

Disability Arts and Equity in Canada

by Michele Decottignies

The Deaf, Disability & Mad Arts Alliance of Canada (DDMAAC)¹ is a collective of long-established, disability-identified artists who came together in 2012 in response to increasing disability inequity in the disability arts domain. Being disability-identified means to embrace and advance the political, artistic, and cultural objectives of disability arts. According to the Ryerson RBC Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education, “disability arts ... marks the growing political power of disabled people ... [who] use it to counter cultural misrepresentation, establish disability as a valued human condition, [and] shift control to disabled people” (Abbas et al. 1). As the acting Executive Director of the DDMAAC, a nascent national arts service organization, I recently completed the first national survey of Canada’s disability arts domain. The results indicate that even though very high degrees of both equity and diversity exist in disability-identified artwork, disability equity has decreased in the disability arts domain. What was established twenty years ago as a site of cultural autonomy, artistic self-determination, and collective representation for disability-identified artists is now a site of artistic inclusion wherein disabled people are dependent on the non-disabled for access to the arts.

The most significant inequities for disabled artists stem from biased attitudes, not limited opportunities to access the arts. That barrier is, in fact, not unique to disabled artists but something experienced by all equity-seeking communities in the arts sector, including women—whose representation in positions of authority seems to have stagnated at 30 per cent (MacArthur). Lack of access to the arts is certainly intensified in the disability arts community by the absence of fully accessible venues. Yet the lack thereof has not stymied almost forty-five years of disability arts history in Canada to date, starting with David Freeman’s *Creeps* in 1971—



Meg Torwl in her intersectional solo-performance, *That's So Gay* (December 2009; Big Secret Theatre, Calgary).
Photo by Danny Cox

which the DDMAAC has discovered is the oldest example of disability art production in the world (Kaplan, “Remembering”)!

Disability inequity arises from biased notions of disability as a form of tragedy and abnormality, and of disabled people as incapable and dependent. These notions are so deeply entrenched in mass and popular culture that they have come to dominate the collective Canadian psyche. Disability-identified art disrupts these misperceptions through the development and dissemination of artwork that inverts the position of disabled people in society as “lesser than” and affirms impairment as a source of diversity and pride. Disability studies scholar Colin Barnes notes:

disability arts ... is not simply about disabled people obtaining access to the mainstream of artistic consumption and production. Nor is it about simply expressing the individual experiences of living with or coming to terms with an accredited impairment. Disability art is the development of shared cultural meanings and 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. (“Generating” 4)

Over the past forty-five years, professional disabled artists have proven ourselves to be a competent community of accomplished cultural producers who have made significant artistic contributions to Canadian society. Canada’s disability arts domain is vibrant and expansive. It is multidisciplinary, with theatre, dance, visual art, and new media being the most prominent disciplines. It encompasses twenty-nine professional arts organizations and approximately 250 professional, independent, disabled artists. It is enhanced by several commercial arts organizations and for-profit artists who are more able to make a living as disability consultants than as independent artists, by an as-yet-unknown number of amateur companies that provide programming for disabled people who do not wish to become career artists, by a large volume of arts programs and special events by disability service providers, and by an even larger volume of disability studies scholars who make use of arts-based research and engagement modalities (Decottignies).

Although the tracking of targeted disability arts disbursements has not yet been undertaken, our best estimate is that producers and patrons in the disability arts domain are contributing well over \$25,000,000 to the professional arts industries each season. Contributors to the disability arts domain have additionally achieved considerable artistic acclaim, positioned Canada as a leading contributor to the global disability arts movement, and significantly inverted the gender imbalance that has been entrenched in the arts for far too long now (Decottignies).

Our research indicates that 82 per cent of companies in the disability arts domain are female-led (Decottignies), compared to the roughly 30 per cent of women who have gained access to power in the theatre community as artistic directors, directors, and/or playwrights (MacArthur). Increased representation alone is not enough to bring about greater equity. Systemic shifts in equity require access to power in the arts and authority over artistic production. This is where the disability arts domain has encountered decreasing disability equity: only 43 per cent of disability arts domain companies are disability-led. Interestingly, the degree of disability equity increases with the degree of identification with disability politics and disability culture in the work: of the sixteen disabil-



Lindsay Eales (L) and Danielle Peers (R) in their *QueerCrip* production *InterRelationCrips* (October 2009; Motel Theatre, Calgary). Photo by Joel Adria

ity arts domain companies that offer theatre programming, ten produce disability-identified theatre while six produce inclusive traditional theatre. Of the ten that produce disability theatre, 100 per cent are led by *disabled* women; of the six that produce traditional theatre, 100 per cent are led by *non-disabled* women (Decottignies).² It should come as no surprise that a majority of these disabled women artists are feminists.

Gender equity in theatre seems tied to feminist politics. The more a company sets out to disrupt sexism in “the system,” the higher the representation of women and the greater our access to positions of power and authority—as evident in companies such as Nightwood Theatre, Sarasvati Productions, She Said Yes Theatre, and Stage Left Productions (the latter being a leading contributor to Canada’s disability arts domain). However, the wealth of women producing theatre in Canada hasn’t brought about a significant shift in gender equity. Equity in Theatre’s latest study shows the field to be the same “old boys’ club”—that is, patriarchal domain—it has been since Canadian theatre was established in the 1970s (MacArthur 20).

Unfortunately, disabled women’s representation and access to power in the early disability arts movement was also hampered by the sexist heyday of the 1970s (Withers 92). While Factory

Lab and Tarragon Theatre produced and toured David Freeman's *Creeps* in 1971, disabled women didn't make it into the limelight until almost fifteen years later—and even then only as independent artists who produce from the margins.³ Yet disabled feminists have been disrupting both sexism and disablism in the arts for over thirty years now, through the production of artwork that is intersecting⁴ and intercultural, and consequently far more equitable—not to mention, in many cases, innovative.

Disabled feminist artists have significantly influenced the industry. A few cases in point: Persimmon Blackbridge first produced feminist visual art in the 1970s and then merged it with lesbian politics in the 1980s when she began examining the intersections between woman, lesbian, and mental illness in works like *Still Sane*. As the *section15.ca* website notes, “This was one of the first public representations of the treatment of patients, and probably the very first of the treatment of lesbians, from a patient's point of view. The show rocked Vancouver and the Lower Mainland” (Rooney). *Still Sane* was also an early example of what we now call a “performative installation.” In 1993 Ruth Ruth Stackhouse, the founder and artistic director of Toronto's Friendly Spike Theatre Band, introduced *Mad Pride* to Canada, which insisted that the practice of professional theatre accommodate and celebrate proud survivors of psychiatric incarceration (Reaume 2). *Mad Pride* is now celebrated worldwide. In the late 1990s, queer, mad, mixed-race artist Dr. Rachel Gorman produced some of the earliest examples of disability performance in Toronto, through several ensemble-based dance/theatre productions, and introduced non-normalizing techniques to both dance and theatre practices (“Revolutionary Forms”). I began my own disability theatre practice in Calgary around the same time, through artist–community collaborations with youth and adults with developmental disabilities. The ten disability arts festivals, fifteen original theatre productions, and thirty digital films I have since produced are all intercultural, intersecting, and interdisciplinary fusions of feminist art, queer art, and disability art—co-created with teams of diverse collaborating artists from across Canada.

In 2000 Alex Bulmer was commissioned by Nightwood Theatre to write a show about a lesbian who is becoming blind, called *Smudge* (Kaplan, “Alex”), which was nominated for a Chalmers Award (Flacks). Shortly thereafter Bulmer relocated to the UK, where she worked with the esteemed disability arts company Graeae Theatre and has become “a New York Radio Award nominee, Society of Canadian Musicians award recipient, [and the] writer of two award winning short films” (Bulmer). In 2005, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha co-founded *Mangos with Chili*, a touring cabaret of queer and trans people of colour that is one of the earliest examples of *QueerCrip* production in Canada (Galette and Piepzna-Samarasinha), a daring form of art that boldly asserts disability as desirability. In 2009, poet, broadcaster, and new

media artist Meg Torwl was commissioned by Stage Left to create *That's So Gay*, a multidisciplinary solo performance examining gender, disability, and sexuality (Torwl). As well, over the last decade, a huge cadre of diverse, disabled feminists have also embraced the politics of disability art, including Onyii Udegbe, Artistic Director of the Disabled Young People's Project (Artreach); Tiphaine Girrault and Paula Bath of SPiLL/PROpagation (SPiLL/PROpagation); Eliza Chandler and Cara Eastcott of Tangled Arts + Disability (Tangled Arts); and a large number of independent artists, including Kayla Carter, mel g. cambell, Lindsay Fischer, and so many others.

The artwork produced by these disabled women is remarkable for many reasons. It results in higher degrees of equity because it specifically sets out to challenge sociopolitical, cultural, and artistic hegemony. It promotes unapologetic, if unorthodox, perspectives on social justice. It serves as a driving force toward a redefinition of art itself, through the integration of the values, perspectives, and skills of people who have been made “others” because our social identities fall outside of idealized

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social norms. It also represents greater degrees of diversity. After all, disability is experienced by every population, from the feminist to the LGBTTIQ community, from people of colour to First Nations peoples, and all other social groups (disability does not discriminate!). Diversity seems to be embedded in disability-identified theatre because few of us producing it are “only” disabled. A high percentage of us are also feminists; lesbian, queer, and/or trans* identified; women of colour; senior artists (if not yet senior citizens); and proud members of the grassroots working class. In fact, our collective body of disability-identified art serves as a model of excellence in equity and diversity in the arts.

Ironically, producing from the margins is what seems to have given the disability arts domain freedom from the hegemony embedded in the core of “the system.” The politics of *inclusion* are sometimes simply not enough. Many forms of political art do not merely seek to include the historically excluded; they specifically seek to affirm the identities and countercultural knowledge of oppressed peoples. Windsor Feminist Theatre's vision, for example, is to “recognize, reflect and support the social, ethnic, political, and economic diversity of all women.” In other words, feminist art elevates the shared experiences and perspectives of a class of oppressed people: women. As defined by Judy Chicago, “It is art that reaches out and affirms women and validates our experience and makes us feel good about ourselves.” The politics of disability art are equally radical.

Unfortunately, disability inequity in the disability arts domain has arisen, in part, as Dr. Gorman explains, because our collective body of disability-identified artwork “has continuously been threatened by arts institutions and charitable organizations that seek to promote disability arts while dismissing its political



Rachel Gorman in her dance/theatre production with mad aesthetics, *Pass* (December 2008; Big Secret Theatre, Calgary). Photo by Danny Cox

base” (16). Not every woman artist produces feminist art, and not every disabled artist creates disability-identified art. UK-based disabled poet Alan Sutherland asserts, “Disability art would not have been possible without disability politics coming first” (2). Disability politics mark the difference between an artist with a disability who produces disability-inclusive forms of art and a Deaf, mad, or disabled artist who produces disability-identified art.

Disability-identified art prioritizes the politics of inversion and affirmation over inclusion. It inverts authority over disability arts by putting disabled artists firmly in control of both artistic production and product. It affirms disabled artists as qualified cultural contributors by celebrating Canadian disability arts history and our global accomplishments and by promoting the knowledge, skills, and repertoires of disability-identified artists. Disability-identified art inverts the notion of disability as tragedy and abnormality by affirming disability culture. As Barnes explains, “Disability culture affirms impairment as a symbol of difference rather than shame ... by making it a source of individual empowerment, shared resistance and collective pride” (“Generating ... Penultimate Draft” 7). Thus, a significant aspect of disability-identified art is that it is non-normalizing.

A condition of our acceptance into mass and popular culture is that disabled people spend our entire lives striving to become as normal as possible. The insistence that people with impairment(s) conform our “abnormal” minds and bodies to society’s misguided ideals of “normality” is considered a form of assimilation by disabled people who identify with disability culture. Similarly, disability-identified artists do not want to be included in traditional forms of art that idealize “normal” bodies as the sole source of aesthetic appreciation. Encouraging disabled artists to satisfy traditional aesthetics, through processes of adaption that seek to normalize impairment, is consequently considered by disability-identified artists to be a form of cultural imposition. Disability-identified art inverts impairment into a source of aesthetic appreciation by affirming disability aesthetics: impairment-specific words, gestures, symbols, meanings, history, and collective responses to disablism that cannot be authentically represented by the non-disabled. Visual art curators Syrus Marcus Ware and Elizabeth Sweeney refer to this political and cultural inversion and affirmation as a process of artistic “repurposing”:

All adaption allows for is inclusion, period. Repurposing requires the altering of something, so that it takes on an entirely new function. For politicized, diverse artists, repurposing is not just an aesthetic preference but a necessary act of survival: by reshaping and reinventing art forms, we’re redefining reality and thereby representing a more complete picture of Canadian society.

As a result, disability-identified artists claim the disability arts domain as a site of counterculturalism that affords us an avenue of wilful separation from a mass culture that relentlessly devalues us and believes that we are “better off dead than disabled” (Lucas). The disability arts domain thus offers disability-identified artists a site of artistic autonomy and self-determination, political solidarity, and countercultural affirmation. As several disability arts scholars have noted, “To encourage the growth of a disability culture is no less than to begin the radical task of transforming ourselves from passive and dependent beings into active and creative agents for social change” (Morrison and Finkelstein, qtd. in

Disability-identified art inverts the notion of disability as tragedy and abnormality by affirming disability culture.

Barnes “Generating ... Penultimate Draft” 9). In other words, it is the politics of disability art that invert disability inequity in the disability arts domain.

Disability inequity in the disability arts domain seems to be tied to disability arts policies, funding interventions, and market-access collaborations that focus on the inclusion of disabled people in the arts as the principal concern of disability arts, rather than the production of disability-identified artwork by qualified disabled artists (Decottignies). To bring about increased disability equity in the disability arts domain, the DDMAAC has consequently prioritized three objectives: (1) educating stakeholders and collaborators on the difference between disability-inclusive

art and disability-identified art; (2) promoting disability-identified artists, art forms, and artistic practices; and (3) insisting on increased investment in disability-identified artwork that is produced by disability-identified artists. By prioritizing these goals, the DDMAAC is addressing the systemic issues that have negatively influenced disability equity in the disability arts domain.

Notes

- ¹ *Disability* is used here as inclusive of all people with any kind of impairment(s). The DDMAAC acknowledges 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. Many others share similar resistance to the term *disability* because the word has become overly associated with the charitable and medical models of disability, which position “the lived experience of disability” (Canada Council of the Arts) as a form of tragic affliction that must be overcome or cured at all costs.
- ² Since our study was completed, one of these artistic directors has acquired a disability.
- ³ A gendered barrier that still exists in the disability arts domain is that there is a larger volume of disabled women producing art, but disabled men seem to be getting more presenting, co-production, and touring opportunities from non-disabled arts organizations.
- ⁴ The term *intersectionality* was coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to refer specifically to how anti-Blackness and racism intersect with feminism. As a result, some Black feminists object to non-Black women appropriating this term. Because I am a white woman, I use *intersecting* rather than *intersectional* to refer to the complex relationships between different axes of oppression.

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