihoods within the arts industry. Disability Arts and Culture are not the traditional sites where disability and art intersect. In the eyes of many (notably including gatekeepers in arts funding, arts infrastructure, arts media and arts discourse) disability and art are linked only therapeutically. The far more politicized tasks of creating and affirming cultural identity and deconstructing the politics of both art and disability, invariably leave disabled artists outside the parameters of traditional disability funding and mainstream arts support.

The experience of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, writers and producers of the American documentary film *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back* (1998) powerfully illustrates the enormous challenges faced by disabled artists in securing appropriate funding for artistic work. In their pursuit financial support for this groundbreaking documentary account of the Disability Arts and Culture movement, the filmmakers discovered that “ironically, disability organizations with grant monies refused to fund the documentary because it wasn’t ‘rehabilitative’ or ‘practically applicable’ to the real lives of people with disabilities” (1998:333). Negotiating the funding terrain with such a uniquely political piece was fraught with difficulty:

... the central funding organizations for disability research such as the World Institute for Disability (WID) and the National Institute for Disability Research and Rehabilitation (NIDRR), look upon artistic approaches to disability as existing outside the more rigorous and practical approaches of science and therapy (Mitchell & Snyder 1998:333-334).

The friction between *Vital Signs* (and arguably most Disability Arts projects) and the kinds of endeavours typically supported and encouraged, was that this project “sought *revision* while those disability granting operations seek an illusive notion of *correction*” (Mitchell & Snyder 1998:334).

The *Vital Signs* project was rejected not only by the “disability” sector, but also by mainstream arts organizations. PBS (The American Public Broadcasting System) and the Independent Television and Video Service found this project too complex, their notion of disability and its function in the arts being more suited to “the powerful stuff of first person melodrama... [rather than] an organizing component or political identity or subculture perspective” (Mitchell & Snyder 1998:334). Even [Very Special Arts](#), an organization specifically mandated to “create a society where people with disabilities can learn through, participate in, and enjoy the arts”, declined to support the project. As disabled artists struggle to find place and voice in both the arts world and the world of disability, they lack the very support required to revise and open these worlds up to their work.

*Vital Signs* did eventually find the funding it needed and the final edit of this piece was done, ironically, with the support of the Mayo Clinic (Mitchell & Snyder 1998). With respect to this unlikely funding source, Mitchell and Snyder note that they “accepted [their] strange bedfellows” (1998:334).

Although in the United States traditional funding avenues originally closed to works like *Vital Signs* may now be opening up to Disability Arts and Culture (Mitchell & Snyder 1998), funding opportunities to promote Disability Arts in the Canadian context are still conspicuously absent from mainstream arts and disability funding sources. Until major Canadian social institutions recognize the importance of nurturing and promoting Disability Arts and Culture, until a place is made for supporting these creative projects, Disability Arts pioneers will likely continue to rely on strange, surprising, and often uneasy pairings.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that the Canadian Disability Arts and Culture movement is at a crucial stage in its development. It has reached a point in its growth where it has produced a fair number of artists, and a growing audience for their work. Disability Culture appears poised to take its place in a broad agenda of cultural development. Yet it is questionable whether this movement will have the resources required to raise its profile, expand its capacity and deliver its message to a broader audience. Indeed, in order for Disability Arts and Culture to be artistically, culturally, and politically successful its message must reach beyond the disability rights community into places of direct challenge to

medicalized discourse. We conclude with an outward turn to the reader, and an open question to those who shape and administer Canadian cultural policy: Will the creative contributions of disabled Canadian artists remain vital but invisible?

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## **Disability Arts & Culture Links**

### **Disability Arts and Culture Organizations**

[All Change](#)

[Artsline](#)

[Attitude is everything](#)

[✳️ Canadian Centre on Disability Studies: Culture Links](#)

[Centre for Developmental Arts](#)

[Disability Action Hall](#)

[Graeae](#)

[Institute on Disability Culture](#)

[✳️ Integrated Arts](#)

[International Guild of Disabled Artists and Performers](#)

[London Disability Arts Forum](#)

[National Arts and Disability Center](#)

[National Disability Arts Forum](#)

[✳️ Ryerson RBC Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education](#)

[✳️ Society for Disability Arts and Culture](#)

[Shape](#)

[Stage Left Production](#)

[VSA Arts](#)

## **Disability Arts & Culture on Display**

[AbleTv](#)

✳️ [Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf: Deaf Culture](#)

[Crip-stirring Culture](#)

[Disability Arts and Entertainment Links](#)

[Disability Social History Project](#)

[Disability World](#)

[Disability Arts Database](#)

[Disability Cool](#)

[Disability Culture Rap](#)

[Disability Discussion Forum](#)

[Dizabled](#)

[The Disability Archive](#)

✳️ [EnableLink Arts Links](#)

[International Centre for Bioethics, Culture and Disability](#)

✳️ [kickstART!2001](#)

[Madness and Arts 2003 World Festival](#)

[The Nth Degree](#)

[Outsider Art](#)

✳️ [Picture This Film Festival](#)

[Promoting Creative Power](#)

[Ragged Edge Magazine On-Line](#)

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## **Disability Culture Documents & Resources**

[Arts and Disability Movement](#)

[Artists with Disabilities: A Cultural Explosion](#)  
[Artistic Quality](#)

[Annotated Bibliography About Disability Culture](#)

[Annotated Bibliography on Life Writing and Disability](#)

[British Film Institute: Disability Strategy](#)

[!\[\]\(e47960738e6ea3789f6c775a7c00e3a4\_img.jpg\) DAWN Canada: Disability Culture](#)

[Disability in Television](#)

[Disability Studies Links](#)

[Disability Arts Magazine](#)

[Disability Culture](#)

['Feet--What do I Need Them For if I Have Wings to Fly?': Disability as Power in the Works of Mary Duffy, Frida Kahlo, and Vassar Millar](#)

[How We Get Where We Are: A Select Bibliographical Look at Disability Culture](#)

[!\[\]\(7bc7d0b21fb75edca085762d3c2705d2\_img.jpg\) Re-imagining the \(Dis\)abled Body](#)

[!\[\]\(606a2135522c6c8720259a5c82bda9b6\_img.jpg\) Arts Smart Handbook](#)

[Transcript of Disability Arts and Culture Seminar](#)

## **Disability Arts & Culture Festivals**

[!\[\]\(03679d0b8c1c8fe2130e9ec163b81a65\_img.jpg\) Picture This](#)

[!\[\]\(290f0a1c279c1a58bab46217fd22de76\_img.jpg\) kickstART!](#)

## **Arts Accessibility**

[Blindspots: Movie Reviews for Visually Impaired People](#)

[✿ Brail Tone Music Society](#)

[Project Ability](#)

[The Association for Theatre and Accessibility](#)