

The disability arts and culture movement grew out of the disability rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Its origins coincide with a more general shift toward a concern with representation and cultural production in the 1990s. While in the UK, greater possibilities for community-based arts initiatives, as well as a vocal and highly organized disability rights movement with greater access to arts higher education has given rise to a radical community of independent artists and artist-led organizations, in Canada, the emerging disability arts and culture movement has continuously been threatened by arts institutions and charitable organizations that seek to promote disability arts while dismissing its political base.

"Disability culture" only emerged as an organizing concept in Canada in the past seven years. In 2000, Ryerson University launched its first disability culture event, "An Evening of Deaf and Disability Culture," as part of its fledgling disability studies program. In 2001 Geoff McMurchy of the Society for Disability Arts and Culture (S4DAC) organized the first "Kick-START Festival" in Vancouver. "Stages," the first disability arts festival in Calgary took place in 2002 (now

# Whose Disability Culture?

## Why we need an artist-led critical disability arts network

by Rachel Gorman

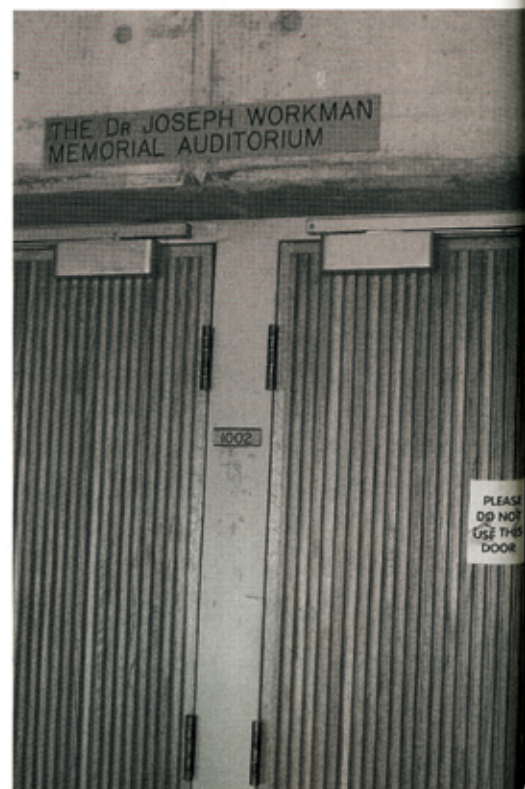
called "Balancing Acts," it is an annual festival produced by Stage Left Productions). The Canadian Disability Studies Association convened for the first time in June 2004; while Spirit Synott, a professional dancer who uses a wheelchair, was on the cover of the Canadian dance magazine, *The Dance Current* that year.<sup>1</sup> In 2006, Bonnie Klein weighed in with her NFB-funded documentary "Shameless: The Art of Disability."

When in 2006, Michele Decottignies, the artistic director for Stage Left Productions in Calgary, announced that she had received funding to start a national Disability Arts and Culture Network, many artists were excited about the possibility of a network that could develop disability culture and promote disabled artists. Funding from Canadian Heritage would allow Decottignies to gather disability arts festival organizers to discuss the challenges of sustaining and developing audiences for the different festivals. This would be the first time that disability arts presenters would meet to discuss the future of disability arts in Canada. People from six organizations were called to the table: Balancing Acts; Ryerson's Art with Attitude; Kick-START; S4DAC (the organization that runs Kick-START); Madness and the Arts; and the Abilities Festival in Toronto. Four out of the six organizations are run by disabled artists/activists with strong ties to the disability rights movement.

The first national Disability Arts and Culture Network meeting was held in Calgary in March 2006, and it was closed to all except representatives of the six organizations mentioned above, excluding independent artists from the conversation. When the second national Network meeting was held in Toronto in February 2007, Decottignies took the opportunity to consult with artists outside the Network meetings. Decottignies planned an open meeting for disabled artists to be held in Toronto at the Workman Theatre on February 21st, and asked Toronto-area presenters to send out the call.

Some last-minute scrambling in the two days before the meeting served as an

Workman Theatre at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health on Queen Street West in Toronto. Photo: Aaron Cain.



indication that the alienation between presenters and artists was more pronounced in Toronto than it was in the Western Canadian context where Decottignies is based. The e-poster, a call for “artists with a disability to provide feedback about a national arts initiative,” was sent to arts presenters, who sent it to their respective boards, committee members and close collaborators, but not to their wider lists. As a result, almost none of the independent critical disability artists working in the Toronto area were contacted. When a friend heard about it and told me, we activated an ad hoc phone tree to get as many independent and emerging disabled artists to attend the meeting as possible.

In her presentation to the group, Decottignies described the funding and political context of the Network, explaining that Canadian Heritage would only cover costs for disability arts presenters to meet and that at the first Network meeting, presenters had argued over whether (and

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which) artists should attend, reflecting a growing tension over the Network’s political orientation. Having reached a stalemate, the second annual Network meeting was to proceed in Toronto with the six original organizations. Decottignies explained her intention for the open artists’ meeting was to give artists a chance to raise issues that she hoped would inform the direction of the Network. Over two hours, we engaged in a lively discussion about the state of disability culture, with special attention to the experiences of professional artists. I will outline the recommendations that were put forward, but first I would like to give some context to the struggles over disability arts and culture.

**The Politics of Representation**

In part, the tensions in the Network meetings that Decottignies alluded to arise from power relations around access to funding. These power relations are related to divisions between artists and presenters and contradictions between disabled-identified and non-disabled-identified presenters. But underlying these issues are more fundamental questions about the politics of representation and the possibilities for artistic interventions into these cultural relations. While the disability culture movement is an expression of the disability rights movement, the idea of disabled people doing art has also proven itself irresistible to the charitable classes. For instance, the Abilities Festival, with its list of honorary patrons that includes Bluma Appel and Heather Riesman, seeks “artists with disabilities ... whose work exemplifies excellence, creativity and innovation” for its 2007 festival.<sup>2</sup> This call situates disability arts as a display of competence — proof that disabled artists are “as good as” non-disabled ones, while at the same time obscuring the cultural and political origins of the disability arts movement.

Eliza Chandler, *Hands*, 2005, video still. Courtesy: the artist.



Disability as a social category is reproduced through a web of political and cultural sites that predate these current struggles between artists, arts presenters and arts funders. Disaggregating the political category “disabled artist” exposes how different groupings of people are positioned in relation to art, educational, legal and medical institutions. The three examples that follow sketch out the politics of disability culture from the specific entry points of art therapy and institutionalized/incarcerated artists; access to training for physically disabled dance and theatre artists; and how disability narratives, tropes and metaphors function for “intellectually disabled” artists engaging in visual arts practices.

**Madness and its Artworks**

One of the issues on the table at the first Disability Arts and Culture Network meeting was the problem of what to do with the products of art therapy programs. When a struggle over art therapy comes up in relation to disability culture, it

is not therapy *per se* that is the problem, but the institutional practices that position disabled people as being in need of development (social, psychological, or functional) and non-disabled counsellors (sometimes in the form of art therapists and art animators) as providing rehabilitation/therapeutic services intended to address these developmental deficits. The non-consensual structure of disability services removes the possibility of self-determination and sharply narrows possibilities for self-expression.

The problem of art therapy in relation to disability arts and culture goes deeper than the question of whether or not it is appropriate to include artefacts produced in therapeutic or quasi-therapeutic contexts in public exhibitions (although I will have more to say on that topic below). I am concerned with the political implications of exhibiting work produced in a de-politicized and individualized mode at disability arts festivals that should be challenging the



*Trouble with Sirens* dance company. Left to right: Perry Augustine, Paulo Raposo, Rachel Gorman, Spirit Synott. Photo: Lindsay Chipman.

very power relations through which these artefacts are being produced. I was confronted with this issue when I performed at a conference organized by the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies in Winnipeg in 2004. Looking at one of the visual art displays, I realized that the artists' names were missing, with the name of their therapeutic program there instead.

Of the six presenters who participated in the Network meetings, the Madness and the Arts group may have the highest stake in the art vs. therapy debate — especially a discussion in which therapy is understood to be part of the systemic violence committed against people with disabilities. Madness and the Arts was produced by Workman Arts, a partnership of the Workman Theatre Project and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) where the Workman Theatre is based. Workman Arts is mandated to support people who are “receiving mental health services.”<sup>73</sup> The struggle over the role of therapy in disability arts arises from a fundamental disagreement about the basis of the cultural exclusion of disabled people — are disabled people excluded because

we need “special help” to make it in a competitive world, or because we have been subjected to historically unfolding relations of oppression that are expressed in all of our major institutions and cultural imaginings?

### Space, Technique and Access to Training

Disability culture is in part a response to, and exists within, segregated institutional spaces, but it comes from the artist/activists, not the institutions. Disability festivals emerged as spaces to showcase these artistic and activist cultural interventions. I have struggled to understand why the same theatre piece may feel different when it is performed in a disability culture space than when it is performed in a professional theatre space. In the former context, the implied or framing purpose of the event has to do with revealing disability-focused experiences and standpoints. In the latter context, when the audience supposes itself to be able-bodied, the same piece that served to reveal a lived reality becomes an affirmation of individuality, or an embracing of peculiarity. Without very carefully constructed contextualizing devices, a



Centre for Addiction and Mental Health on Queen Street West in Toronto. Photo: Aaron Cain.

theatre piece about someone's life ends up serving the theatrical purpose of bringing a catharsis of conformity to the audience that supposes itself to be able-bodied.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the focus on physicality and embodiment, theatre and dance are particularly politicized genres for disabled artists. Dancers with physical disabilities are met with disbelief when they state their occupation and are either patronized or ignored in the professional dance community.<sup>5</sup> The entire pedagogy of dance training falls apart when a dancer with a disability enters a mainstream technique class. What the instructor may correct over and over in a non-disabled dancer, she may ignore in a dancer with a different body. A dance instructor or artistic director may assume that all the physical mannerisms of a disabled performer are related to an (unchanging) impairment, rather than to bad form or lack of technique. When asked in a radio interview how she trains as a dancer and develops as an artist, Spirit Synott emphasized the importance of working with choreographers who are willing to modify their technical training in order to challenge her to do more.<sup>6</sup>

### The Trouble with "Innocence"

When we shift to visual arts, and consider the ideologies that operate around artists deemed "intellectually disabled," the moral imperative (or trope) also shifts — to one of "eternal innocence." Innocence is a trope that is often projected onto "publicly" disabled people, regardless of perceptions around intellectual capacity — Canadian artist Eliza Chandler addresses the idea of being publicly disabled through videos that document how passers-by react when she dresses and presents herself in a sexual way; and British artist Alison Lapper addresses the idea of innocence in her 1999 image "Angel," in which the artist's

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face and winged, naked upper body hover in the top right corner of the image. But in the cultural imagination, the projection of innocence onto disabled people has expanded to include the trope of "absolute un-self consciousness" — a notion that has excited art collectors and psychiatrists alike.

I acquired a pamphlet from the curator/program director of Creative Spirit Art Centre at a public art showing and performance event she organized in 2004. The centre specializes in disability art, and the curator's mission is to promote the work of artists with disabilities by championing *art brut*. This philosophy contains implicit assumptions that certain people do not and/or cannot make conscious choices about the content of their artwork and what it represents. Therefore, while these artists would need time, space and resources with which to produce their *art brut*, they would not (according to this philosophy) require technical training to clarify and convey their

conscious analysis of the world. Implicit in this philosophy is the idea that "innocent" or "non-conscious" work will appeal to a "knowing" or "conscious" audience.

This appropriation and alienation of the artist from her work creates a non-consensual relationship between artist and audience. Analyzing disability as "unconsciousness" in the visual arts is akin to analyzing disability as "peculiarity" in the dance/theatre arts. In the former, the (implied) non-disabled art consumer can reflect on the existence of a transcendent human nature or psychic characteristics; in the latter, the art consumer can move from pity/fear to empathy and catharsis, through which the moral-physical attribute is cleansed. In both cases, the disabled artist becomes the object, not the subject of her work, and her humanity is erased and replaced with a trope, or living symbol, whose purpose is to provide guidance and healing to the non-disabled.



Eliza Chandler. *To Look Back*, 2007, video still. Courtesy: the artist.

This philosophy of disability and art, which I have come to think of as the aesthetic of absence, has a particular relationship to technique and technical training. Since the aesthetic tends towards the presentation of an imaginary innocence, there is an assumed absence of technique. The technique that the artist *does* possess is interpreted as an inherent/unconscious mode of vision rather than a conscious stylistic choice.<sup>7</sup> If we analyze the possibilities for access to technique for artists with disabilities, we quickly see that the content of visual arts training in a college art program is completely different than the content of a segregated arts program.

The failure to incorporate technique — thus giving artists tools to inform the choices they make in relation to their artworks — is not related to the capacity of the artist, but to the ideologies about the artist-as-disabled. There are examples of programs that do provide critical and technical skills training in the arts. Since 1999, Michele Decottignies of Stage Left has been producing politically and technically challenging work based in the ideas and struggles of the artists in the theatre group — many of whom have been labelled intel-

lectually disabled. Decottignies uses a forum theatre approach to develop the work, and operates a comprehensive theatre-arts training program, with ongoing skills training, and new productions in development every year.

But when arts programming is divorced from the critical disability movement, it can't help but replicate the institutionalization and segregation that sparked the disability rights movement in the first place. In 2004, the aforementioned champions of *art brut*, Creative Spirit, joined with us-based disability arts network Very Special Arts (vsa). vsa's advisory board includes an array of creative arts therapists and, according to their website, their 2004 national conference was hosted by no other than George and Laura Bush. The recasting of disability art as a therapy- and charity-based venture does not deter Canadian funding agencies — also in 2004, Creative Spirit received \$24,900 from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, to match \$24,900 from Canadian Heritage to conduct a feasibility study for a new facility, which has a projected annual operating cost of \$275,000 and projected renovation and property cost of \$4,000,000.<sup>8</sup>

Toronto-based Picasso Pro has also received Trillium funding to run workshops for people with disabilities. Yet despite that fact that the project's precursor at the Toronto Theatre Alliance had a disability advisory group of practicing artists with diplomas from OCAD and degrees in theatre, the majority of its workshops are led by non-disabled-identified artists. The choice not to hire disabled-identified artists as educators replicates the non-disabled-therapist/disabled-person-with-deficit power relation I described above. While these workshops may be a way for non-artists to get involved, this type of programming is not useful to the many trained professional artists and performers who can't get shows because of discrimination.

Of course, as professional artists, we do need access to continuing professional development. Specifically, we need more workshops organized by artist/activists, rather than by non-disabled-identified artists who want to do away with technique or who push alternative techniques as a substitute for doing the work of translating and adapting technique for the participants. We need master classes and workshops led by artists who have found



Eliza Chandler. *Catwalk: Audience Participation*, 2005, video still. Courtesy: the artist.



Eliza Chandler. *Steps*, 2005, video still. Courtesy: the artist.

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ways to re-present various aspects of their social identity — for example California-based playwright Lynn Manning, who deals with representations of race, class, masculinity and disablement; or UK-based theatre artist Deborah A. Williams, who has launched important work on representations of race and gender in a white-dominated disability culture movement. We need master classes and workshops led by Canadian artists who can teach us about how they have adapted the techniques of their respective genres in order to address disability critically in their work — for example, Alex Bulmer in video-making;<sup>9</sup> and Alan Shaun in theatre and story-telling.

We need allies in fine arts schools and programs to bring critical discussions about representations of disability in arts and culture into the curriculum, both through the inclusion of critical disability perspectives in core courses, and through the creation of elective courses on disability arts and culture. We need basic access for students with disabilities — this in turn will necessitate a critical overhaul of how we understand and organize the training of students in fine arts techniques. We also need our allies in arts libraries and digital archiving to compile and give students access to examples of disability arts. An innovative example of accessible archiving and programming possibilities is the Stretch initiative based in the Adaptive

Technology Resource Centre at the University of Toronto.<sup>10</sup>

We need to re-politicize our disability arts and culture spaces. Disability conferences and festivals have been important spaces for the development of the critical disability movement. Disability culture events of the 1990s — where artists like Mary Duffy<sup>11</sup> and Cheryl Marie Wade first threw down their performance-art-based challenges to how disabled women's bodies are present/absent in the public sphere — have evolved into stops along the touring circuit for disabled artists. In the current Canadian context, we are operating several disability culture events each year without an independent artistic base. In the UK, radical disability artists and activists have long-established, touring theatre companies, with clearly articulated aesthetic and political mandates.<sup>12</sup> We need festivals to commission new critical and politically challenging work and organize artist calls around challenging themes. At all costs, festivals must avoid pandering to an imagined non-disability-identified audience who will benefit from learning about diversity and tolerance.

We need to support our established artists with residencies, commissions, and curatorial responsibilities. That's the way some us- and UK-based artists have been able to gain international profiles and produce and tour excellent work. We need to mentor our

young and emerging artist/activists. Disability culture events can be spaces for activists to experiment in making cultural interventions and spaces for artists to explore the politics of representation. We need, in fact, to create an *artist-led* network in order to put our lobbying, networking and presenting skills to collective use. In this way, non-disabled-identified administrators who position themselves outside the movement need not be the ones explaining and interpreting disability arts and culture to potential funders. We need our allies, especially the ones with privilege and connections to funders and donors, to lobby for the inclusion of critical disability perspectives in *mainstream* arts programming and festivals, rather than trying to direct the movement.

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### Notes

1. Robin Miller. "Including Every Body: Mixed-Ability Dance in Canada" [cover]. "Redefining dance to include every body" [article]. *The Dance Current*, 7(3), pp. 12-17 & cover.
2. See Abilities Arts Festival. <http://www.abilitiesartsfestival.org/>
3. See Workman Arts. <http://www.workmanarts.com/>
4. Here I draw on Augusta Boal's explanation of the mechanism and function of bourgeois theatre. See *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985).
5. When Heather Mills fell on "Dancing with the Stars", Florence Henderson commented that watching Heather fall moved her to tears, and that she wanted to run onto the stage and pick her up.
6. Ted Fox, *Evidance*, January 18, 2004, CIUT Radio FM 89.5.
7. According to popular-psychology thinking, certain sensory states produce characteristic ways of viewing and representing the world — for example, the idea that autistics have a distinct and recognizable way of visually representing the world; or the idea that Van Gogh's distinctive style was in part a product of schizophrenia.
8. See Creative Spirit Art Centre. <http://www.creativespirit.on.ca/>
9. Alex Bulmer's "Beauty" (1998) and "NOB: Services for the Blind" (2003) are available through Vtape at [www.vtape.org](http://www.vtape.org)
10. See Stretch your Creativity. <http://stretch.atrc.utoronto.ca/>
11. See Mary Duff, Artist's Profile. <http://www.maryduffy.ie/>
12. See Graeae Theatre Company, founded in 1980, at <http://www.graeae.org/> and CandoCo Dance Company, founded in 1991, at <http://www.candoco.co.uk/>