

# **The Importance of Artist Development Programming in Disability Arts**

Christina Oyawale

Historically, disabled artists have been shut out of artist development programming and funding programs that are major contributors to being able to thrive and grow as an artist in Canada. Traditionally, non-disabled artists have benefited from the granting bodies at the federal and provincial levels that continue to uphold the many barriers that discourage disabled artists. Artist development programming such as portfolio reviews, studio visits, CV and artist statement building, workshops and residency programs are essential tools that aid in the growth of an artist's practice by challenging their current set of creative skills, providing artists with educational resources and allowing them space for research. These opportunities also allow emerging artists to meet gallerists and curators that can provide mentorship and exhibition opportunities, which inevitably grant them space to explore more projects. As these systematic barriers affect the disabled artistic community at large, it is important to note that racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty, Indigeneity and colonialism affect how disabled artists access these sorts of resources (Reid, 2019, Oct. 1). Mad, d/Deaf, spoonie, disabled and crip people who exist at the intersection of other marginalized communities have had a significantly harder time navigating the structures that prevent disabled artists from thriving in an already stressful colonial Canadian art system (Reid, 2019, Oct. 1). I believe that in order for the wider art world and its audiences to value disabled identified artists and their work, there needs to be an understanding that disabled artists have similar abilities of critical

and artistic engagement within the Canadian contemporary art landscape. The issue at hand is that sociopolitical systems push them out of spaces and funding.

One principal issue from the perspective and attitudes of the able-bodied arts world is that disabled artists do not have the ability to improve upon their skills due to neurological and/or physical disabilities (Sandals, 2016, Mar 6). Former artistic director of Tangled Art + Disability, Eliza Chandler articulates:

If I'm disabled and I produce something it's like, incredible, or it's a spectacle.

There is no sort of thought that I should or I could improve my work. And maybe

I can't [do that] in the same way as somebody else—but that doesn't mean I

couldn't or shouldn't improve my art (Sandals, 2016, Mar 6).

This illustrates how disabled artists and their work are seen as novel, and thus preventing them from attaining the skills to successfully grow their art practices. By dismantling the “limited-and-limiting mentality that just showing the work of a disabled artist is ‘enough’”, space is created for disabled artists to expand upon their practices and the complexities they choose to explore in their practices (Sandals, 2016, Mar. 6). The wider art communities at large fail to acknowledge the necessity of professional development to a successful career, which has consequently forced disabled artists to create spaces for themselves: peer-to-peer professional development, interdependent support networks and anti-oppressive sharing art circles. Professional development and funding are key components in the success of all artists but more crucial for marginalized artists with disabilities due to the lack of resources and programming that

center disabled artists. In the past 10 or so years, artists and community members have created spaces for themselves that seek to disrupt these barriers and move disabled folks from consumers to producers. The main difficulty faced by these programs and collectives is a lack of funding available to support themselves and the artists exhibiting work. There are only a handful of artist-run centres and galleries in Canada that provide support to marginalized disabled artists. For example, Tangled Art + Disability, based in Toronto, has addressed these issues by providing workshops and professional development programs for disabled artists, as well as a space for disabled, D/deaf and mad creators to exhibit work (Sandals, 2016, Mar. 6). Additionally, they have minimized the financial barrier of accessing programs for artistic growth by organizing a series of workshops called the *Art Mechanics Lab*, that provide barrier free workshops for grant writing, artist statements and artist talks for disabled, d/Deaf and Mad identified individuals and attendants/support workers, free of charge.

Under-waged and non-waged disabled people were no longer hit with the burden of whether they could afford these vital programs. If abled artists wished to attend, they were meant to pay fees of \$100 to elevate the costs for disabled artists in attendance. These fees also ensured that mentors and facilitators were receiving some form of compensation for their programming (Sandals, 2016, Mar. 6).

I believe programs such as Tangled's are crucial as granting bodies at the federal, provincial and municipal levels continue to systemically push disabled artists out due to their specific application guidelines. For those receiving funds from the

Ontario Disability Support Program for basic living expenses and access barriers, there are many hoops one must jump through in order to apply for a grant at the provincial level. In a detailed report titled, *Barriers: The Local, Regional, And National Barriers To Arts Funding For Deaf, Mad, And Disabled Artists; Solutions For Parties Interested In Dismantling Them* conducted by Victoria Anne Warner for Tangled Art + Disability, Warner outlines the challenges disabled artists are faced with while addressing lack of funding to programs and ableism that prevents artists from accessing spaces. Disabled artists surveyed reported facing a “complete lack of access to the career development opportunities made possible by arts funding as arts grants counted as deductible income” inevitably results in benefits they rely on potentially being cut or suspended. Regardless of whether the grant funding was not being used for living expenses or exhibition costs and/or professional development (Warner, 2014). ODSP also states that, “If you have a high income from arts grants and feel it would be better to leave ODSP while you pursue your project, it’s possible to temporarily withdraw from ODSP for the duration of your project and apply for “rapid reinstatement” when you’re done” (Action Coalition, 2017). The anxiety of this contributes to the delays in disabled artists career development as artists heavily rely upon ODSP to survive. Other problems with applying to artists grants are that granting bodies such as Ontario Council for The Arts, have requirements that have made it difficult to be eligible to apply due to lack of support, making it confusing (Warner, 2014). These guidelines required that artists provide information on their status as working artists which proved to be difficult as

many did not have the educational and artistic backgrounds that were required for successfully applying to grants (Warner, 2014). Warner makes the recommendation of there being:

Workshops for educational institutions provided by artists & arts educators on Deaf, Disability, and Mad Arts and Artists; Micro-grants to document work for Deaf, Disabled, and Mad artists, Revisit and clarify definitions of emerging artists, take into account first-time applicants, or barriers experienced by equity seeking artists; Open up training grants to non-professional but promising artists, or those who fit into a revised definition of emerging artist, Create programs for promising artists to assist in reaching emerging status definitions (Warner, 2014).

which would aid in the process of applying and qualifying for these granting bodies.

Accordingly, this disparity sets artists up for failure while their abled-bodied counterparts continue to use granting bodies and programming to their advantage. Funding and programming at the emerging artist level is crucial to the long-term success of one's career. The skills and networking obtained from these programs eventually sees artists taking up space as boards of directors, chair members, gallery owners, curators and head programmers at artistic institutions. As this happens, we continue to see a disproportionate lack of diversity in these factions of the art community. More non-disabled, Mad and d/Deaf people taking up space which continues the erasure of crip aesthetics in the gallery space and diverse stories by disabled artists

exhibited. Warner's report identifies the result of fewer opportunities and network at artists' disposal contributes to the inability to find mentors that can provide space for further learning and navigating the Canadian contemporary art system (Warner, 2014). These systems leave disabled artists behind as there are many more artists at varying stages in their careers being denied the opportunity to grow.

There needs to be more being done to accommodate artistic success than just physical barriers. There is an unjust misconception that disabled artists do not have the ability to improve upon their professional development skills. Disability artists and their artistic practices "call attention to and disrupt these barriers by creating spaces that move disabled folks from consumers to producers" (Sandals, 2016, Mar. 6).

Accessibility should be more than looking at disabled artists as audiences and consumers but people who are activating the gallery and institutional spaces (Sandals, 2016, Mar. 6). Neoliberalism and austerity have seeped their ways in the contemporary arts structures in Canada in a way that traditionally excludes diverse bodies.

Neoliberalism is defined as a contributor to globalization, structural adjustment programs, out-sourcing, etc. which has affected the ways in which we access art and programming in the country (Chandler, 2021, Lecture 9). "The impacts of neoliberalism can be summarized as the re-commodification of labour; that is, market participation is required for an individual to meet their needs and be considered a citizen" (Owen and Parker Harris, 2012). The concept of the non-profit artist-run centre has been a key element of the success of Canadian art, as artists have built their own networks and

collectives that seek to challenge and control old-age means of how “production, publication and dissemination has succeeded in building an infrastructure that can be inclusive of diverse voices and mediums, across all regions of the country” (Journée sans culture, 2015, Oct. 15). I agree with this position, however, I believe that diversity must include the voices of disabled, Mad and d/Deaf artists, as they have been forced out of considerably diverse and progressive artist-run centres due to the lack of understanding access beyond the physical. Austerity specifically functions through the act of cutting benefits, social services, community building in the name of reducing national debt or avoiding such a crises (Chandler, 2021, Lecture 9). Therefore, is prominent in the sociopolitical fabric of disability arts and accessing grants and programming.

Due to this, there are many disabled artists challenging these systems in their work that not just reflect how society views them and their work as novelty but how it is more difficult being a disabled artist in the mainstream. Liz Crow’s performance works are brilliant examples of community-based critiques and resistances to the effects of austerity on disabled artists and individuals. As a critique of the manner the UK government has historically neglected disabled people, Crow’s work *Bedding Out* (2012) examines this by radically occupying her bed as a disabled person (Verrent, 2013, Jun. 25). She uses her experiences and juxtaposes them with the difficulty of accessing Disability Living Allowance felt by other disabled people in the country. In Britain, 3.6 million people annually claim disability benefits, with the assessments to be

considered for the benefits being problematic in how disabled folks qualify, especially those with non-visible disabilities (Verrent, 2013, Jun. 25). *Bedding Out* (2012) acknowledges these conditions by protesting against how disability is viewed through the eyes of ableism. Austerity is critiqued through representing the public versus private life and the difficulties of accessing funding. Crow uses this work to begin conversations about how disabled artists are undervalued and seen as financial burdens. I believe that this work is important in making non-disabled people come to terms with their ableism and how these systems prevent disabled, Mad and d/Deaf community members from thriving in the arts and their day-to-day lives. Her work has made me question how austerity has affected Canadian art systems as well. Though since a 2013 motion to tax Toronto's wealthiest 1% by the Toronto City Council was passed and redistributed to arts and culture funding, much of this funding did not fund the works of marginalized and disabled artists (Journée sans culture, 2015, Oct. 15). With major success in arts funding, there was still a disproportionate lack of public arts projects funding and commissioning going towards disabled, Mad and d/Deaf narratives. An estimated \$17.5 million annually, was increased and is the only recent example of breaking down "the regime of austerity" (Journée sans culture, 2015, Oct. 15). Lack of funding to public projects that engage a crip cultural aesthetic actively prevent the public from interacting with disabled bodies and ideas. Contemporary crip and disability aesthetics command attention to detail beyond accessibility of space. "Public funding for the arts playing a significant role in the development and structure

of the sector” allows for more art to be engaged with in Canada but neglects what is at stake here: losing access to diverse voices in the disabled, Mad and d/Deaf community by treating them as a monolith (Journée sans culture, 2015, Oct. 15).

While using Liz Crow’s work to frame my argument about austerity and the need for funding towards programming, I think of how it has affected my work and life as a disabled/Mad artist. There has been a serious inability to find mentors, residency programs and creative career programming that meet my specific needs. As I am still at the emerging level and have the privilege of attending an arts institution, I still have noticed the immense lack of disabled artists as mentors. While working on my final thesis I have been plagued with the anxiety that my work would be seen as vulnerable and as novelty to appease an abled narrative of what my experiences are. While my thesis documents the intricacies of living with mental health and visible chronic illness, I feel as though artistic development still leaves me at a disadvantage. Though disabled artists have a rich history of supporting and creating space for each other, there is still having to navigate the neoliberalist art systems that have been developed without people who look like me in mind. I think of how I am unable to access funding due to being in school and not meeting certain requirements for OAC grants. Putting me in a position that requires me to consider whether my personal income should be used to self-fund projects or pay for medication, food, living and treatments. These systems were not created for us and I believe there needs to be an understanding that disabled people do not want equal access; we actively need to work together to fully dismantle

these oppressive systems. We need to build new programs and structures of funding that seek to engage and operate radically. Disabled contemporary art critic Gabrielle De la Puente of *The White Cube* published a poignant open letter that stated, “It disappoints me that the art world, an industry that should be explicitly creative in its operations, has nothing already in place for people like me. I might have expected too much” demonstrating how these spaces we attempt to occupy only know us when it is useful to them (De la Puente, 2021, Nov. 14). Disabled artists should not have to demand funding or demand that “it’s not just a question of developing disabled artists but also developing other advocates including disabled programmers, curators and marketers who can assist in widening audiences and help institutions think differently about how and where they place work and how they support it” (Gardner, 2015, Apr. 24). We deserve opportunities, programming, social services and empathy but we must fully dismantle the systems currently in place to achieve this freedom.

### Works Cited

*Barriers- Tangled Report - Tangled Art + Disability.*

<https://tangledarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/BARRIERS-Tangled-Report.pdf>.

“Bedding Out.” Roaring Girl Productions,

<http://www.roaring-girl.com/work/bedding-out/?media=bedding-out-conversation-three>.

Chandler, Eliza. 2021. *DST508 Lecture 9*. Presentation, X University.

De la Puente, Gabrielle. “Love Letter to the Art World.” The White Pube, 14 Nov. 2021,

<https://www.thewhitepube.co.uk/love-letter-to-the-art-world>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2021.

Gardner, Lyn. “Quality Is Crucial for Disability Arts: Poor Work Fails Artists and Audiences.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 24 Apr. 2015,

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2015/apr/24/quality-is-crucial-for-disability-arts-poor-work-fails-artists-and-audiences>.

Journée sans culture. “Art, Austerity and the Production of Fear: Fuse.” *Journeesansculture.ca*, 3 Nov. 2015,

<http://www.journeesansculture.ca/fr/2015/10/15/art-austerity-and-the-production-of-fear-fuse/>.

*ODSP & Arts Grants*, ODSP Action Coalition, 2017.

Reid, Jenna, et al. “Crippling the Arts: It's about Time.” *Canadian Art*, 1 Oct. 2019,

<https://canadianart.ca/features/cripping-arts-time/>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2021.

Sandals, Leah, et al. “8 Things Everyone Needs to Know about Art & Disability.” *Canadian Art*,

<https://canadianart.ca/features/7-things-everyone-needs-to-know-about-art-disability/>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2021.

Verrent, Jo. “Bedding out: When Taking to Your Bed Is Both Activism and Art.” HuffPost UK, HuffPost UK, 25 June 2013,

[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/jo-verrent/bedding-out-activism\\_b\\_3145325.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/jo-verrent/bedding-out-activism_b_3145325.html).