

# Lunch & Learn Presentation for the Canada Council for the Arts

2014

This document represents Stage Left's first effort to disrupt the reduction of all existing disability equity concerns into the single of issue of "access"; by advancing practice-focused knowledge:

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## **An Overview of Canada's Disability Arts & Culture Milieu (DACM)**

Summary of a Lunch & Learn Presentation, for translation into French

### **Preamble**

#### **(1) Outside of Canada, the DACM is referred to as a global Disability Arts Movement.**

This is in acknowledgement of the Movement's roots as a form of Political Art that is practiced by artists with impairment(s) who work within the socio-political, impairment-specific, re-imagined traditions of Disability Arts, Mad Pride, and Deaf Culture.

#### **(2) In Canada "Disability Arts" has become "Disability Arts & Culture".**

(a) In Canada there has been an equal focus within the DACM on both artistic and cultural (e.g. community-building) programming, as well as an equal mix of community and professional arts.

(b) In Canada we are now referring to our collective body of artwork as representative of a Milieu, instead of a Movement.

(c) Firstly, this to recognize the current professionalization (but hopefully not neoliberalization) of the DACM as a whole, since we were successful in motivating you toward policy and investment.

(c) Secondly, this is to acknowledge that the Disability Arts Movement in Canada has moved away from its roots as a unique means of promoting disability rights and justice through Political Art that are accommodating and affirming of both impairment and aesthetic autonomy.

#### **(3) Canada is a leading contributor to the global Disability Arts Movement.**

Yet our contributions remain vastly under-promoted on the world stage.

#### **(4) The term "Disability Arts & Culture" is used here as an all-inclusive one.**

I use it here as inclusive of all art forms practiced by Canadian artists with impairment(s).

#### **(5) The term "disability" is used here as inclusive of all people with any kind of impairment(s).**

We acknowledge that this is problematic for the Deaf community, who prefer to be understood first and foremost as a class of people who are a linguistic minority.

#### **(6) Many others share similar resistance to the term "disability".**

(a) In the DACM, "Disability" has more recently become overly-associated with the Charitable and Medical Models of Disability, which position "the lived experience of disability" as primarily a form of tragic affliction that must be overcome or cured at all costs.

(b) Additionally, in keeping with Canada's official language policy, our Milieu is - unfortunately - not yet able to address the linguistic, advocacy nor practice gaps that exist between Francophone and Anglophone perspectives of "Disabled"/ "invalidité ou "la infirmité ou "handicap"...

## **Background**

### **(7) I am here on behalf of the collective of over 200 artists who established the DACM.**

Many of whom have not been largely recognized within nor supported through the "core" DACM arts organizations, who have inadvertently been privileged over independent artists.

### **(8) I am a person with several invisible impairment(s) and many different social identities.**

(a) As I am also active in decolonization, anti-racist, and LGBTQTT movements in Alberta, I cannot introduce myself to you without first acknowledging the teachings of my colleagues who are members of First Nation, Metis and Inuit communities and thus also members of other diverse artistic networks in the professional ecology as well.

(b) The ways in which "disability" itself discriminates is a follow-up EPIC presentation we'd also be happy to deliver to you.

(c) We are, in fact, one of the most diverse artistic constituencies within your (potential) client base – the one group that is actually growing the fastest and the largest throughout our professional ecology.

(d) Me, personally? I identify as a proudly working class (culturally if not always economically), Feminist, Lesbian, Mad, and Disabled artist/ activist (with emphasis on the activist part).

(e) And, of course, as you all know, I also identify as a Radical (but not the prudent kind Monsieurs Schryer and Gaudet keep trying to turn me into). The kind that won't rest until the *systems* – not individuals – that prevent access are they themselves rehabilitated.

(f) I will reference some examples of Deaf Art as a "small d" member of the Deaf community. In this, I can only speak to the integrity of Deaf Culture as a non-signing ally to the Deaf community - one who is profoundly deaf (more on those still-needed distinctions to come).

(g) I will reference some Francophone DACM companies/ artists, but I do not here profess to be able to represent (Canadian) French cultural perspectives nor artistic traditions.

### **(9) I am an artist with 27+ years of experience in the professional arts ecology.**

(a) I am uneducated, but have gained a great deal of earned experience from a large variety of administrative, artistic, and technical roles - and in many different disciplines, with companies from the margins to the core – with annual budgets ranging from zero to over 5 million.

(a) Ironically, my first paid gig as a professional artist was as SM to *Children of Lesser God* - in 1987, for Shadow Productions in Calgary. Long before "Deaf" or "Disability Arts" were even a "thing". But when "cultural sovereignty" and "independence" (aka "aesthetic authority") were the primary concerns of practicing artists - over "access" - which you really should be framing as "accommodation" ... in keeping with the legal Duty to Accommodate you have as a Crown Corporation. That is one good example you could set for others among us!

(b) Over the past 15 years, I have become the leading contributor to Canada's DACM. To my knowledge, I remain one of the few professional, career-track disabled artists who is making my

living entirely within the resources available to us within the professional ecology. And that has done so now for over a 20 years.

(c) To the best of my knowledge, I also bring to your table today the most varied experience - directly within the professional sector, in multiple roles and disciplines. Not to mention the only view - so far - of the whole. and national scope

**(10) I am here because they way that the Canada Council has begun professionalizing the DACM, has collapsed all our complexities of identity and practice not a single colonial norm.** One that your other equity-seeking constituencies have been telling for you decades now .

**(11) My goal today is to help you not steer us all down those same dead ends, all over again.** The phrase we use in the activist community for this dilemma is "same struggle, different difference". I'm here to hopefully share with you some thing that are new – to you, but not to those of us who been part of the DACM before it actually existed!

## **Context**

### **I. The History of Disability Arts & Culture in Canada's is 40+ years old.**

#### **(1) Phase I: 1970 to 2000 – Independent Artistic Production**

(a) Many already established artists with impairment(s) were producing artwork during this period – including, for example, David Freeman, Persimmon Blackbridge, Lizard Jones, Meiko Ando, Rachel da Silva Gorman, Lyle Victor Albert, Alan Shain, Michele Decottignies, Joe Coughlin, Jeff Healy, Jane Cameron, and Alex Bulmer.

(b) Many of these artists' work was developed with professional disciplinary-based arts funding.

(c) Much of our work was also produced and/or presented through established, professional arts organizations and/or events, including Tarragon Theatre, Factory Lab, Nightwood Theatre, fFIDA, SummerWorks, and the High Performance Rodeo.

(d) In other words, we already had *access* to the professional arts, but because of the strength of the artistic merit and public impact of our artwork; not as a result of the ongoing need for increased access and inclusion into more cultural domains of society for people with impairment(s), along with all other marginalized community groups in the sector.

#### **(2) Phase II: 2000 to 2010 – Organization-based Arts Presenting**

(a) The DACM greatly enjoyed the rise of Disability Arts & Culture Festivals across the country during this time. Ryerson's Disability Studies faculty began producing an evening showcase for their students in 1999. They produced a total of 10 of these events, which were for their private, invited, academic audience only. Kickstart Arts produced the first major, public Festival in 2001 in Vancouver (and have now produced a total of 5 multidisciplinary festivals and one film festival). Stage Left produced 10 annual versions of Balancing Acts in Calgary, starting in early 2001.

Madness and the Arts World Festival came next, in Toronto, in 2003. Abilities Arts Festival took to the stage in Toronto, starting in 2005 (they've produced an annual Festival ever since). The Arts & Disability Network of Manitoba began producing national events more recently. And several, self-produced, smaller regional events have sprouted up all over Canada as well.

(b) And what few seems to have asserted to you yet is that Mad Pride! actually started it all, right here in Toronto - starting in 1991, under the artistic and cultural leadership of Ruth Ruth Stackhouse who also has yet to be supported by any of your new dis arts strategies and funding.

(d) These kinds of self-organized, self-produced events became the first means of national promotion for DACM artists across Canada. Besides national promotion, these Festivals also became the primary means of artist networking. Dr. Kirsty Johnson has published an article detailing the many positive benefits of these events, as have several Disability Studies scholars; so they won't all be reiterated here.

(e) In terms of developing continued policies and supports for career-track, professional artists with impairment(s) in Canada, something that is important to note is the fact that only one of these events was firmly entrenched within the professional arts ecology: Balancing Acts was co-presented by One Yellow Rabbit in Calgary's EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts as part of OYR's regular season of programming, for its first several years. Through this partnership, we forged solid relationships with audiences and colleagues from within the broader arts ecology. And we gained a strong non-disabled ally in Michael Green, who went on to include many artists with impairment(s) in the High Performance Rodeo.

(f) It is also important to note that only one of these earlier Festivals was produced by an already-established, disabled artist - also Balancing Acts. The rest were very well respected Disability Studies scholars, disability rights activists, disability service providers, health professionals and emerging artists. Problem is, those presenters came to the DACM table with little experience in, or relationship with, the professional arts industry.

(g) The shift from production to presenting therefore inadvertently shifted the locus of control over DACM discourse from independent, established artists working within the core of the professional arts ecology to emerging arts presenters working almost exclusively within different segments of the disability community (community and applied arts, disability service sector, the academy, and the Charitable sector).

(h) While the Festivals were undoubtedly a boon to the national promotion of Disability Arts & Culture, and the only available touring circuit for disabled artists, they also unfortunately resulted in a chasm between the more established, senior DACM artists – who were already working within the professional arts ecology – and the volume of emerging artists who eventually became the segment of the DACM community that was well served via the Festival circuit.

(i) And yet the vast majority of artists emerging out of this core circuit of DACM presenting organizations have not been able to gain access to the broader professional arts ecology.

**(3) Phase III: 2010 - present: The institutionalization of the DACM as a whole**

(a) Several years ago, Stage Left initiated an arts advocacy campaign to increase professional arts supports for artists with impairment(s). We were successful in getting enough DACM artists to respond to a Canada Council survey that was intended to inform the development of their next Strategic Plan. Disability Arts thus made it onto the Canada Council's official policy radar in 2005!

(b) We unfortunately did not anticipate that your formalized investment into Disability Arts & Culture would be positioned in the Equity Office and focus on capacity development. While still necessary for many DACM contributors, this has bolstered most of the companies that are not recognized by their peers as professional arts organizations, but considered moreso to be community arts companies. These companies have not served the more established DACM artists, nor advanced more emerging artists with impairment(s) into the broader arts ecology. (And the arts access funding that you keep giving to all of them has only inverted authority over who gets included from the most qualified among us to the least .)

(c) The vast majority of disabled artists who are not affiliated with these companies have consequently turned away from the DACM to sustain their careers as artists – including Stage Left and the volume of more established artists we have been able to support and collaborate with on a national scope.

(d) This same group of artists have now collaborated on the development and dissemination of practice-specific knowledge about Canada's DACM. We hope it will more comprehensively inform the development of DACM-specific arts policy. We have also collectively initiated the development of The Disability Arts & Culture Alliance of Canada, as a nascent NASO. Though the process of incorporating it, we are endeavoring to "professionalize" the DACM as a whole across Canada, largely by shifting the DACM's primary focus back to independent artistic production, by disseminating artistic practice knowledge, and by mobilizing the more experienced artists among us across the country.

**II. Barriers for artists with impairment(s) extend far beyond "access to the arts"**

Limited opportunities for "access to the arts" isn't actually unique to artists with impairments, but something experienced by all equity-seeking client groups. Access to the arts is uniquely manifest in the DACM as the need for physically accessible venues. However, while there are actually some already accessible arts venues in Canada they are not seeing an increase of artists with impairment(s) making use of them.

Why then, after 15 years of national DACM arts promotion and presenting, and Council's more recent access funding, has all of this not translated into a significant increase in artist(s) with impairment(s) working in the professional arts? Because we are facing far more barriers than limited physical access to professional arts venues. The following barriers are detailed here for reference but will not be explained more fully nor discussed in detail, as Council's Disability Arts Officer is developing an access guide that elucidates these artistic practice issues more clearly than I can here:

**(1) Disablism:**

The entrenched, and therefore often unconsciously embedded, ideology that people with disabilities aren't capable of making independent, informed choices for ourselves – and the

resultant behaviors and attitudes toward us that position people with disabilities as a class of oppressed people.

**(2) Dependency:**

The extension of the dominant mode of disability service delivery into the DACM has resulted in the vast majority of non-disabled, DACM-based artists not being challenged around the leadership positions they have been given (or have taken for themselves in some cases). Nor has the degree of credibility they have been given over established artists with impairment(s) been challenged.

**(3) Ghettoization:**

As soon as people with disabilities self-organize with other members of our own community – i.e. other people with impairment(s) – our non-disabled supporters (and staff) accuse us of ghettoizing ourselves. This accusation is (a) predicated on the notion that disability is a form of abnormality, (b) that the non-disabled are entitled to give, or not give us, their approval, and (c) an assertion that we do not have the right of free association with our own peers in society. It also negates the very real difference between the forced segregation of people with disabilities into institutions for the "mentally defective" and the willful separation by people with impairment(s) from a mass culture that relentlessly devalues us.

**(4) Eternal innocence (this framing is from Dr. Rachel Gorman):**

The "Art Brut" and "Kitsch Aesthetics" ideologies that assert artists with impairment are not capable of making informed artistic choices in terms of the purpose, style, properties, and materials used to make art that is about something that the artist has to say to society.

**(5) Innate artistic genius:**

The notion that everything that comes out of the mouth or body of a disabled person is somehow organically artistic. This denies us the opportunity to make informed artistic choices, which turns us into artistic objects rather than subjects in artistic production and presenting.

**(6) Objectification and/or exoticization of our Otherness:**

When people with disabilities are treated as topics for non-disabled artists to represent in their art, this almost always results in the objectification and/or exoticization of disabled people – because too many non-disabled artists are indoctrinated with the hegemonic notions of disability as a form of abnormality, tragedy, and/or grotesqueness that has so often been gawked at and marveled over.

**(7) Cultural erasure:**

The core artistic function of Disability Arts, Mad Pride, and Deaf Art as forms of Political Art that promote disability justice and/or glorify the Otherness of impairment has been lost in Canada Council's Strategy, in which "Disability Culture" and "Mad Pride" became "the lived experience of disability". And in which Council wholeheartedly embraced Deaf Culture, but did not once mention Disability Culture and erased Mad Pride (and therefore Mad-identified artists) off the arts ecology map altogether. Yet Disability Arts and Mad Pride are what established Disability Arts & Culture in Canada in the first place.

**(8) Cultural imposition:**

Normalization is the dominant agenda for people with impairment(s) in all spheres of society. Normalization is also the dominant theory behind all disability service, and it is – by far – the dominant ideology that is firmly entrenched in the Canadian collective psyche. Normalization means giving people with impairment(s) the greatest opportunities possible for our full inclusion into mass culture. But mass culture is where disability is devalued the most. So most of the representations of disability in popular culture actually reinforce disability stereotypes instead of challenge them. Insisting that artists with impairment(s) conform our "abnormal" minds and bodies to the "universally" recognizable forms of Traditional Arts can therefore also become a form of normalization and thus a form of cultural imposition.

**(9) Disability stereotypes :**

- tragic victims of painful, woeful afflictions
- inspirational supercrips who are overcoming the tragedy of disability or must consider suicide if we can't become more normal or independent enough
- burdens on society
- sources of embarrassment and shame
- dependent on the non-disabled
- abnormal, grotesque, deformed, violent monsters that need rehabilitation or institutionalization or to be shot dead by an angry horde of non-disabled vigilantes
- medical oddities/ freaks that are therefore rich spectacle for the non-disabled to wonder over, gawk at, and get grossed out over
- and so on

**(10) The absence of accessible professional arts training for artists with impairment(s):**

Most formalized arts training is not at all accessible nor inclusive, and is focused almost entirely on the Traditional Arts. Most informal training offered within the DACM has been by non-disabled artists who impose Traditional forms of art onto our non-traditional bodies. Those established DACM artists with training curricula in non-normalizing technique have not been called on by the core DACM organizations as trainers and/or mentors for the emerging artists they support.

**(11) Artist exploitation:**

Arts industry best practices, protocols, and standards are not being consistently adhered to when artists with impairment(s) are involved.

**NEW (to you at least!): Artistic Information!!**

**I. The Culture part of Disability Arts & Culture**

(1) Canada's DACM represents one artistic domain that consists of **shared cultural purposes**.

(2) Some of the DACM's shared cultural purposes include:

(a) To represent the distinct ways that impairment informs and enriches artistic expression and appreciation, and offers unique perspectives of the world;



- (b) To increase the meaningful, qualified participation of artists with impairment(s) in both professional and community arts;
- (c) To challenge the belief that only non-disabled people can make art, and that all people with disabilities require the help of non-disabled people and artists to create art;
- (d) To foster disability pride through the production of art work of high artistic merit and through equity in artistic production and engagement processes;
- (e) To encourage arts stakeholders to improve access for artists, participants, and patrons with impairment(s) and to provide examples of best practice in this regard;
- (f) To reject notions of the "healthy" or "normal" body as the only source of aesthetic appreciation and assessment;
- (g) To contribute to Canada's canons of Traditional, Contemporary, and Alternative forms of art, in all artistic disciplines;
- (h) To promote artwork made by artists with impairment(s);
- (i) To give artists with impairment control over the artistic representation of the "lived experience of impairment";
- (j) To challenge the notions that DACM artistic practices are ONLY forms of rehabilitation, therapy, or education for people with impairment(s) and/or form of education or awareness for people without impairment(s); and
- (k) To challenge the notion that DACM artistic practices are ONLY of interest or value to audiences comprised of people with impairment(s).

## **II. The Art part of Disability Arts & Culture**

Canada's DACM represents one domain that consists of **six distinct artistic practices**:

### **(1) The Arts & Disability:**

- (a) These are Traditional forms of art that are practiced by artists with impairment(s).
- (b) The primary function of the Arts & Disability is to provide artists with impairment(s) access to the professional arts.
- (c) Supports for the Traditional Arts are already available to artists with impairment(s) within each of the disciplinary offices. Council's "equity prioritization" in grant application assessments is leveling the playing field for artists with impairment(s) who face unique barriers within each discipline.
- (d) Two examples of the Arts & Disability are:
  - (i) Alan Shain, the storyteller, who was a featured artist in Ottawa Storytellers' presentation of the entirety of THE ILIAD in one reading.

(ii) Joe Coughlin, the very successful jazz vocalist.

**(2) "Integrated" Dance (recently expanded into the more general "Integrated Arts")**

(a) Within the DACM, "Integrated" is being used as a term that means "mixed abilities", NOT Interdisciplinary Arts as defined by the Canada Council's Inter-Arts Office.

(b) What "Integrated Dance" or "Integrated Arts" means in the context of the DACM is "inclusive" arts. We are therefore encouraging our colleagues who work in "inclusive arts" to align their terminology with already established practices in the professional arts ecology.

(c) Because, really, "integrated" arts or – more accurately "inclusive" arts – are forms of Artist-Community Collaboration that are primarily facilitated by non-disabled artists.

(d) The primary function of this art form is to include people with disabilities in the arts, through adaptation and inclusion techniques. In many cases, there emerges a few community participants who desire to move into a professional arts practice. But, by far, most "inclusive arts" participants simply want to "participate in the arts", not to become professional artists. And the majority of programming in most DACM-based "Integrated Arts" organizations is focused on community-arts inclusion, not professionalization processes for emerging artists.

(e) Supports for "inclusive arts" – i.e. Artist-Community Collaboration – are already available to the facilitating artists within each of the disciplinary offices.

(f) Examples are Propeller Dance, MoMo Dance Theatre, Theatre Terrific, Calgary SCOPE Society, Creative Spirit Arts Centre, Picasso Pro, and many other community-based arts organizations that have been privileged as professional arts organizations within the DACM.

(g) Most of these organizations are unfortunately not recognized as professional arts organizations by the vast majority of non-disabled artists, nor by the vast majority of senior, established Disabled, Mad, and/or Deaf-identified artists – aka they are not recognized by their peers as professional arts organizations, which is one of Council's core funding criteria.

**(3) Deaf Arts:**

(a) Deaf Arts specifically represent Deaf Culture.

(b) The primary purpose of Deaf Arts is to infuse a Deaf cultural presence in the arts and in the world.

(c) "Deaf culture" is a positive term, indicating pride in a distinct collective identity that encompasses the norms, beliefs, values, and mores shared by members of the Deaf community.

(d) Deaf cultural norms inform not only artistic content but also artistic form. For example, Deaf actors do not speak oral English or French on stage. They instead communicate with their audience through Deaf Cultural symbols and imagery such as ASL symbols.

(d) Art technique and production is controlled by people who identify as Deaf artists. But the work can also involve non-Deaf artists as collaborators.

(e) Two examples of Deaf Arts work are:

(i) Adam Pottle's play, Ultrasound. Adam created a play that represents Deaf culture in content: In this show, two Deaf parents discover they are about to have a hearing baby. They must then consider whether or not to abort the baby because it will not be a part of their Deaf cultural norms.

(ii) Some of Tiphaine Girault's Visual Art features LSQ symbols embedded in nature to reveal the contrast between vocal-aural and visual-manual languages – in a striking print that she's titled "Pollution sonore" ("sound pollution"). The left image of this print represents the desolate pollution of aural noises. On the other hand, in keeping with Deaf cultural norms, the right image describes sign language as joy and nature as experienced by eyeing people. Sign language thus embodies an intimate experience of connection to nature through the use of the "impaired" body.

#### **(4) Mad Pride:**

(a) Mad Pride is the artistic representation of Mad Culture.

(b) Most think of people with mental illness only in terms of medical diagnoses and abnormalities. In this, there becomes a lot of emphasis on “mental health awareness” and/or on challenging “stigma” - which are forms of education and awareness, not art.

(c) When we talk about Mad Culture, however, we are talking about those who are Mad as a class of people. Madness then becomes a political and social identity that we take pride in.

(d) As Mad people, we have unique ways of experiencing the world, making meaning, developing community, and creating culture. We take pride in our unique culture.

(e) Mad Pride is celebrated globally through arts, culture, and heritage festivals by psychiatric survivors, consumers, mad people, and folks the world has labeled “mentally ill”.

(f) Mad Pride is about remembering and participating in mad history, challenging discrimination, advocating for rights, affirming Mad identities, and developing and empowering mad communities.

(g) Mad-Pride is practiced by artists who proudly identify as Mad.

(h) Two examples of Mad Pride work are:

(i) Friendly Spike Theatre Band in Toronto.

(ii) Charlene Hellson, from the Siksika First Nation in Alberta, and her solo-performance, UNPACKING THE BACKPACK, which reveals the causal relationship between Aboriginal mental illness and colonization.

**(5) Disability Arts:**

(a) Disability Art is more than any artwork that is created by any person with an impairment: Disability Arts specifically seek to glorify impairment as a natural and desirable source of diversity in society.

(b) The primary purpose of Disability Arts is to challenge the normalization of impairment through socio-political interrogations of the "lived experience of disability" in artistic narratives/ themes and through the re-imagining of Traditional artistic symbols in artistic form.

(c) Disability Arts thus promote a unique alternative to romanticized notions and idealized forms of aesthetic appreciation through the glorification of impairment.

(d) Disability Arts are practiced by artists who proudly identify as Disabled.

(e) Two examples of Disability Arts work include:

(i) David Freeman's CREEPS.

(ii) Persimmon Blackbridge's visual artwork.

**(6) Inter- and Trans-disciplinary Disability Arts & Culture:**

(a) A primary purpose is to examine how bodies and social identities are classified as either "normal" or "abnormal". This is not unique to Disability Arts & Culture, but to all forms of art that examine what used to be called "the politics of the body".

(b) All represent the intersections of disability, LGBTTIQ, gender, racialized, and other social identities through deconstructions of "Othered bodies".

(c) Crip or Gimp Arts represent a contemporary framing of disability identity through the advancement of counter-cultural reclamation.

(d) QueerCrip Arts move issues of identity, embodiment, and desire to the center of cultural and political analyses.

(d) Feminist & LGBTTIQ Disability Arts challenge socially constructed notions of female and male identities and sexuality, and the lingering ideologies of "disabled people are asexual", "women are hysterical" and members of the LGBTTIQ community "mentally ill".

(e) Ethno-cultural Disability Arts challenge socially constructed notions of racialized identities and the exoticization of ethno-cultural diversity.

(f) Two examples of Inter- and/or Transdisciplinary Disability Arts work include:

(i) Rachel Gorman's intercultural dance theatre work.

(ii) Meg Torwl's intersectional digital media work.

### **III. The aesthetics of Disability Arts & Culture in Canada:**

(a) Arts & Disability and "Integrated" (aka "inclusive") Arts tend to rely on Traditional aesthetics, which are adapted as necessary to enable the artists with impairment(s) to more fully achieve the "universal" symbols of those artforms.

(b) The more culturally-based DACM artistic practices tend to make use of impairment-specific aesthetics, which Dr. Rachel Gorman has framed as "the aesthetics of real vs. imaginary bodies."

(c) "Disability aesthetics refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body – and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty – as the sole determination of aesthetic appreciation." (From Tobin Siebers's book, *Disability Aesthetics*)

(d) It is our collective assertion that greater investment in artistic production that enables more representations of Disability aesthetics is what will enable Disability Arts & Culture to continue to flourish in Canada. This is one area of the DACM that has not yet been well attended to, nor greatly supported. Yet this is where lies our greatest opportunity to influence and reshape the professional arts ecology.

## **(Potential) DACM Framework for identification and assessment**

### **I. Spectrums for the identification and assessment of DACM artistic practices**

Unfortunately, none of the definitions framed above are actually as neat and tidy as suggested. Most DACM artwork is a merger of any or all of the above. And, to make things even more complex, most DACM artists do not work exclusively in one form or another.

So we have developed a framework of SPECTRUMS. These spectrums are intended to aid in the identification of which DACM artistic practice the artists are engaged in – and therefore to make it more clear to funders what discipline or office applications for funding support should be submitted to.

Our hope is also that consideration of these spectrums will lead to a more informed assessment at the PAC level and greater appreciation for the distinct DACM art forms at the audience level.

#### **(1) The Spectrum of Social Identity**

Just as not every female artist in Canada identifies as a Feminist artist, so too not every artist with an impairment identifies as a Disabled, Mad, or Deaf artist.

The spectrum of DACM social identity therefore runs from

(A) The individual model of disability to -----(B) The collective/ cultural model of impairment.

On the individual model side of the spectrum, the artist's social identity is described in terms of their individual position in the world: "I'm disabled but my art is not". "I am an artist, period". "I am a person with a disability who happens to be an artist". These individuals with impairment tend to be more identified with mass/ popular culture notions of disability, than those embedded in "disability culture".

On the collective/ cultural model side of this spectrum, the artist's identity is described in terms of their proud membership in the class of oppressed people generally referred to as "people with disabilities". We enjoy affinity with our peers. We celebrate, nurture, and promote Disability Justice, Mad Pride, and/or Deaf Culture as a form of counter-culturalism and we proudly call ourselves Disabled, Mad, and/or Deaf artists.

Not very many people with impairment want to be affiliated with an oppressed community. Because, understandably, not very many people with impairment(s) want to be perceived as victims. So it's especially important to note here that only the disability community has been denied the opportunity to glorify our otherness in terms of human rights advocacy. The Civil Rights Movements, for example, came together around the rallying cry of "Black is Beautiful". Feminists came together around the ideology that "Sisterhood is Powerful". The Queer Community has turned "Pride" into some cities' biggest tourist attractions!

But the community of people with impairment(s), who often require supports in daily living from non-disabled service providers, have not been given much opportunity by these service providers to forge culturally-based affinity and solidarity with our peers. We have been denied opportunity to develop pride in ourselves and in each other, because we are continually segregated away from each other in the name of "community inclusion" into mass society. Only now are we seeing the emergence of Disability Pride, and most of that is a result of Disability Arts and Mad Pride!

## **(2) The Spectrum of Personal Politics**

All artists bring a personal world view to their work, which is the lens through which we perceive ourselves within the context of the broader society. That is what "politics" refers to, in the context of art production. Within the DACM, these world views/ politics have most often been described as "Models of Disability".

This spectrum therefore runs from  
(A) Charitable & Medical Models to ----- (B) Social & Affirmation Models

The Charitable & Medical Models position disability as a tragedy to be overcome or cured, and disabled people as being entirely dependent on non-disabled benevolence and/or expertise.

The Social Model positions "disability" as a structural problem imposed on people with impairment(s) by the lack of accommodations in society. The Affirmation Model positions impairment(s) as a rich source of diversity that Disabled, Mad, and Deaf people glorify as a desirable form of Otherness. In this way, the "disability community" affords Disabled, Mad, and/or Deaf people with a community of peers, colleagues, and friends with whom we can self-organize to achieve the collective goal of self-determination.

## **(3) The Spectrum of Artistic Control**

In keeping with Charitable and Medical Models, as well as the disability service modalities that inform society's understanding of "people with disabilities", the DACM has also privileged relationships of benevolence and dependency for Disabled, Mad, and/or Deaf artists.

Too much artwork is again being made by non-disabled artists ABOUT people with disabilities and too many non-disabled artists have control over the processes and products generally referred to as "disability arts".

After all, the domain of Disability Arts was developed by Disabled and Mad artists specifically as a domain for Disabled, Mad, and Deaf-identified artists; just as the Feminist Arts community is a domain for Feminist-identified artists and the Queer Arts community is a domain for Queer-identified artists.

This spectrum therefore runs from  
(A) Non-disabled service providers to ----- (B) Deaf, Mad, Disabled Artists

Unfortunately, too much "disability art" work has been facilitated by disability service providers who are not even artists and/or by qualified non-disabled artists who are actually engaged in Artist-Community Collaboration work with community members who have impairment(s). These arts participants are certainly being given access to community-based arts programming, but they are not being given opportunity to make informed artistic choices as emerging or established professional artists.

On the other end of this spectrum are fully trained, fully qualified, already established artists with impairment(s) who identify as Disabled, Mad, and/or Deaf, and who are fully capable of producing professional artwork and/or professional arts events.

In between are non-disabled artists who run community arts programming for disabled people. And non-disabled collaborators who partner with artists with disabilities on Arts & Disability productions and/or with Deaf, Disabled, and Mad artists on Deaf Arts, Disability Arts, or Mad Pride productions. In these cases of collaboration, however, the artists with impairment(s) are always in full control over the interpretation of the "disability experience" and its representation on stage. Or the work cannot be considered "disability arts".

**(4) The Spectrum of Artistic Content (treatment of "the disability experience"):**

Artistic content here represents the artists' narrative or thematic treatment of "disability" in their work.

This spectrum therefore runs from  
(A) Aligned with mass/ popular culture to ----- (B) Aligned with disability culture

On the mass culture side, disability is represented in keeping with the Charitable and Medical Models, and with normalized notions of impairment. In this, disability either isn't dealt with at all (for example, Jeff Healy) or is framed as a tragedy to overcome, cure or commit suicide over. People with impairments are represented as being just like everybody else. Or as inspirational supercrips. Often the focus on disability in this type of work zeros in on its educational function.

On the disability culture side, disability is represented in keeping with the Social & Affirmation Models. Artists make use of non-normalized treatments of impairment and non-normalizing technique in representing them. Disability is glorified as desirable. We proudly assert our uniqueness from "normal" people. And our art functions as a form of counter-culturalism, not education or awareness.

**(5) The Spectrum of Artistic Form**

Artistic form here represents artists' physical treatment of "disability" in their work, or – more specifically – the aesthetic representation of "the disability experience".

This spectrum therefore runs from

(A) Traditional forms of art to ----- (B) Alternative/ Experimental forms of art

Traditional forms of art rely on the aesthetics of what Dr. Rachel Gorman has named "imaginary bodies". In other words, Traditional forms of art come complete with long-established norms, conventions, symbols, and images that are embedded in the collective psyche as "universal". For example:

Please imagine a prima ballerina.

How many of you imagined a tall, overly thin, white woman in a pink leotard and tutu?

Did anybody imagine that prima ballerina as a fat, male-bodied/female identified, physically "deformed", gay dancer in a wheelchair?

So...

On the other side of the spectrum is what Dr. Rachel Gorman has named "the aesthetics of real bodies", which is a form of "disability aesthetics". These forms make use of embodied, impairment-specific symbols, images, norms, and conventions that cannot be authentically replicated by the non-disabled.

This innovation and experimentation in artistic form, that is impairment-specific, is what is not yet being supported by our funding stakeholders. Yet this is our strength as a unique community of artists/ equity client groups who have something very distinct to contribute to the professional arts ecology. As with the other equity client groups - our strength, our uniqueness, comes from our representations of our shared culture as a distinct group of diverse people who have all experienced unique forms of social exclusion and have something significant to say about that to the rest of society.