

FRESH PERSPECTIVES/7

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PERMISSION TO STARE

Arts and Disability



picture: Michael Turinsky in 'Second Skin – Turn the Beat around'
at Tanzquartier Vienna (© Rafael Stiborek)

Kate Marsh and Jonathan Burrows (ed.)

September 2017



in partnership
with



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Permission to Stare

Fresh Perspectives on Arts and Disability

by Kate Marsh and Jonathan Burrows (ed.)

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About

KATE MARSH

is a dance artist and researcher; she was a performer and teacher with Candoco dance company from 1999 – 2004. She continues to work with the company as an associate artist. She teaches regularly in a range of contexts and has created a duet, 'Famuli', with dancer Welly O'Brien which is currently touring in the UK.

In 2016 Marsh completed her PhD in Dance, Disability and Leadership. She currently works as a research assistant in C-DaRE, the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University. She is also working in partnership with Metal Culture as part of the Arts Council of England Change Maker programme.

JONATHAN BURROWS

danced with the Royal Ballet in London for 13 years, before leaving to pursue his own performance work. His main focus now is an ongoing body of pieces with the composer Matteo Fargion, with whom he continues to perform around the world. The two men are co-produced by Kaaithheater Brussels, PACT Zollverein Essen, Sadler's Wells Theatre London and BIT Teatergarasjen Bergen.

Burrows has been an Associate Artist at Kunstencentrum Vooruit in Gent, Belgium, London's South Bank Centre and Kaaithheater Brussels. He is a visiting member of faculty at P.A.R.T.S. Brussels and has also been Guest Professor at universities in Berlin, Gent, Giessen, Hamburg and London. 'A Choreographer's Handbook' has sold over 10,000 copies since its publication in 2010, and is available from Routledge Publishing. Burrows is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University.

THE BRITISH COUNCIL

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for educational opportunities and cultural relations. It creates international opportunities for people of the UK and other countries and builds trust between them worldwide. It works in over 100 countries in the arts, education and English.

IETM

IETM is a network of over 500 performing arts organisations and individual members working in the contemporary performing arts worldwide: theatre, dance, circus, interdisciplinary live art forms, new media.

IETM advocates for the value of the arts and culture in a changing world and empowers performing arts professionals through access to international connections, knowledge and a dynamic forum for exchange.

Foreword by IETM

Disability is a complex term, that is used in different ways in different contexts. It can be used to indicate physical or mental impairments; to refer to the limitations that an environment or a society impose to people with impairments; or to identify people. So disability is not only a contested concept, but also a complex phenomenon.

No wonder the field of performing arts reflects this complexity, and the connections between the performing arts and disability can be viewed from different angles and can become a battlefield of conflicting convictions.

It is for that reason that this new Fresh Perspectives publication collects different, sometimes contradictory, always very personal and touching views on arts and disability.

The two editors, artists Kate Marsh and Jonathan Burrows, have chosen to focus on contemporary dance, and have limited their curatorial work in order to leave as much space as possible to the voice of artists themselves; so the first part of the publication contains a chain of letters written by fellow artists, while the second part builds on contributions collected via an online open call. Overall, 'Permission to Stare' provides an overview of the variety of questions and possible approaches, and refuses to provide clear answers, rather hoping to trigger the interest of readers new to the topic and to enrich the views of those already informed or involved.

With the invaluable support of the British Council, IETM has started the discussion around arts and disability by including a specific session in its autumn plenary meeting 2016 in Valencia ('[Other abilities, evolving aesthetics?](#)') and makes concrete efforts to provide the best conditions for disabled performing arts professionals willing to

participate in IETM's activities and to join the network. Besides, we hope to bring the discussion on this topic also to countries where it is currently lacking or only timidly starting.

We are grateful to the artists who accepted to write their letter, and we would like to thank all those who have responded to our open call sharing their views and experiences, in particular: Jonathan Meth - [Crossing the Line](#) (UK), Lawrence Shapiro (CA), Richard Phoenix - [Constant Flux](#) (UK), Meritxell Barberá and Celine LeBlanc - [Festival 10 Sentidos](#) and [Taiat Dansa](#) company (ES), Simon Raven - [Northumbria University](#) (UK), [Michael Turinsky](#) - Verein für philosophische Praxis (AT), Zélie Flach - [Wales Arts International](#) (UK), [Luke Pell](#), Vera Rosner and Cornelia Scheuer - [MAD Coproductions](#) (AT), [Aidan Moesby](#) (UK), [Robbie Synge](#) (UK), Priya Mistry - [whatsthebigmistry](#) (UK), Roberto Casarotto - [Opera Estate Festival](#) (IT).

This publication, like most of the others in the Fresh Perspectives series, is available also in accessible format for readers with visual impairments ([see links on IETM website](#)).

IETM believes that the diversity of background, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, social conditions, working and employment status, age, career path and geographical location is an asset for the network and for the contemporary performing arts sector in Europe and worldwide. Your feedback and questions are welcome at ietm@ietm.org.

Foreword by the British Council

If you are a performing arts professional working in Europe and you don't know about the work of disabled artists, you are missing one of the creative opportunities of our time, and you are doing your artists and your audiences a disservice.

It is a bold statement, but one which reflects the simple fact that something remarkable is happening in Europe.

For many years some insightful governments and funders, and a small number of pioneering arts organisations, have passionately advocated for the rights of disabled people to attend and to participate in the arts.

However, today we see an increasing number of leading arts organisations hosting and supporting the work of disabled artists not because these organisations think they *should* (a moral imperative), nor because they think they *must* (a legal imperative), but because they realise that the current generation of disabled artists is making some of the most exciting, provocative and boundary-breaking work in Europe. The artistic imperative!

Think about it. Artists with unique experiences of and perspectives on the world make new and unique art. Artists who have not gone to the same dance & drama schools, conservatoires and arts colleges as everyone else (often because they can't), bring new aesthetic ideas. Explorations of difference or 'otherness' help us all understand the complex society in which we live.

And, in the field of dance and movement (the subject of this publication), it is my opinion that no serious dance promoter, interested

in the way the human body moves and the way it travels in space, can ignore those leading disabled dance artists who bring to their work their different bodies and their different ways of moving in space.

There are of course many performing arts professionals and inclusive dance and theatre companies which have been creating remarkable work for many years; decades even! The UK's Candoco Dance Company, Belgium's Theater Stap, Switzerland's BewegGrund and Theater HORA, Germany's DIN A 13, and France's La Compagnie de l'Oiseau-Mouche, are just some of the pioneers.

What is changing is that these companies are being joined by many other disabled artists to be increasingly presented and supported by some of Europe's leading arts organisations. From Dansens Hus in Stockholm to Mercat de les Flors in Barcelona to Tanzhaus NRW in Dusseldorf, Europe's dance houses are hosting, supporting and celebrating disabled dance artists, alongside new initiatives of the European Dancehouse Network. Whether presented at Paris's Festival d'Automne or at dance festivals from Lublin to Zagreb, Oslo to Turin, inclusive dance and the work of disabled artists is being presented at the highest level across the continent.

The British Council is honoured to be on a journey with IETM in which we are celebrating and investigating the unique work of disabled performing artists, and which we hope will result in an increasing representation of excellent disabled artists and inclusive companies within the membership of IETM and of other key global networks.

As you will read in 'Permission to Stare', there is a long way to go before our arts sector fully embraces the artistic opportunities offered by disabled artists, and a long way to go before our institutions and structures allow equal access to the arts for disabled people as artists and audiences. We would like you to join us and IETM on our journey towards understanding how we remove barriers – not because we *should*, not because we *must*, but because as professionals we all share a commitment to presenting the very best and the most innovative work, and as audiences we share a desire for excellent work which tells us more about who we are in new unexpected ways.

Ben Evans

Head of Arts & Disability, European Union Region, British Council

www.disabilityartsinternational.org

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The body is central to art.
 The body and the practice of art cannot be separated.
 We make art with and about our bodies.
 We watch, feel, experience art with our bodies.
 Our bodies are a tool for artistic expression and a vehicle for interpretation of ideas and artistic practice.
 My body is not what it is in spite of my physicality; in-fact it is what it is because of it.
 The body is... nothing.

01.

INTRODUCTION

Whereas I cannot speak for all disabled artists altogether, since that would presuppose one kind of unified voice which as such would deny the variety of aesthetic positions amongst us, I, from my own politico-aesthetic perspective, strongly believe in challenging various notions of the normative. As an artist working in the field of choreography, I have always put my focus especially on challenging notions of artistic 'quality' and their inherent normative implications.

Michael Turinsky, 2016.

This publication aims to explore the diversity of thinking concerning the body, from sharing lived experiences of artists to ideas relating to aesthetics and the body in art across a multitude of artistic genres.

We will privilege the voices of artists and stakeholders in the arts. This is based on our view that conversations, ideas and shared thinking between artists give a new and invaluable perspective on the subject of the body, difference and notions of 'otherness' in the arts.

We posed questions that we hoped would invite responses from a wide range of people. At the start of our exploration we decided to resist a 'finishing' point. This is to recognise the transient nature of this subject and of the arts in general. We want to avoid positioning ourselves in any way as answering these questions. We aim rather to start a debate that feels authentic and is based on the real experiences of individuals and their practice.

It feels important to share our discussion around how disability is defined in the arts, and who is 'included' when we talk about 'other' bodies or 'non-normative' practice.

We embark on this curatorial process from the pre-defined and possibly traditional model of one disabled and one non-disabled person, one male, one female. In this way we are echoing many duets already danced that outwardly seem to reinforce a binary of 'normal' and 'other'. We are more than this though, we are people, we are parents, we are artists. We are both UK based artist-researchers.

This is an important point - geographical contexts differ widely, in both European and global environments. Within the UK for example, discourse around the arts and disability is well-developed and relatively widely understood. There are many areas of UK arts practice where disability is significantly under-represented, but generally speaking, disability in the arts is present in some way in various contexts, ranging from the professional stage to academia. This is mostly thanks to the specific cultural policies by Arts Councils and national institutions in the UK, that have paved the way for debates and practices absent in most non-Anglo Saxon countries. Because of this, because of our experience, and because of the results of the open call launched by IETM and British Council in preparation for this publication, the majority of examples and inputs for this publication come from the UK.

In this publication we have tried to give voice as much as possible to other artists: on one hand IETM and British Council disseminated an online open questionnaire to collect responses, and we - the editors

- carried out interviews in person; on the other hand, we wrote a letter to share with artists whose work we know and appreciate, inviting them to answer in a very personal way and to share their letter with others, as in a 'chain'.

Thus the publication is made of two parts, a more theoretical essay and the collection of personal letters, offering complementary approaches to the topic of arts and disability. Overall, in both parts of the publication we chose to limit our editorial work to the minimum. In the theoretical part we decided not to take a clear stance, but to offer the largest possible variety of views, mirroring the organic nature of the conversation about disability and arts. In the letters part, the editing is limited to highlighting excerpts as 'titles'.

In the curating of this work, as we talk to each other and gather the responses of others, it becomes clear that the obstacles one might expect, such as access and funding, are not necessarily the things that are at the forefront of our thinking as researchers, or in the thinking of the respondents.

The body changes constantly, we are in an ever-shifting process of ageing and changing, as artists we might experience a period in our early career of pushing to 'fit' into prescribed or 'ideal' representations. Time and experience however seem to give us more confidence to act on impulse and practice our art form authentically and with a truth that is tied to our individual and transitional body.

What does this realisation mean when the arts, collectively seem so focused on the 'new' or 'innovative'? How can there be space to slow down or listen to what is needed for each artist? These questions are a reminder that the so called field of 'dance and disability' is insufficiently understood to account for the much wider debate of who is actually included, and that this is more complicated than 'non-disabled in, disabled out'.

*Kate Marsh and Jonathan Burrows,
 June 2017*

SECTION 1

‘Dear fellow artist...’

The following letters are more or less explanatory. They were intended to be an equal conversation between artists, curated but nevertheless aware of what Dan Daw has called ‘the falsehood of curated community’. What people have written is a mixture of personal stories, poetic visions and political speeches, which are meant in no way to be comprehensive or to represent anybody, but only to point towards the possibility that we go on listening, in order to continue fighting and resisting. With thanks to all the artists who participated.

'...and so onwards, and sideways, more or less'

Letter from Jonathan Burrows

Dear fellow artists, Katie Marsh and I were invited to curate this publication on arts and disability, and our first thought was that we wanted to hear the voices of artists. And this thought was backed up by something our friend Dan Daw has been saying, which is that his experience of being a disabled artist is that what he does often gets filtered through gatekeepers of one sort or another. This is an experience many artists will recognise, and one that we might fruitfully resist. So Katie and I had the idea to use the publication to initiate a direct exchange of artist's voices, in the form of open letters. And endlessly more thinking and endlessly more getting lost and confused, threw up some principles we thought we might hang our invitation on. And the principles started to sound something like this, with as minimal a gatekeeping as we could manage.

That we should write letters and that letters aren't essays, given that we have nothing to prove except to reclaim the conversation momentarily for whoever we think ourselves. And that we might begin by recognising that this conversation is going on anyway, so these letters are just an antennae raised curiously from random points to see what we might hear, however loosely articulated.

That these letters can talk about what matters in any way that matters, politically or artistically, and that they may or may not mention disability, as you like, whatever seems useful and of interest.

And it seems clear to me that this is something pretty important right now, the way all of us as artists are dealing with complicated issues of identity, and having to figure out all the time whether we want any particular identity to be the subject, or when we might want a different subject, and what all that does to our beautiful careers.

The idea is, that I might send my letter to you, and then you send yours to someone else who might also respond. And we'll do it on the understanding that we can't possibly fit everyone in but we might fit some of us in. And you can choose to show your chosen

friend all the previous letters, depending on whether you think that puts too much pressure on them, or is interesting for them as a starting point. I'm not sure right now which I'd prefer. And I use the word friend here with caution, conscious of the fact that it might risk sounding like a new age thing, but I do it in the spirit of ignoring the hierarchies that usually govern us. So say what you want, friend or not.

The letters can be addressed to whoever, as in 'Dear whoever', or 'Dear gatekeeper', or 'Dear producer', or 'Dear fellow artists', but I opted for writing to my fellow artists, on the basis that I always have an interesting conversation here and never more than when our conversations somehow sidestep gatekeepers or producers, or academics, though technically speaking I am one, and all those pathways converge anyway, and even Dan Daw works for the British Council.

Write short, in order, of what matters (this was said by the poet John Berryman, in a long poetic work called *The Dream Songs*, which took him 17 years to write). Your letter can be as short or as long as you want. I suggest you begin by sitting down and starting and seeing what comes out, and then editing it a bit and showing it to someone you trust.

The main thing is that we're all stupidly busy, and this is just another example of someone demanding you give your time to their project for no money. But at the same time I sometimes say yes, because I like the ways in which my art form of dance seems generous, and the ways in which this doing things generously together becomes something that we need right now to counter the stuff that's going on around us. And other people are noticing how we operate. And they maybe like the messiness of what we do, which on the whole can't quite be owned, by collectors or art historians or gatekeepers or producers or fellow artists or whoever.

Let's follow the idea here that nobody has to declare their authenticity or come up with any qualifications in order to take part, other than that since the person who asked you thought you were authentic or inauthentic enough, then that is enough.

And then you write some things about how and why you do what you do, and how you make it matter, and what you have to deal with, and what you must negotiate to make it sing, and most of all how you survive which is what we love to read about. And how you survive financially but also artistically, and how you know what matters. And how you survive without getting overwhelmed by all the art and all the arguments, and how you're going to keep going, or not. And what you want.

And how you fight for professional status and at the same time stay amateur enough to threaten the status quo. And how you deal with the politics and avoid being the artist who nobly conquers their supposed difficulties. And how you are not an heroic paralympian. And whether to be an equal colleague amongst colleagues or if there's a better way to remain visible. And how to persuade more dance institutions to accept more so-called disabled dancers. And how to represent yourself and at the same time know when to step away or stop when you need. And so on.

And how we all go on talking and doing and questioning and activating about all of this in a way that matters, even though we may doubt our qualifications and feel fearful of getting something wrong for someone.

And I have no qualifications but the questions matter, and so onwards, and sideways, more or less.

Jonathan

'...there are more of us than you think, and we're out here dancing'

Letter from Annie Hanauer

Dear fellow dance artists, it's hard to know where to begin. I would like to share something meaningful about my experiences in the dance world, to initiate some conversation about disability and dance and to finish it off with a feeling of solidarity and hopefulness. But it's all been building up for so long, and there are so many things to say that it feels too huge and like I'll miss something important, or stumble inarticulately. So I'm going to try beginning at the beginning...

I'm a dancer.

If we were being proper you could say I have a disability. If we're doing labels, I prefer to call myself a cripple, a cripp, or a disabled, pronounced dis-ah-blayed, like a member of an exclusive club. I feel these words are less serious. Using them feels like a tiny rebellion.

Let me define myself a little more. I've got a prosthetic arm, and it's not a blending-in sort of prosthetic. I have a visible disability in a very visual art form. This has influenced my life, professional and otherwise, in every way, and that's important but also just background information. Living and dancing in my particular body has given me a particular perspective and I'm very grateful for that. My presence onstage inevitably makes some sort of statement, which as a performer is a gift. What audiences read into that presence might sometimes make me want to throw in the towel, but more on that later...

I've always felt that first and foremost, I'm a dancer.

I've been dancing since I was a child. I have a degree in dance, and (surprising no one more so than myself) I've earned a living as a performer, and also as a teacher and choreographer, since I entered the professional world. When I work I emphasise the fact that I'm a dancer, because I know that usually someone else will emphasise the woman-with-one-arm part for me. Some audience members will never see

anything else when I perform, no matter what remarkable physical feats I might theoretically throw out. These people are very difficult to deal with sometimes, and in order to keep going I have to accept that they'll always be there. And I have to convince myself that they are not the majority. I don't know, maybe they are the majority, but for the moment people keep hiring me as a dancer.

I learned the ropes of the professional world in Candoco, a company that mixes dancers with and without disabilities - there were disabled dancers and non-disabled dancers. Some people might argue that this model is outdated, and that this way of categorising people actually creates unnecessary boundaries. Aren't we past that already? To this I would say I agree, defining people through any sort of dichotomy is problematic, and many people in the dance world are ready to work with all sorts of dancers as long as they're skillful, but companies like Candoco still have a vital function, because the dance world as a whole is not very diverse.

We in the UK are lucky to have a healthy dance and disability sector (a sector! It doesn't exist in other places!) filled with knowledgeable practitioners, well-established companies, talented performers, and choreographers making fantastic work. That's inside the sector. In the mainstream dance world, where are all the disabled people? Are they in major contemporary dance companies? Are they in the West End? Are they being given opportunities to study if they so wish?

Sometimes. But not often enough.

We need more teachers who are curious and willing to investigate ways they could open up their practice to make it more accessible. We need institutions who accept disabled dancers to study, because there are people waiting to teach them and an industry that values their skills. And we need an industry that really does value their skills.

I left Candoco a while ago to pursue other opportunities, and to address some huge questions hanging over my head. I needed to know what would happen if I presented

myself as a dancer outside this particular framework, in the larger dance world. Would I be good enough? Would people agree to see me as a dancer, or would I always and only be a chick with one arm? (If this sounds melodramatic to you, all I can say is you haven't heard the kind of crap people say to me sometimes.)

Now that I'm working (successfully?! So far?) in the wider dance world, outside of companies specifically concerned with disability, I've been able to experience the creative process in other settings, and also what it's like to be introduced to new critics, other audiences in other countries and other contexts, who've maybe never seen someone like me on stage.

I've been re-contextualised, and this is very fascinating and sometimes totally depressing. Instead of being conveniently pre-labeled as a disabled dancer (which for some writers and viewers seems to 'explain' something, though actually the word itself can mean so many different things and ultimately tells you nothing about me as a dancer), now I'm watching as a new slice of the international public tries to figure out who and what I am, and what it means that I'm there in the work. If it means anything at all that is. And since my disability is visible, I'm dealing with the fascinating slide of seeing and not seeing, being seen or not seen, which is amplified (intentionally or not) by the choreography, and most of all by who's looking.

It's been interesting observing how the format of the work affects how people see me when I perform. When I'm in a big, action-packed work with a large number of dancers, the audience mostly talk about the work. There's a lot to look at and sometimes they don't even notice I've got one funny arm, even when I'm downstage for a very long time, or featured in a section with only one other person. How can this be? Well, some auditoriums are very big, but I think it has more to do with how they're looking, and what they're looking at.

Another show I'm touring which is a two-hander (haha!) that I perform with another woman, and has many solo sections for both of us, and many very intimate and sensitive moments, tends to get a different reaction.

A lot of people make the whole thing about disability. In a large part, the work is about us, her and me and the particularities we bring as performers, and my physicality is part of who I am. So the format is very naked and everything is very visible, shaky balance and all, and it's a beautiful gift to perform something so personal and alive and wholly mine, but it's not 'about' disability.

And sometimes people think the show is about disability because the marketing team or the programmers at the theatre or festival have gone ahead and said it is, and written that down in all their promotional material, without asking us first.

After a show, sometimes people say, 'I didn't even notice you have a disability!' and they mean it as a compliment. Hint: this is not a compliment. I'm not trying to hide anything. The epitome of success for a disabled dancer is not to blend in. And I've trained to be a dancer and I've worked professionally for a while now, so it shouldn't really be surprising that I might appear skillful in some way.

But sometimes when they say, 'I didn't even notice,' they really didn't notice. They didn't see. And maybe that was because they were sitting far away or need new glasses, but I think it's more because when everything points to the fact that this person is a dancer - the choreography, the concept, the costumes, the context, whatever - the audience just agrees. So maybe in a sense they do see. They see and acknowledge and then it quickly becomes part of the fabric of the work.

I've recently become aware that in the eyes of the larger dance world I am Slightly Unusual. I guess people sometimes get excited because historically there haven't been that many performers who look like me in mainstream contemporary dance productions. Or maybe there have been but they didn't notice. And sometimes people want to Hear What I Have To Say because of that, which feels kind of like being an imposter, but also like a fantastic opportunity to be a role model of sorts. Because if you don't ever see any dancers that look like you, you might think it's not possible to do what you want.

There are more of us than you think, and we're out here dancing.

And I'm looking forward to the day that no one bats an eye when they see me on stage. When I'm not unusual or an exception. In that future I guess I'd lose my special status as an Interesting Weirdo but it would feel like we are really getting somewhere in the global dance community. And I like to think that we all move things forwards together, slow and fast, with incremental but undeniable progress.

Anyways, I'm just a dancer like all you other dancers, and whether that day comes or not, I don't plan on stopping any time soon.

Annie

'...moaning never helps when you want to change to world'

Letter from Elisabeth Löffler

Dear fellow artists,

and whoever...

I remember very well how the career officer laughed at me, when I told him that I wanted to become a singer. Three years later the director from a private acting school suggested I make radio plays instead of starting an acting career, so nobody would have to look at me. And another actor got furious, because I dared to mention that I would like to play Juliet in 'Romeo And Juliet'.

I was humiliated, angry, and happily young. So I used this energy of anger to prove that all these voices of 'You can not, because of your disability', were wrong.

It's written down fast, but it took time to decide that I wanted to become a dancer. Although I had always wanted to be an artist, I'd never thought about becoming a dancer.

I loved 'Hair', and to sing along with Maria in 'West Side Story', and I loved the fully engaged dance of Mikhail Baryshnikov in 'White Nights'. Looking back I'd say there was a lack of Role Models I could refer to, but by accident I started to dance, and in this one week in Cologne in 1996 I figured out that this was what I wanted to do with my life, and that it was worth putting all my energy into it. I was twenty-six, and I already had a job as a counsellor. For a short time I tried to do both, but I very soon figured out that it would be good to concentrate fully on training and performing. Not just as hobby, or a way to feel good – although this sometimes happens – but I felt that this was the way to express myself, with and within my body. And I felt insecure and at the same time very strong, by showing myself and my so-called dis-abled body on stage. And to be invited, which meant I was seen and got paid for it.

And I thought, this is what it feels worth putting all my energy into. This is how I would like to earn my living. This is what



Elisabeth Löffler, *Bizeps* - Zentrum für Selbstbestimmtes Leben (© Bizeps)

satisfies me in a deeper sense. And of course not only because of the results, but also during the process. And this loving the process, as well as the performing itself, is why I'm still doing art. But it wouldn't have been possible without a lot of open-minded friends, and surprisingly most of them weren't artists at all.

At the beginning of trying to join classes, most of the artists rejected me and wouldn't let me participate in their classes, and I'm still not always successful. But nowadays the teachers are slowly changing their minds.

Unfortunately I wasn't successful until now, to convince the government that dance art and disability aren't a contradiction, and that disabled dancers are also worth

supporting. This led to my mantra: Yes, politics and art matters and influences each other. And I feel it in my daily life. As an artist, as a woman, as a woman with a disability. To be aware of the political doesn't mean that I always use it directly in my work, as a subject or material, but I can't avoid or fully control what people might see or think of it, or what conclusions they draw from that.

Being an artist with a disability has an impact of course. Often I wonder if I would have become a dancer if I wasn't disabled. How I move and how I deal with the restrictions of my body seems very interesting for the so-called non-disabled dancers and choreographers, and of course for the audience. For me, seeing other dancers with a disability was always a release – this feeling of 'I am not the only strange duck' who

wants to dance. And it is less boring to have diverse dance-bodies on stage. This probably sounds harsh, but I think this diversity is 'normal'. Art isn't working in a separate clean holy space, it's also competition, and we all have to survive in a very basic way. Enough to eat and a place to sleep.

And the desire to work as an artist and have a family at the same time, was sometimes hard to deal with. Here we are in the real world, and that means even if I'd like to, there's no way of separating politics and art. And why should we? Moaning never helps when you want to change the world. Although it is just a little world I'm living and working in, I always wanted to change the world.

The most important thing for me to keep going, are friends who are working in an artistic and political field, trying to stay optimistic and active in spite of all the difficult things going on in the world.

I'm tired of convincing people about why it's worth getting an artistic education in dance and performance. And I'm not expecting the director of the art school to make sure that I get a possibility to work afterwards. I just want the same rights of education as non-disabled students, as well as accessibility to education, rehearsal space, wardrobes, and of course stages. This needs people in politics and administration who have enough power and courage to make it happen.

Back to us! I think it is important to follow your desire as an artist, to look for other artists to connect with, and to never lose your sense of humour.

Elisabeth

'...everything is wiggling'

Letter from Vicky Malin

Dear Artist,

I really enjoyed reading the previous letter. It reminds me (and excites me), that we can always surprise each other (and ourselves). I feel I was let in on the secrets of someone I've worked with quite a lot. Her letter was touching and surprising, and it invigorates me that we keep questioning this bizarre life.

The way I'm thinking now is that things are always in flux. If I look back over the last 36 years, I've thought and communicated about my disability in different ways. When I was a child and teenager, I dutifully explained my diagnosis to anyone that asked. I offered little 'sound bites' of information which I'd gathered from my parents and doctors. Maybe this helped me to understand? But I think it was also to inform or to make people feel comfortable. In my 20's, I got a bit more elusive with it

(perhaps a bit more short and grumpy with people), and I wanted to be a bit vaguer with the labels. I had a shifting sense that I didn't HAVE to talk about it. Now in my 30's, I think I have a balance of these options, and I'd say it really depends on the situation, the day and the vibe of the conversation, and how I want to talk about it...

And for an attribute that people say they don't notice, I do get asked A LOT!

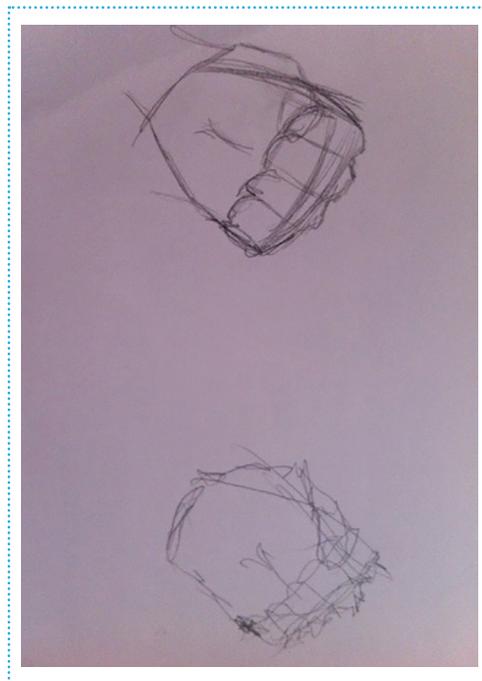
A regular sort of exchange would be:

'What's wrong with your leg/hand?'

'I have cerebral palsy.'

'Oh, right...you don't really notice it.'

It's a contradiction that baffles me, and which I can find either funny or irritating. I do understand. They notice something, but it is not quite what they expected. I guess from my experience I would never ask someone those kinds of questions, but is that because of my experience?



Drawing by Vicky Malin (© the artist)

FRESH PERSPECTIVES

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Parts of me are ambiguous, changeable...or is that just being human? I feel this letter is giving me some dramatic licence, so yes, I will go for it! Hold tight:

Dear audience, person on the street, friend, you don't know what my life has been like and I don't know what yours has been like, so don't guess or judge or comment on how disabled you think I am. It seems to hurt me, whatever your opinion. Try not to put a value, grade or specification onto it. It is the way it is, and as I am discovering through this letter it is so CHANGEABLE (physically and psychologically).

Here comes the drama...

I know what it feels like have someone feed me and wash my hair.

And what it feels like to not be able to run for a bus, or not be able to walk.

I know what it's like to feel like nothing, and anything, is possible.

This letter feels like a space to get things off my chest, but perhaps it's addressed to people who actually understand, so I am not shouting at you specifically.

I get a bit overwhelmed when I feel like it's a competition. What is your situation? What are your beliefs?

I'm curious. Do you use the word cripple or not? And with whom? I don't say it often, I've tried and it sounds weird coming out of my mouth, not that I think people shouldn't say it.

These thoughts and experiences influence my latest artist question: 'Can I explore the movement of my hands, in particular the relationship between them, just as a dancer might explore their pelvis?' I panic that I might hear someone say, 'Oh, I thought she didn't create or perform work about disability.' 'But I just want to explore the possibilities and opportunities of my body as any other dancer would.' Or do I? There is something interesting about the agency of discovery, particularly if you've been poked, prodded and corrected by doctors. Or by dance teachers and choreographers...

Is this all getting a bit political?

Or is everything political, and if I avoid those questions will I never make anything?

Do you or do you not want to talk about it Vicky?

YES AND NO!

Don't tie me down man!

I realise this letter has thoughts bouncing everywhere! Am I feeling a pressure to be the 'face of' disabled dance? Does that face have to be crystal clear and fit in with other people's expectations? What are my expectations?

These representations feel very grey, and my thinking can shift quite dramatically. I guess I'm used to calling myself a disabled person. The way I think and talk about my disability seems more changeable. For me the terms 'dancer' or 'disabled dancer' are also in flux, but then on a lighter note, the dance I often dance (and like to watch) might not be described by some people as dance anyway.

My conclusion is that I don't want my disability to prevent me doing the things I want to try. I've always felt this was important in my life, which is why I started dancing professionally in the first place. So for this next step, I don't want it to limit or censor my choreographic material as a maker. I obviously want to be clear about my choices and what and how I am exploring these ideas, but I don't want to assume that certain topics are out of bounds. Maybe it's even a bit strange to panic that someone might think my work is 'about disability'. Maybe my worry comes from the thought that it could 'ONLY be about disability'. Not to disregard the part, but to acknowledge it is as fragment of a whole pile of stuff. A bit like if you focus your attention on the hands or the pelvis, but the whole body is wiggling.

Everything is wiggling!

'...I worry, because perhaps we're all gathering in a falsehood of 'curated community''

Letter from Dan Daw

Dear fellow artists

I worry. I worry a lot of the time actually. I worry, because doors between us seem to be closing. I worry, because cards are held closer to chests. I worry, because the notion of community might be disappearing. I worry, because perhaps we're all gathering in a falsehood of 'curated community' to take what we need from one another and go. I remember not so long ago when a difference in opinion or perspective was interesting, exciting and even valued and respected. It was these differences in opinion that spurred creativity on. I worry we're losing the ability to quietly observe and that we're tightening our grip on protest signs. I worry that we're thinking with our tongues. I worry that deep thought is evaporating into thin, meaningless air.

I worry about my choices needing to be the 'right' choices. 'Right' in line with how you make, think, feel. I worry about the consequences of not toeing the line and about the consequences of falling into evenly paced step. I worry that success is 'becoming too big for my boots' and I worry I need to stunt my growth just to make others feel good about themselves. I worry that this is now what empowers others. I worry that I still care for others in a world that seems to not...



Dan Daw in 'On One Condition' at Sadler's Wells, March 2017 (© Foteini Christofilopoulou)

'...and all the little wounds from dancing on the floors of London, France, Vietnam, Palestine and Israel, Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and our bedrooms'

Letter from Andrew Graham

Dear Gatekeepers,

Listen to a song: *Nostos* – Jean-Michel Blais

For the time I spend away from the rest of my body.

And so I am ... a dancer... dancing...

In the streets of London with my thumb on the screen... at my desk, with the tip of my fingers shooting lots of images into my eyes and sounds in my ears.

I have my body and my computer.

The computer is my extra limb, my agent, my job, my opinions, my god, my family, my friends and my romances.

My computer is my buddy, but am I his? Or hers? Or its?

And so I am... going with the flow, accepting that the world is changing.

I've bought a computer so I can do, think

and feel, further and faster. But really, I am further and faster away from you and your dances.

So let's celebrate the fact that we have danced together, shared the sensation of each other's skin, smells and the thickness of our sweat. We have listened to each other and believed in each other's concepts. Yet I am on my computer. I can still remember the shiver I got from touching your different skins... The sensuality of your otherness... All we see from each other when we looked into each other's eyes. The attention and respect we have for one another when our bodies meet. Let's celebrate our recent history of diversity. Let's celebrate our on-going curiosity for other lives and other experiences. I wish to feel the dancers' sweat, their smells and all the little wounds from dancing on the floors of London, France, Vietnam, Palestine and Israel, Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and our bedrooms.

I wish to celebrate the desire to dance, the beginnings of movements and our unreasonable impulses... The ones that allow us to abstract... and to celebrate our outbursting human creativity.

Maybe, the human body can't deal anymore with its own creativity.

Let's celebrate the highs of abstraction and

the fact that we exist. Today 'less isn't just more,' because we can do 'more AND less' at the same time, or separately or juxtaposed, in different dynamics, body parts and intentions...

Let's just celebrate the fact that I am writing this letter and you are reading it.

All these thousands of years evolving to obtain this bodily being? Sold to virtual reality?

All these millenniums, to obtain my heart, my brain, and this whole system of complex emotions... And how about the child in me, the monkey, the iguana, the fish? Stolen by my computer... I keep arguing about dance and forget to dance.

My dance is increasingly becoming an intellectual fantasy. My virtual dance is growing, leaping, stretching away from my physical dance.

When we fantasise about others and it turns into reality... isn't that called love?

Am I disengaging from loving others? Or you?

Because I danced on this song in between writing each paragraph of this letter. You may listen to: *Un ratito de fiesta*, Angel Pastel.

More than ever, let's invite others to dance.



Andrew Graham dancing in his living room (© Katherine Waters)

'...but that wasn't what you wanted the artists to do was it?'

Letter from Simon Startin

Dear Humanity,

Where did it all go wrong? You were given a perfectly acceptable rock to hurtle through space on, with the possibility of infinite wonder and through a process of laziness, obfuscation and cowardice you have come to gather around the flames of what you most fear, quivering at your own shadows that are cast upon the cave wall. You have been born. You will be mired in daily hardship. You will die. Furthermore your body, the other gift you were given along with the rock, is going to travail a variety of forms. You will grow lumps, lose bits, stumble, vomit, consume, shit. Every cell in your body will be replaced every 3 months. You will decay. You may even lose your mind. Look in the mirror. That's you. That's going to happen.

So to help yourselves you have made up this job called the Artist. You have asked them to look into that mirror and come up

with a bit of a song and a dance. They've been quite successful at it. Sold a few tickets. But still those shadows flicker on the wall. Unfortunately, you gave that job to the wrong people. You gave it to the people who really loved looking in that mirror. They loved their beautiful shapes. They adored their own voices. Voices that will never crack. Shapes as perfect as their god intended. Bumps in the right places. The shit safely flushed. To hide from the shadows, the Artists have made you a sumptuous palace of lies.

But that wasn't what you wanted the Artists to do was it? They were given carte blanche with the truth. Perhaps it's time for the shadows to sing. Let them peel from the wall and dance with us. A fragile dance. With crutches and age. With stumbles and blindness. With the 10 to the power of 480000 different genetic combinations of human shadow that are possible. Let's dance in the ruins of the sumptuous palace, on the shards of broken mirror. Let's dance with the truth.

As a disabled artist, all I want to do is tell you the truth. Sometimes mediated by my disability. Sometimes from my other many shadows. I am available for children's parties, Bar Mitzvahs and weddings....

'...sight, smell, touch'

Letter from Nadia Nadarajah, translated from British Sign Language by Sue MacLaine

Hello,

I read the other letters submitted by the other artists and could certainly relate to what they were saying.

For my story, I am remembering when I was small and I loved ballet. I asked my parents if I could go and they were encouraging. They never viewed my being Deaf as a problem and my mum was always very 'you can' and so we found a class. I must have been about 6 at the time as I had just started primary school.

I arrived at the first class where all the other pupils were hearing. I had on the ballet outfit my mum had bought me, of a white tutu, wrap-around cardigan and pink ballet shoes with pink ribbon laces. My mum told me to 'watch the teacher, copy the movements of the other children and not to scream!' She'd told the teacher in advance that I was deaf, as I was at a school for deaf children, but this was an after-school activity in a different place.

The ballet teacher put us into rows, I think there were about 12 of us and I always stood in the middle. Being in the middle meant there was always someone in front of me to copy and get the rhythm from, even when we turned round. The teacher was very strict about everyone being in exact time with each other, but I was confident that I could and I didn't think it would be a problem. Bear in mind that I was only 5 or 6 years of age and learning everything for the first time by copying, so inevitably I was a little bit behind. I was trying to learn everything as fast as I could, and maybe if I had been older...but I was never good enough for the teacher.

After two or three weeks the teacher told my mum she didn't want me to come back again. When asked why by my mum, she said it was because I was always behind. My mum explained it was because I was relying totally on the visual to learn through copying, and in time I would improve. The teacher was unrelenting, and said again

that she didn't want me back.

At the end of that lesson, my mum told me to say goodbye to the other children as I wouldn't be back next week. I asked why, and she explained what the teacher had said. We were both annoyed and upset, because I knew I could do it.

I had always loved dance and had wanted to dance, and so my mum found me other ways. I went to an Indian Dance class, run by a friend of hers. The friend knew I was Deaf and was really enthusiastic about my participating, saying she would keep a special eye on me to make sure I was ok. We went into a large room full of women and I stood in the middle again. I could see everything and picked up the dance moves and intricate hand gestures. I felt confident there and I used my sight and the vibration from the music to get the rhythms, and the teacher would make additional effort to communicate with me with lip patterns and gesture. I knew I had it in me to dance, but it was about finding the right way to help me access that. Thanks to my mum, who never emphasised the need to be able to hear, but encouraged me to use my other senses and not give up. I proved the ballet teacher wrong as I danced in school shows, took solos and continued my love of dance.

There is now a developing field of choreography that utilises and enhances the physicality of sign language, and that is really exciting to me.

A final note would be to tell anyone who is deaf and wants to be a dancer not to give up. Use your other senses: sight, smell, touch...if one sense is lost then use the others more powerfully and don't let the loss beat you or define you...make everything else stronger and don't give up.

'...all you bastards out there who told me I'd never paint, act and dance, here I am!'

Letter from Julie Cleves

To Whom It May Concern

I'm an Artist/Painter, I went to University. I'm an Actor, trained by Graeae Theatre Company and I'm a Dancer trained by Candoco Dance.

Throughout these three genres there has always been within my work a separation of two parts. Not in a bad way as they've always worked well together.

I've never been particularly political. It's not that I don't care, it's for my own survival, as I have to deal with bad day to day stuff as it is.

My work is very much for me. I dance for me, overcoming challenges, trying new things, working with my body in new ways. This excites me and I'm still learning. It's how it makes me feel that's important. Working with other dancers, learning so much. Then there's another side of performing, showing off. All you bastards out there who told me I'd never paint, act and dance, here I am! Look at me! If I can put a seed into someone's mind to empower them to do what they feel, then yes that's an added bonus.



Nadia Nadarajah screenshot of 'signed' letter (© the artist)



Julie Cleves (© Robbie Synge)

'...perhaps the increased splintering of identity politics will be the patriarchy's death by a thousand cuts?'

Letter from Will Bride

Hi Kate,

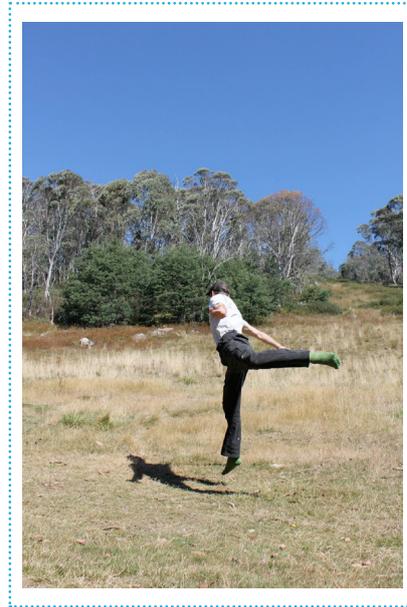
I thought I would respond by fleshing out some different points that came up during the workshop and have stayed with me – things we discussed, or things that came to mind privately.

'Working from where you are':

Dance practice as both a job and an art form feels best when you work from the energy level, needs, technical capacity, training, personal and cultural history, aesthetic preference, points of reference, etc., that are wholly, faithfully your own. This doesn't at all mean complacency or concession. It means that good work can be done when it emerges from a conscious understanding of and engagement with where you are as a human making dance. An antithesis of this might be making work motivated by impressing people who hold power; performing in a style that tries to imitate something you have witnessed that is exalted, but which doesn't necessarily see you thrive; or trying to conceal things (inadequacies, short-cuts, presumptions) from an all-seeing audience.

'What can disability bring to dance?':

You said this in your artist talk. How might disability add complexity and advance the form, and reject a concessionary status. In her workshop, Claire Cunningham, maybe quoting Jenny Sealey, talked about 'the aesthetics of access' – the rich, multi-dimensional aesthetic potential of conscious increased access in a performance. In his workshop, Tere O'Connor said choreography and dance as a form thrived when it operated according to principles of 'multiplicity and complexity, over cogency and certitude.' In his workshop, Takao Kawaguchi said he moved from theatre into contemporary dance because he found it a more open form. Jacques Rancière's 'emancipated spectator' is an audience



Will Bride (© Paulina Olszanka)

member that the maker understands as a free thinker who will make of the work something entirely particular to their own perspective. I like to think of a dance piece as an offering, a node. I try to embed an openness of interpretation into my work, intentionally using ambiguity, humour, surprise, contradiction, etc., to shake loose any expectation of a singular interpretation. My heart sinks when, as an audience member, it dawns on me what I'm 'meant' to be thinking and feeling during a performance, but when I don't necessarily think or feel that, and an 'obligation-resentment' mindset creeps in.

'Nothing is normal':

Everything is natural. (This phrase appears in my friend Lz Dunn's work 'Aeon.' I'm not sure if it's a quotation from somewhere else, or from Lz.) One lunchtime during the workshop we talked about the TV series 'Transparent' and how in it, the romantic and sexual encounters portrayed don't proceed in a standardised way, but demonstrate the particularity of each different configuration of people. In the process this exposes patriarchal heteronormativity – and some standardised way of coupling and having sex – as a brittle notion. Relative

disability is a real and consequential thing, but the notion that everyone is either 'disabled' or 'normal' is facile and damaging and doesn't foster empathy. A common grievance levelled at identity politics is at the ever increasing subsets of identities claiming particularity – in rights, suffering, voice, pride. Perhaps the increased splintering of identity politics will be the patriarchy's death by a thousand cuts, fundamentally undermining ideas of a homogenous majority with unfortunate aberrations. Ali in 'Transparent' thinks of 'intersectionality as the holy other.'

Using your body, being creative, making art, working hard at something over a long time and seeing results of your labour, curiosity, refined emotional sensitivity, communication, stretching, Pilates, aerobic exercise, negotiation, engaging with different people, being present, good breathing, openness to strangers, are all very healthy ways to be alive. Dance/art/performance is conducive to physical and mental good health. If disability intersects with 'health', then arts practice is a good way to engage with your health. When I am working in the studio, making a show, I feel healthier than at any other time in my life.

'...it dawned on me that some of the audience hadn't realised I was disabled'

Letter from Welly O'Brien

Dear Artist,

I'm not sure how to describe myself, some days I decide I'm a performer, other days a dancer, and sometimes an artist. Whatever I am, I find it quite a complex job.

I have to wear so many hats and I have to be able to adapt to so many different environments and scenarios. I have to be able to be happy in my own company and my own skin, but I also have to feel happy in the company of lots of other people, often sharing personal space. Hours spent travelling, quite often alone, and hours, days, weeks spent making. Touring to strange and wonderful places, as well as mundane or not so thrilling places. Each scenario I land in, I make the most of it and live for that moment, whatever I am doing or whoever I am with. I savour every bit, as I never know when it will end.

I am Disabled. Generally most of the works I've been involved in have been integrated environments, a couple of times being the only disabled performer in the cast. I've performed for over 20 years, and have had a great time. There have been ups and downs and each day is different. I guess it's what I love to do, and I'm not sure what else I would be content doing, but a few things have been brought to my attention recently and it has made me think about my role as a disabled performer.

Until recently, I've always performed in costumes in which my disability has been very visible. It was never a conscious decision - just how it was. But when I started performing in a show where my disability was covered, I started getting different feedback after shows, which made me think.

It dawned on me that some of the audience hadn't realised I was disabled, and for some reason that sat oddly with me. I think for the first time I could feel what it was like to perform as an artist and not as a disabled artist. It felt exciting, but at the same time it brought up questions of 'who' or 'what' I

am as a performer. In the past (I'm sure this resonates with other disabled performers) I would generally get comments like 'aren't you brave' or 'an inspiration', from some audience members; but this time these kinds of comments didn't come, which was interesting.

What worried me was that I've spent 20 years thinking I was an ok performer and doing alright in my practice, but I started to wonder has it only been about my disability? Am I still valid if I am not making my disability explicit? How am I perceived then?

I think maybe this will be a lifelong question, and maybe it's just the way it is... all I know is that I am very lucky to do what I do, and to have done it for this long. The highs and lows, the tears and laughter, the places I've seen and the people I've met. It's a fabulous job and I wouldn't have changed any of it for the World.

'...I see myself as a dancer of three different bodies: Tanja with crutches, Tanja with a wheelchair, Tanja without crutches or wheelchair'

Letter from Tanja Erhart

Dear Many,

I'm sitting here, trying to understand what's happening with me right now. I just had another fever attack, at an intensity I didn't have before. It's crushed me in a couple of hours, from my usual swollen and painful lymph node, to shivering and fevering up to 40 degrees Celsius. It's beyond my understanding what has happened, though it's not entirely new to me. And still, it's happening so differently. I'm so fragile, so vulnerable, and that's unusual.

It's always been a learning curve. My aunty used to say, 'Yes Tanja, until you learn it', and I did. So much listening and trying to understand what it is that makes me have that fever attack, which used to last just one night, and then three days to recover and I was fit again, and all without medicine. My body seemed to be able to heal itself from the inflammation, burning the bacteria and sweating it all out. Not any more. I'm in my second week right now, after an antibiotic boost straight into my veins and then pills which made me swell up and look like a puff pastry. The fever has gone, swollen lymph node as well, but my eyes are still nicely cushioned. Am I getting old?! I've had no time to dance. In fact I had to stop touring with Candoco in Eastern Europe and fly back to London to see my specialists, so I could get well and recover. Thankfully I had my personal assistant with me in Eastern Europe, who took care and organised everything for me. Lou was there when my body shut down for a while; she was my body and I needed her to be active, so I could recover. Now I feel exhausted, sad, helpless, stranded and lonely. I know, that's just life and part of where art thrives from, isn't it!? But it had a major impact on me, physically, mentally and emotionally. And on writing this letter.

Why am I telling you all this? Because that's what my mind spits out right now. It's part of recovering! It's as simple as that, but also hard to find the words and how to talk

about it without being seen as a poor and pitiful dis_abled, which is how I very much feel in this moment. But there is so much more to it. It seems like my life as a dancer is in danger, and I need to talk about that danger before it gets dangerous. And also I want to talk about that dancer.

Since we're all dancers with different experiences, minds and understandings, I'd like to hear your voice, your advice, your thoughts, your anything. Because I think there's deep knowledge to find. A collective knowledge I want to dig into. And also because I want to talk about my body, to find out more about our bodies. How physical health and wellbeing is important in order to be able to do things. Or not? Is this what we should question when we talk about the body; this split between a wholesome entity that is healthy and well, or a body which is sick and ill?

Currently I'm reading a book called 'Culture-Theory-Disability', published recently by Anne Waldschmidt, and it's amazing. It's as if my mind starts to find words and ideas/theories to put my thoughts and practical experiences into. Our bodies are fluid, we're not one body but many, and they are not defined by what they are, but by what they can do. Nothing is fixed, everything is in constant change. And this fluidity of the body is something I've realised through dancing, and the possibilities that come into a space when I bring my crutches and my wheelchair.

This following excerpt is something I wrote in October last year, when Kate Marsh asked me to give her some quotes around dancing/performing with or without prosthesis. This is what I replied, and by reading it again now I see it reflects on the thoughts I spit out above, and might offer another perspective, and some food for thought:

'I see myself as a dancer of three different bodies: Tanja with crutches, Tanja with a wheelchair, Tanja without crutches or wheelchair. And at the same time it's always just me, the one-legged, three-legged Tanja with a wheelchair.

When I first started I just jumped onto the dancefloor and danced using what I came with, but as time has passed and I've been

through different making-processes, I've started to actively think about my 'various' bodies, and my embodied differences.

I do this especially in the creative making-process with a choreographer, actively giving them options from my different bodies. Whether s/he wants to see me dancing or exploring with or without my crutches or wheelchair; or dependent on the task, or the aesthetics, or the idea that they have in mind. Usually I suggest these options at the very beginning of the process, when the choreographer has no idea which Tanja to choose when, or for what reason. But the seed is planted...

Then I start exploring for myself, making my own decisions about which physicality I want to engage with. And these decisions are based on the task given; on how I feel, how much I want to challenge myself or stay in my comfort zone, how I am energy wise and how I'm doing emotionally.

And there's also a very practical aspect to these decisions, which is to do with the time it takes. For me the process goes like this: I come in to the space with my movement equipment (crutches and wheelchair) ready if needed, then I listen to the task, ask questions if needed and make decisions on which tool to use to best fulfill the task. And as the class or creative process goes along, these tasks and exercises change, so I might need to change my movement equipment. And if that happens, the time issue becomes key, because I need to figure out where the equipment is and then go/hop/crawl/roll there and make myself ready with the new tool. And this all takes effort and energy, so sometimes I decide to stick with what I have and who I am right then, and stay focused on that. And I do this even though I might be really interested in changing.

I performed in a piece recently where I used all three of my embodied differences. And I have to say I found that some of them are more embodied than others, because I'm more used to one tool than another. For instance, it hasn't been long since I've been using my wheelchair in dancing, because it's only recently that I've had a wheelchair in my life again. When I was small I needed one to move around, because I couldn't walk on my legs or crutches, and then after my amputation, when I was six, I started to

learn to walk with crutches. And because I was much more mobile with the crutches (the house I grew up in wasn't accessible at all), we soon became very close friends and I started to run around everywhere with them. It's only since 2013 that I started using a wheelchair for dancing. And I've begun to really enjoy it, because of the speed it gives me, and the spins and all the crazy tricks, which is something I can't do with my crutches.

So skill-gaining in all my three different bodies, is key to them becoming my embodied differences. And it all takes time, curiosity, training and a huge desire to dance. I'm not one, but many, in a very obvious way; as an amputee with various equipment to help me move, but also to do with my invisible dis_abilities, like my tumours, diabetes, chronic infection and so forth, which shape what I do and what I can't do.

We are not one, but we are many. How can we understand that without becoming crazy? How can we understand and talk about it not only in a medical, but a constructive productive way? How can we understand and communicate more about dis_ability in a playful rather than resentful way? We are thinking beyond our bodies in dance already, so how can we do that when we look at dis_ability in dance? How can we understand and be compassionate about it, with it, with each other? How can we understand more about each other and ourselves through dis_ability?

My artistic and scientific interests lie in understanding cultural models of dis_ability, and how to bring it into the dance space and onto the stage, but also into everyday life when connecting and engaging with people on the streets. Having been in the dance profession for several years now, I encounter questions about my dis_ability from audience members, for example in Q&As, on a daily basis, but when I'm in the studio or in a working environment these questions rarely come up, or are being avoided. It's interesting isn't it?! The common mantra sounds like this: 'don't talk about disability, but about the work and the quality of the work', which is fair enough, but to be honest I'm sick of it. I'm sick of not looking at dis_ability. I want to look at it and find out what potentiality dis_ability experience brings into dance and aesthetics, and

how to rethink the body.

Embodied differences are not only an extension of my physicality, but an addition to my possibilities of expression. They each bring different qualities into the space, becoming movement resources and skill gaining opportunities. Thinking of dance, that's clearly one place where we can find crossovers and intersections.'

'...If the audience requested dignity from the actors, it could judge for itself what theatre should be like, and imitating life is neither beautiful nor cultured'

Letter from Saša Asentić

Dear artists and cultural workers that worry,

I see that many of my fellows already became accomplices of the creative industries, and that they took austerity as a fatality.

Some of them were not aware when it happened.

Some are still not...

Some are worried, scared, and anxious...

Some are angry, and some are disappointed.

Only a very few are happy, because they think that they were lucky to be selected.

As for myself, I can tell you that every day for the last 18 years and counting, I've been recalling memories from a tiny room on the ground floor of a socialist building on the Boulevard of Freedom in Novi Sad, right after the NATO bombing. The room was too small for Natalija, Kristina, Goran, Jelena, Igor, Maida, Medina, Mladen, Vasil, Mića, Siniša, Bojan, Tanja, Rajko, Milan, Damir, Ilija, Tamara, Dejan...for some parents who would accompany those who needed support...and for Dragana, Tanja, Tamara, Ivana, Zorica, Milica, Aleksandar and me. I was 22.

Maybe you wonder how life was in Serbia at that time? Why did people make art?

I am the 2nd generation of independent artists in Serbia since socialist Yugoslavia fell apart. In the 1990's, to be independent in Serbia meant deliberately taking a critical position and resisting Slobodan Milošević's regime, and the institutions that were serving it, including those of cultural. It was a clear political position. We had to create a public and address them in a sphere that was not controlled by the state, using streets, squares and parks as places of action, with preparations and

meetings taking place in living rooms, on park benches, and wherever else we found ourselves. It was in this context that the tiny room happened, and it became an important meeting of disabled and non-disabled young people, who had a vision of a better society.

My disabled friends had no theatre or performing arts experience whatsoever, so I started by sharing with them what little experience I had. In one of our meetings, I asked what they thought theatre should be like. Natalija Vladislavljević, a friend and colleague with Down syndrome, said: 'If the audience requested dignity from the actors, it could judge for itself what theatre should be like, and imitating life is neither beautiful nor cultured.' This was, and still is, the kind of theatre I believe in: a theatre that has rejected the illusion of the fourth wall and offers its audience, instead of the 'neither beautiful nor cultured' imitation of life, the sense of dignified performers as political subjects and theatre as a socially engaged act. That was the moment our group consolidated, around this understanding of theatre and its role in society.

Less than a year after our first meeting in the tiny room, democracy arrived, but it was only when we experienced austerity measures that we realised how democracy came together with neoliberal capitalism. Yet, since that moment we've made 9 performances, 7 exhibitions, 1 film, and 2 books, in a self-organised way, with solidarity, enthusiasm, trust, and respect for diversity, and with very little or even no financial support at all. We knew that we had to take everything into our own hands, because if we had waited for the system or someone else to do it for us, we would not have existed.

I believed strongly that my disabled colleagues should be able to make their art and that we should present it within the local cultural scene, so I started to involve more of my non-disabled colleagues and other cultural professionals. This included the new directors of cultural institutions, with whom dialogue was possible and politically acceptable for the first time, as a strategy for change. In the dawn of democracy in Serbia, I slowly created a network of individuals - from technicians and ticket

sales persons to artistic directors and general managers; from journalists, school teachers and professors at universities to students and youth workers - who would advocate for our idea of inclusion, through their different positions in cultural and educational institutions, informal associations and NGOs,

Inclusion is still a relatively new notion in our context. For us it's a principle, and at the same time a living process of developing the inclusive society we stand for. This kind of society does not exist (yet). And when we speak about inclusion, we speak about the areas where inclusion takes place: for instance when we see our colleagues with disability using public transportation to come to the national theater for a rehearsal of their performance; or when we publish a book written by our colleague with Down syndrome, with a foreword written by a renowned dramaturge, which is then promoted in the national gallery; or when our colleagues appear in the media as disabled artists and talk about their artistic work; or when we see the speed at which the news of a new performance or exhibition spreads over social media. And above all, when we see how our work affects the personal development of our colleagues and their families. Then we know that we are on the right track, on the path towards the establishment of the society that we wish to live in. Or as Natalija writes in one of her poems, 'This is how it makes sense, to live this way'.

Dalibor Šandor, another colleague of mine with learning disability, who is interested in epic fantasy and the social reality of his position as a disabled person in Serbia, believes that one has to be brave to perform in public, and that this is the only way to foster social change: 'When I go on stage in front of an audience, I often wonder what the audience will be like; will they clap, will we do it right, will someone start to panic?... you could compare it to high fantasy stories, because to go on stage you need courage, like heroes do in epic fantasies... we all need to be brave, because if someone isn't brave, if they're scared on stage, it can create chaos, especially, but I doubt this will happen, if everyone gets discouraged at the same time, then it would be real chaos!'

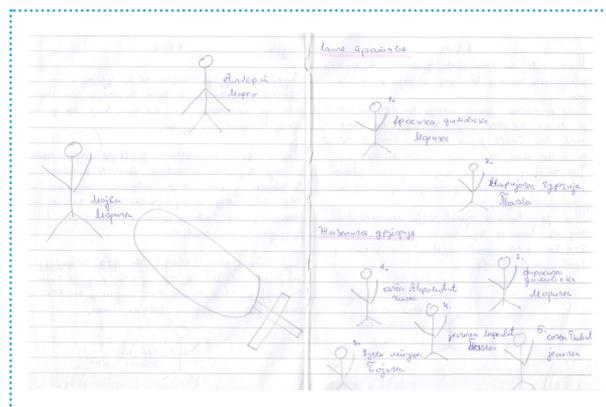
What is the social reality in which Dalibor and his eleven other disabled colleagues meet their audiences? Let me give you some facts so you can imagine the situation in Serbia better. Discrimination and corruption are the two main characteristics of Serbian contemporary society, and right-wing violence is quite high. If postcards were made out of Human Rights reports or the Corruption Index, then those from Serbia wouldn't be pretty: bridges, factories and roads destroyed by NATO bombs; hooligans burning embassies in Belgrade; LBGTQ participants beaten at our first Gay

Pride; the murder of a young French football fan, Brice Taton; barbed wire fences around Roma settlements during the World Student Games; and textile industry workers cutting their fingers off in protest during a strike...

In this context it's a constant struggle for us to make our work and to claim our place in public for disabled artists and disabled audiences. But even when we are discouraged, we never give up. The social choreography we imagine and realise in our artistic work, rehearses a society that abolishes marginalization processes or reduces them



Saša Asentić's group Per.Art (© Aleksandar Ramadonovic)



Drawing by Natalija Vladisavljević, member of Saša Asentić's performance group, Per.Art (© the artist)

to a minimum - a society that doesn't use just one parameter to measure everything, and that doesn't apply the same norms to all people but rather starts instead from the specificities of concrete people, opening the possibility of a social community.

We are always aware that 'the future is uncertain', but through our aesthetics of responsibility, we also always believe that 'it will be what we make it'. The poetics and politics of our work are inspired by Natalija's writings: 'You should know that the rest of your life is your happiness.'

...

A couple of months ago Dalibor and I heard from James Leadbitter about what he calls 'war against the disabled' and the activities of Atos Healthcare in the UK, who are managing the so-called 'reform' of Disability Living Allowance into Personal Independence Payment. The whole procedure of stripping disabled people of their rights, seems so horrifying to Dalibor as a disabled man that he compares it to slavery. And this same economy of austerity is also having a devastating impact on the public sector in Serbia, and on people's lives there. This is one thing we have in common I guess, that austerity makes us worry...

Art that is still defending the idea of art as public good; art that is NOT a category within the creative industries; art that invests in the public realm we all share, where we can challenge and change the way we are or are expected to be as social subjects, and where we can celebrate the diversity of who we are. This art is facing 'death by a thousand cuts.'

...

The tiny room that grew into a local community:

Natalija, Snežana, Goran, Marina, Bojana, Dalibor, Marko, Vuk, Marijana, Dejan, Mihailo, Beata, Nina, Srdjan, Dragutin, Dejan, Damir, Ljubica, Daca, Dušanka, Maja, Milan, Saša, Bosa, Dragan, Jovica, Jovana, Jadranka, Mira, Dragan, Bogdanka, Mladjana, Jan, Nada, Zoran, Nikola, Estika, Palika, Andreja, Nataša, Olivera, Frosina, Dunja, Dragana, Tatjana, Saša, Dragana, Branislav, Višnja, Laslo, Predrag, Tihomir, Slavica, Dragana, Milica, Jelena, Milena,

Višnja, Aleksandar, Tijana, Dragan, Ibolya, Višnja, Ljilja, Nataša, Sneža, Igor, Vesna...

We wish to endure the cuts although they're painful and leave many of us exhausted, burned out and disappointed.

We wish to find a way to escape the bottom line logic of the creative economy and the economy of austerity.

We wish to continue creating new social facts that will be our contribution to a society of solidarity and complementarity.

We wish to last at least as long as we've existed until this moment, because duration and depth are becoming rare states in creativity, thinking and socialising.

We wish to continue to mobilise other precarious groups in our society, and to claim responsibility for the public good.

We wish as artists to continue inventing new tactics to subvert a system that favours markets over public good, that prefers controlled and measurable outcomes over experiment and contingency, and that prioritises individual success over collective efforts.

...

'Do I speak in vain?', shouts out loud Snežana, one of my colleagues with learning disabilities, in the final scene of our performance 'Little Party of Missed Dance.'

We know she doesn't.

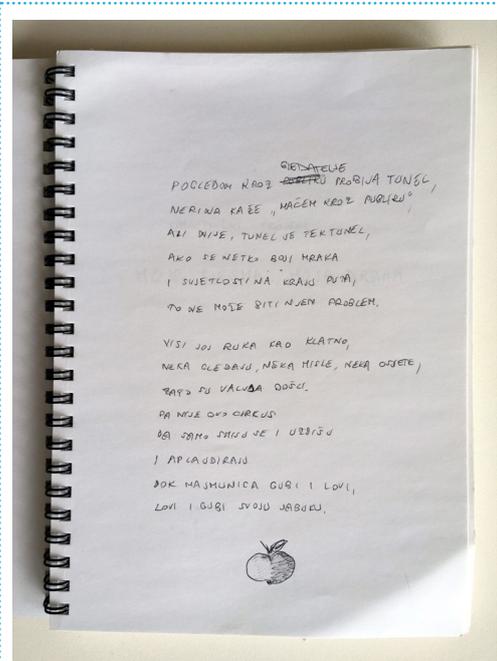
She knows we don't.

'...I have no urge or inspiration for writing a letter, but if you can accept my thoughts and feelings about my disabled performing body then I offer you the attached poem'

Poem by Vesna Mačković

Looking through the spectators she is digging a tunnel
Nerina says 'by the sword through the audience.'
But no, the tunnel is just a tunnel.
If one is afraid of the dark
and the light at the end of the road
it cannot be her problem.

Her arm hanging like a pendulum,
let them look, think, let them sense,
after all isn't it why they came.
It is not a circus
for them only to laugh, sigh
and applaud
whilst monkey is losing and chasing,
chasing and losing her apple.



Vesna Mačković's poem (© the artist)



Vesna Mačković in 'Two of them' at Festival Perforacije, Teatar &TD, Zagreb, 2016 (© Edita Sentić)

SECTION 2

Permission to stare

02.

DISABILITY AND THE ARTS -
A SEPARATE SECTOR?

'...defining people through any sort of dichotomy is problematic, and many people in the dance world are ready to work with all sorts of dancers as long as they're skilled, but companies like Candoco still have a vital function, because the dance world as a whole is not very diverse'

From the letter by Annie Hanauer

As will be demonstrated by the collection of approaches below, the notion of 'dance and disability' as a sector of the arts in its own right is both troubling and beneficial to disabled artists across different art forms. It is also a notion that varies significantly between different geographic and cultural contexts. UK experience tells us that the development and progression of art that includes and is made by people with disability is dependent on policies and political frameworks for support. Without such formal structures, disability arts as a sector that is 'recognised' in its own right wouldn't be possible, or would be the privilege of some, while others stay marginalised and under-supported.

Locating disability in the arts, be it as a specific phenomenon or considering disability arts as a separate sector, suggests that it requires a separate framework of understanding. This opens the way to a separation between a sector which is the 'norm' and one that is the 'non-normative', linked to notions of 'right' (dominant / non-disabled) and 'other' (passive / impaired). A compelling argument against programming work by/with disabled artists 'outside' or 'alongside' mainstream art is exactly to prevent this perception of disability as 'otherness'. Moreover as long as disabled artists and their arts are identified as 'other' they are more easily absent from mainstream leadership and power structures that can bring about shifts and changes in the arts in broader terms.

It is useful to note here the distinction between 'disability art' or 'disability and art' - both of which refer to a more generic understanding of art made by and including people with disabilities - and Disability Arts, which refers to an established field of practice, as 'art made by disabled people which reflects the experience of disability'¹.

Richard Phoenix, founder of Constant Flux, a UK organisation creating opportunities for musicians with learning disabilities, suggests that the current segregation between disability and art on one hand, and Disability Arts on the other hand is to be reconsidered; putting them together as a single entity leads to 'strength in numbers'. It also helps to create a counter-narrative to the typical media representation of people with disabilities as victims (stories about people with disabilities linked to hate crime are common). Conversely - he says - creating a distance between this field and the arts in general can further separate and even ghettoise disability art and maintain its association as being the 'other'. In his opinion producers and programmers in the arts are key to influencing the perception of work made by and including disabled artists. The aim should be for theatres and festivals to programme artists of all abilities and simply disregard the differences.

The needs of disabled artists are diverse, not standardized. This diversity asks for a debate on how to best fight for the rights of artists who are facing all kinds of barriers before their work can be exposed to the public. However, for the artists it is important to be considered in terms of quality - the indulgence of special treatment would never help to add value to their work. Considering a model of placing disability and arts and/or Disability Arts in its own sector continues to build on the concept of exclusion instead of inclusion.

In any case, if art and disability were to be seen as a distinct sector, the best model would be one with disability arts companies that are disability-led. In that case the sector could be defined by the creative leadership being the domain of disabled people.

This would reiterate the value of disabled artists as leaders of their own work and supporting the view that a field of arts and disability is well placed to make room for the artist's voice.

Apart from the discussion on arts and disability as a separate sector or not, conversations in the field revolve around other key issues: the identity of disabled artists, the role of curating and programming, the social model of disability, and the need for political engagement and consequent funding.

Simon Raven of Northumbria University suggests that Disability Arts is already a sector (albeit marginalised) offering a vital cultural platform to both disabled and non-disabled artists/audiences to consider how creativity can be informed by human difference. By stimulating audiences to look and perceive differently and cast their habitual thought patterns aside, Disability Arts provides a means to address constructions of identity and in this way Disability Arts might address lived experience of impairment and difference, whilst also seeking to reveal and redress forms of social marginalisation. Disability Arts might challenge 'acceptable' neoliberal notions of 'diversity', as propagated by mainstream culture.

¹ as defined by [Disability Arts Online](http://DisabilityArtsOnline)

'After a show, sometimes people say, "I didn't even notice you have a disability!" and they mean it as a compliment. Hint: this is not a compliment. I'm not trying to hide anything. The epitome of success for a disabled dancer is not to blend in. And I've trained to be a dancer and I've worked professionally for a while now, so it shouldn't really be surprising that I might appear skillful in some way.

But sometimes when they say, "I didn't even notice," they really didn't notice. They didn't see. And maybe that was because they were sitting far away or need new glasses, but I think it's more because when everything points to the fact that this person is a dancer - the choreography, the concept, the costumes, the context, whatever - the audience just agrees. So maybe in a sense they do see. They see and acknowledge and then it quickly becomes part of the fabric of the work.'

From the letter by Annie Hanauer

Disabled artists might be expected to have a particularly nuanced approach to tackling disability, drawing from both lived experience and critical reflection, but artistic treatment of disability should not necessarily be limited to disabled people. Mainstream venues should focus their curatorial attention on redressing an historic lack of artistic engagement with disability. If Disability Art became a more recognised sector within the arts and major arts institutions commissioned and curated disability art, an enlivened critical discourse about 'diversity', difference etc., and more opportunities for disabled artists could be expected.

In their contributions to this publication, [Luke Pell](#), [Claire Cunningham](#) and [Jess Curtis](#) offer a helpful summary of their shared discussion concerning the question of disability and the arts as a separate field. They believe for some people a separately-defined sector in its own right is useful; some individuals, artists and communities absolutely wish to locate themselves and identify with a specific territory that offers a particular lens, heritage, politic and aesthetic sensibility to their practice. This is typical of the UK context, due to the history of theory development and the radical disability rights movement in the UK of the past thirty years. The introduction of



Dançando com a Diferença, 'Madeira. No centro da cor o som', 2015 (© Júlio Silva Castro)

the [Disability Discrimination Act](#) in 1995 employed the [Social Model of Disability](#) in order to address reasonable adjustments that ensure disabled people could fully participate in society. The social model—unlike the medical model of disability—doesn't locate disability in the individuals, but rather in the physical and attitudinal barriers found around them: disability is not something people have (we are not people with disabilities), but is something done to people with impairments. People with impairments are disabled by poor or non-existent access to the public places where ordinary life happens and by the condescending or unwelcoming responses of those who occupy these places¹.

[Claire Cunningham](#), Scottish dance maker and performer, gives a personal perspective within which she highlights economic factors as key to the development of Disability Arts in the UK. One important factor in the UK is money. 'Money has been invested in disability arts/art-by-disabled-artists, pure and simple. I would be both an ignorant, and privileged, fool to pretend that my position, or my career were not the result of genuine

investment, financially as well as creatively, in an artist.'

Cunningham gives a detailed example referencing her own experience as an artist based in and supported by funding structures in Scotland: 'My specific degree of "success" as an independent artist and disabled artist is directly related not just to being in the UK but to being in Scotland, as in recent years the Scottish Government chose to invest in culture as something nationally important, and significantly as an "export". Our national arts body/funder, Creative Scotland, chose to go beyond legislation, for example to ensure basic equality and diversity requirements with regard to disability. Scotland chose to invest in disabled artists as an area of specific artistic focus and development. It supported the development of artists like myself to research and make work, to pursue bespoke training (because institutional training was and is still not particularly suited to supporting disabled dance artists²), and to platform that work at home and abroad.'

¹ <http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/why-we-are-disabled-people-not-people-with-disabilities>

² See S. Whatley, 'Moving Matters: Supporting Disabled Dance Students in Higher Education', Coventry University and I.J. Aujla & E. Redding, 'Barriers to dance training for young people with disabilities', *British Journal of Special Education*, 40 (2), 2013

Cunningham says about her early performance work:

'No matter where I perform, in my career nothing will be as vital as my performance in 2008 at DaDaFest in Liverpool—the UK's longest running disability arts festival. For the first time I knew I was playing to a room of my peers – to other disabled people, many of whom were quite politically active, indeed militant regarding disability. I knew I would genuinely be told the truth about my work, and I would be told if it reflected badly on disabled people generally. There is a weight to the sense of responsibility that comes with being identified with any minority group. You are seen as representing everyone. Every work I make, every public image, every tweet, document, etc., I have to check, to vet that it is not reinforcing any negative stereotypes of disability, not taking backwards steps, and that can be exhausting, and then of course I am also a female choreographer on top of that, but that is a whole other publication!'¹

The way in which an individual artist wants to identify in this sector is a personal experience; some find disability a core part of their creative identity and others find it restrictive. To stand alone as a sector might feel complicated and segregated. However, one sector which can include different perspectives and expressions could present an interesting model. In this publication we have aimed through our call-out and invitation to write a letter, to represent a range of perspectives and experiences.

03. CHALLENGING NOTIONS OF 'NORMAL' OR JUST BEING AN ARTIST?

'Maybe it's even a bit strange to panic that someone might think my work is 'about disability'. Maybe my worry comes from the thought that it could 'ONLY be about disability'. Not to disregard the part, but to acknowledge it as a fragment of a whole pile of stuff. A bit like if you focus your attention on the hands or the pelvis, but the whole body is wriggling.'

From the letter by Vicky Malin

Work made by disabled artists is often viewed through a politicized lens and interpreted through an agenda of what it means to be 'different'. How does that impact on those making that art? Is there an implied pressure on them to create work - or even present one's own body - as a resistance to the norm? Artists with disabilities may not want their work to be consistently considered as challenging the existing notions of the norm.

If the binary between normative and other in the arts is blurring, this should also influence how art made by disabled makers is read and understood. Non-normative arts and artists being narrowed down to their 'otherness', could also be extended to assumed narratives and expectations surrounding many practitioners in the arts – Is an older dancer always understood from the perspective of the ageing body? Are female artists critiqued with reference to feminist practice and the dominance of male leaders in the field?

Some artists most certainly do want to challenge 'norms' and their work is really important to the development of what dance can be and who's allowed on stage. Through their political approach they are also role models for other artists as well as young dance students. If one never sees disabled artists on stage it is difficult to feel welcomed as an artist or audience member with a disability.

04. 'GATEKEEPERS' - IMAGINING THE CENTRE IS EVERYWHERE

'I'm tired of convincing people about why it's worth getting an artistic education in dance and performance. And I'm not expecting the director of the art school to make sure that I get a possibility to work afterwards. I just want the same rights of education as non-disabled students, as well as accessibility to education, rehearsal space, wardrobes, and of course stages. This needs people in politics and administration who have enough power and courage to make it happen.'

From the letter by Elisabeth Löffler

Early conversations relating to this publication also raised the issue of power structures in the arts: those in power positions or the 'gatekeepers' (funders, policy makers, artistic directors, programmers etc.) are instrumental in the positioning and progression of art.

The artistic leaders, even more than funders and policy makers, could be perceived as the traditional gatekeepers to the public stage. But since public stage performances are guided by funding and audience, audiences and sponsors both need to be served in their needs. From this perspective, we can say that a performance process is informed by a range of gatekeepers: audience, curators and programmers, and funders.

One step beyond, if we resist the understanding of gatekeeping as a mainstream closing or opening doors to a margin, and instead consider the possibility that the centre is everywhere, gatekeeping becomes a state of mind, a practice – of opening doors and leaving them open to see what might come in.

Part of the job of the curator, producer or programmer is to educate the general public, encourage them to keep an open mind and enjoy the arts without any bias. In order to do this effectively, they must take chances on new companies and new

¹ Another Fresh Perspectives issue deals indeed with gender: P. Charhon, 'Of boxes and ceilings', IETM, 2016

styles of performances, including artists with different abilities; however, as long as artists with disabilities create their art in ghettoised artistic groups, producers, programmers and curators risk to be poorly informed about such artists, and to engage exclusively with artists without disabilities. This is a strong argument in favour of including disability arts in the general programmes of venues and festivals, instead - or besides - organising specific events focused on artists with disability; but it is also an argument in favour of more diversity in gatekeeping roles - and in the sector in general.

There are differing perspectives on what constitutes a gatekeeper; for example, artist and researcher [Simon Raven](#) suggests that the principal gateway to inclusion in the arts is through education and that to promote inclusion a diverse and inclusive arts education should be the norm in all schools. However, the current direction in education in the UK and other countries with neoliberal leadership is promoting the reverse: arts courses are being cut, and in many cases not taught at all. There is also an issue with professional arts education, particularly in dance, where more flexible curricula and more sensitive educators may allow disabled students to find a reasonable compromise between individual needs and education standards.

Dramaturg [Luke Pell](#) offers a broader view on gatekeeping, suggesting that artists, art makers, enthusiasts, funders and communities, are all gatekeepers. Describing his recent collaboration with Claire Cunningham and Jess Curtis 'The Way You Look (At Me) Tonight' Pell states that the project began to notice and explore what it is to deal with different gatekeepers. As an artist he is less concerned with challenging gatekeeping hierarchies, but he acknowledges that gatekeeping could be a personal aspect that exists in all of us. In this sense Pell is suggesting to recognise the potential for all those invested in the arts to be gatekeepers, rather than resisting gatekeeping in its entirety.

Speaking about the processes and practice of Portuguese dance company [Dançando com a Diferença](#), Artistic Director Henrique Amoedo suggests that taking into account

the 'reality' of each individual (performer), creating an environment where the needs of the individual are met, means that the disabled performer can be their own gatekeeper and spokesperson, because they are less dependent on external systems and power structures. Amoedo continues to suggest that this autonomy has assisted the progression of his organisation. He suggests that this individualised approach has enabled the company to benefit from support networks (audiences, peers other artists) that have helped by 'giving us strength and support to our claims and demands, making our petitions noticed when needed'. This is a useful perspective - that people in key positions have enabled development through authentic support and listening to the requirements of this dance company. Individual artists develop passion for the arts and therefore attend more dance events, performances, presentations, workshops, conferences and initiatives. They become ambassadors or 'gatekeepers' for their art form and often involve friends and family members, contributing to the development and engagement of new audiences for dance.

There is an interesting use of the term 'gatekeeper' here that in some ways aligns with Pell's earlier comments that gatekeeping is a phenomenon potentially shared by many of us working in the arts, but that it must include a vast and diverse range of experiences and positions.

Richard Phoenix states that his personal experience of engaging with the arts shifted dramatically when he was exposed to the idea of 'do-it-yourself'. On the subject of gatekeepers he suggests that the only person preventing you from expressing yourself artistically is you. The idea itself gives you permission; you become the gatekeeper. However liberating this idea is, it doesn't take into account other factors which create barriers to self-expression, for example, as we have mentioned, the importance of role models - because 'you can't be what you can't see'. If you don't see yourself in the arts in whatever way you view yourself, then it's hard to overcome the hurdle of putting yourself on to the public stage.

On the subject of barriers to access, participation and progression in the arts, [Aidan Moesby](#), a UK-based artist and producer, states that he 'constantly hears that disabled artists don't have any barriers which are not there for any artist'. He adds: 'I go to meetings, the National Portfolio Organisations (NPO's¹) have a system of tick box engagement for funding with little authenticity or meaning'. In other words, he feels these highly supported organisations merely check boxes on forms to affirm their engagement to priorities instead of really undertaking proactive initiatives.

¹ NPO's (National Portfolio Organisation) refers to UK based organisations who receive regular, on-going funding from Arts Council, England.



Robbie Synge & Julie Cleves, 'River Boards' (© the artists)

His perspective speaks directly to the marginalisation of disabled artists, the suggestion that the inclusion and support of artists who do not conform to 'traditional' perceptions of what makes an artist is at times tokenistic and unhelpful. Possibly if a greater number of 'power brokers' identified themselves as part of a marginalised group, they would be more authentic in their support to such groups and their causes. Furthermore this would encourage longevity of practice rather than short bursts of support, which are limiting for artists and possibly perpetuate an environment of competition between individuals and organisations.

Artist [Robbie Synge](#), who collaborates regularly with disabled dance artist Julie Cleves, responds to the question of gatekeeping within the context of their shared practice. He states that, as a straight, white, middle-class, non-disabled male he feels very self-aware, as the producer of their [ongoing project](#) Synge suggests that it may be unexpected or jarring that he is submitting something to the call for contributions issued by IETM to prepare this publication. He adds: 'The narrative that I feel dominates {in arts institutions}, is one of disabled artists leading or being encouraged to lead the way; to propose and direct projects and to champion equality and diversity by creating art and accessing platforms. This is, of course, essential and goes a long way to address the visibility and profile of disabled artists and to challenge perceptions of who art makers might be, and to encourage new disabled artists.' Synge goes on to add that Cleves has little interest in 'leading' their collaborative work; she consciously resists the 'administrative and fundraising' aspects preferring to locate herself as a performer. An important point here is that disabled artists and their non-disabled peers or collaborators may feel restricted by a prescribed narrative of what they should be ambitious for. Choice is a key element of artistic and creative freedom and Cleves' desire not to lead gives a valuable insight, it is a possible and justified option. However, in an environment where disabled artists with aspirations of leadership are restricted by dominant, outmoded ideologies, attention and space must be given for their voices and ambitions.

Curatorial processes include a responsibility for extending and perhaps challenging pre-conceived ideas of who is 'included' in the arts. The gatekeepers have the potential to implement shifts in the arts; but they also have the potential to reference the disabled body in a way that is peripheral to an 'ideal' body in the arts - a risk particularly high as gatekeepers are generally non-disabled. In addition, it is also the case that the voices of artists - disabled or not - are often absent from gatekeeping frameworks. Consequently the shifts and developments may bear less authenticity for individual artists.

The collective responses included in this chapter identify a diversity of perceptions of gatekeeping in arts contexts. For some there is potential in these roles to bring about change, for others they are seen as barriers to expression and autonomy. What is clear is a shared desire to include a range of voices in power structures across the arts. It is perhaps useful to conclude here that until such time that the gatekeeping roles are taken by a wider range of people and manifested in ways that invite new thinking and 'non' traditional representations of what a leader is, the playing field will remain uneven.

05. RESOURCES

[Disability Arts International](#) is a website and regular digital newsletter developed and coordinated by the British Council. Disability Arts International aims to promote the work of the exciting generation of excellent disabled artists, disabled-led companies and inclusive arts organisations. It also aims to share the ways arts organisations are increasing access to the arts for disabled people as audiences and visitors.

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