**Disability Arts: An Evolving Definition**

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This discourse is a personal journey in an attempt to identify what is meant by the term ‘Disability Arts’. It is a term that has been around in the U.K. for over thirty years, emerging within political contexts to assert rights for disabled people. Its earliest definitions were clearly confined as political tools to draw attention to the prevailing oppressive and discriminatory practices that many disabled people were used to: but what is exciting about the disability arts movement from this strong and highly charged inception, is that it has continued to evolve, remaining pertinent and relevant to disabled people in a vastly changing society; shifting with the growing awareness of disability issues within societies most marginalised people. However, I do believe that during its evolution, the phrase has also been abused, misunderstood and used detrimentally, being aligned to any arts work created by disabled people.

Therefore I feel that the time is right to examine the meaning of disability arts again, exploring its original intentions and how the phrase may have shifted. As it has developed alongside and in close allegiance to the political disability movement of the late 1970’s, it may mean that the work has become ‘aged’ or only relevant to British culture and its changing legislation. In my attempt to provide what I feel is an authoritative definition, establishing what may be deemed as its distinct elements, traits and characterisations , I hope that this will encourage the perpetrators of Disability Arts to view their work as important and vital as a distinguished arts movement in its own right. In doing this I will not seek a definitive one-phrase answer, but attempt to cite a mixed set of identifiers that together can mark out and shape an updated definition.

As disability experiences vary enormously, it will be a complex undertaking and I know that many may disagree with the conclusions I find, therefore it is important to state at the outset that this exploration will not be set in stone, or expect to reach a consensus, but will try to give clarification to dispel confusion about what ‘Disability Art’ conveys or means to move the debates on, thus assisting its continued evolution and relevance in an ever-changing world.

Since 2001, I have had the immense privilege to lead a ‘Disability Arts development agency [DaDa – Disability & Deaf Arts]. This has had considerable success since it was established in 1984. Over the years it has delivered various arts projects that have been mainly disability ‘issue – based’ work in development alongside a changing cultural landscape for disabled people. DaDa has also pioneered and developed many training and accredited courses to provide skills and opportunities for disabled and d/Deaf people to work and lead in the arts sector. Since 2001, DaDa has been delivering an annual Disability and Deaf Arts Festival [DaDaFest], with 2010 marking its tenth event. The festival was borne out of an opportunity to help promote the city of Liverpool in its bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2008 [which it ultimately did]. One of the aims of DaDa was to use the opportunity to create a programme of art works by disabled and d/Deaf people[[1]](#footnote-1) with mainstream arts and cultural venues. Another aim was to create employment opportunities as many of the now qualified and skilled artists, were finding it hard or impossible to gain work opportunities within mainstream arts environments. Over the past ten years, DaDaFest has employed over 600 artists, attracted audiences of nearly 100,000 and created a vast amount of new ‘ Disability Arts’ commissions, bringing together artists from around the UK and internationally. The work has always been proudly promoted as a ‘Disability Arts’ festival. Needless to say, we have been confounded and offended when reviews and comments are made to the contrary.

There is much confusion and I have observed two commonly held viewpoints which I feel mistakenly give rise to the notion of disability arts: firstly that to create any art as a disabled person automatically gives it the label ‘Disability Arts’, and secondly, that any disabled person from any background or age creates ‘Disability Arts’. Increasingly, there is also some questioning by disabled and deaf artists themselves who are rejecting any reference to being labelled as ‘disabled’ or ‘d/Deaf’. Unlike other arts movements, disability arts have constant problems in how its work is defined and viewed. These issues may range from those who assume the work is about therapy and passive arts activities, through to disabled artists themselves not wishing to be identified as disabled through reasons such as feeling their work will be patronized, de-valued or even pitied. There is always a difference from choosing the label you wish, to having a label thrust upon you.

I need to stress that Disability arts, is art. It is seriously intentioned creative work covering a range of art expressions, from poems to painting or music or comedy or theatre and they like: all is made with a degree of aesthetic purpose. It is not a hobby to keep the ‘cripples' hands busy, it is not therapy or passive activities designed to amuse and pacify. It is most definitely not all or any art created by disabled people.

It is true to say that many of the great artists in western culture have been disabled people: from Van Gogh to Handel, from Goya to Hockney, Toulouse Le Trec to Christina Rosetti. Very occasionally their work may lean toward expressions and a context informed by being a disabled person, but more than default rather than design. A notable exception is Goya; once became deaf he changed the style of his paintings by becoming more ‘pared to the bone’ [Booth] and created a new way of working which influenced subsequent arts work thereafter; his work was not deliberately shaped or informed from his experiences of being a disabled person, but his impairment was a factor in changing his approach, in that he caricatured the people he felt mocked him. Goya and the other renowned artists would not have categorised themselves as ‘disabled artists’, they were artists creating art within specific contexts of their time and experiences.

Before delving any further, it is useful to examine a wider context of what terms and definitions are used to define disabled people, especially as this deeply affects the way artistic expressions can be perceived by a prevailing non-disabled society. ‘Disability’ as a term gives rise to an enormous range of reactions; the phrase is taken from many viewpoints that can continue to perpetuate stereotypical notions, such as charity giving (Children in Need), pity or tragedy et al. These stereotypes are often supported by the vast array of media stories and Hollywood movies, from super-achieving individuals to Oscar winning film depictions such as Rainman and Forrest Gump, to the countless documentaries about the lives of disabled people and their tragic struggles. Current media coverage in the UK is also giving rise to attitudes that disabled people are ‘spongers‘, costing the government too much with all our welfare benefits and support services. These all have an effect on creating conflicting and confusing messages about disabled people’s lives and what they are capable of and serve to create labels that are medically fixed and therefore separate from the ‘norm’. The very terminology assigned to disabled people creates all sorts of issues:

*“Noun (pl. disabilities) 1. A physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities.*

1. *A disadvantage or handicap*.”

OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY www. http://www.askoxford.com

*“Disability; a noun an illness, injury, or condition that makes it difficult for someone to do the things that other people do*”

CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH DICTIONARY http://dictionaries.cambridge.org.

So what does ‘disability’ mean? On the face of it, it is a negative word: ‘dis’ from the Latin meaning ‘lacking’, and ‘ability’ (dictionary definition ‘power’), and we can surmise that for many years disabled people have been defined by a phrase that quite accurately says that they are a people who ‘lack power’. Finklestein (1993) especially noted that the very term, ‘disability’ was deemed as a stigma and stated, that as such few [disabled] individuals would willingly, ‘*identify themselves as disabled'*: therefore the very term ‘disabled’ causes dissent. It is clearly medically determined as seen in the previous definitions, but when an artist chooses the term ‘Disability Arts’ to label their work, they may be in danger of creating a different definition of disability, one of empowerment.

I can best explain this through personal experience. Since 1995 I have been involved in what I now believe to be, ‘Disability Arts’; firstly on the fringes, not really understanding what it meant, but having a profound sense that the art I experienced made absolute and total sense to me as a person who had recently started the journey to investigate my life and come out as a ‘disabled’ person. The first connection I made was an emotional one, by witnessing Caroline Parker’s signed song. The art I saw began to speak to me and create in me a new way of viewing creating art. Up to this point I had tried with every fibre of my being to deny, hide and live life as if being deaf didn’t matter. Most of the time I could get away with it, especially as it was not obvious, a ‘hidden impairment’. I was first diagnosed when I was six years old, and have vivid memories of being in school standing in the classroom corner with my head facing the wall, meted out at the time as a form of punishment, never knowing what I had done. I was extremely quiet and hardly talked, my Mother told me I babbled, but no one, until grade two thought that something maybe preventing me from participating. From the moment I was diagnosed, I was aware of a notable shift in attitude towards me; I joined the ‘them’. I had experimental ear operations, had to undergo extensive speech therapy and had to wear the dreaded hearing aids. I hated this time and always remember people talking over me, never asking me what I thought. At the end of year six my parents were faced with a challenge to keep me in mainstream education, as my form teacher thought I would never amount to anything and therefore should be in a ‘special school’! That particular teacher used to petrify me: he would humiliate me by asking in the classroom in front of everyone if I had my hearing aid in, then threaten to cane me if I took it out again. From that point in time I experienced horrific moments, from bullying to loneliness so I tried to ‘hide’ my deafness or ‘wrongness’. Sometimes it became all too obvious, like when I have totally misunderstood the context of a conversation or blurted out during a time of silence, and then I had to justify and explain, and with that came the focus on my condition, which eventually took over my school interactions.

It would be easy to continue my life story and reveal aspects of what I felt affected my development and with that the sense of being accepted either by myself or others, but I share it with the aim that it may have a deep resonance to how being ‘not normal’ has a debilitating affect of what one’s life chances are perceived to be from within and without. This doesn’t just occur through childhood. In my line of work I meet others who, upon acquiring impairment/s, find that they are suddenly placed into a significant ‘other’ category and with it acquire a whole set of differentials that defines how they are perceived by others and this in turn affects their self esteem, needs and wants.

To explore these issues further, I will seek answers by exploring the different models of disability in an attempt to provide a social context to ‘Disability Arts’. The definition of ‘disability’ is usually fixed within a medical framework and as such a person is seen from a deficit point of view of what is considered ‘normality’. As Davies (1997) says,*“ We live in a world of norms.”* Disabled people’s lives can be exposed to controlling forces which have determined such things as what a person’s quality of life is likely to be, where or how to educate, what jobs [if any] can be done, to how disabled people can participate in cultural life or society [mainstream] at large in reference to their impairments as determined through a medical analysis, or the ‘Medical model of Disability’. It is possible to view this as a form of oppression, as Price and Shildrik (2002) observe, that this medicalising and biological fixer has had a dangerous impact in that is has caused attitudes towards disabled people to be,

***“.. establishing a separation from non-disabled people that speaks***

***to an implicit - if not explicit - hierarchy of oppression.”***

Cited Corker and Shakespeare

Education can be one of the biggest barriers in allowing participation in mainstream life, which is ultimately affected by how a disabled person’s biological state is analyzed. This can be traced back to the Darwinian theories of the late 1800’s in which the concept of the ‘survival of the fittest’ had a knock on effect in the education system. This was typified by Dendy (b.1855 – d. 1933) a passionate eugenicist who in 1890 explained through a pamphlet produced by the newly established ‘Lancashire and Cheshire Society for the Permanent Care of the Feeble Minded,’ known today as ‘people with learning disabilities’ should be,

***“….detained for the whole of their lives as the only way to stem the***

***great evil of feeble-mindedness in our country”.***

She proposed that this was the ‘right thing’ to do for society and expounded the principle to permanently exclude and institutionalise disabled people. This thinking caught on and led to mass exclusion and segregation which still has an impact today. As the work of Eugenicists began to develop, more and more disabled people, especially those who were unable to be cured or ‘fixed’, were deemed to live lives of negative quality and productivity; they were seen as likely to cost too much money and be a burden on the family, especially upon the emerging welfare state. Disabled people also began to described in derogatory medical terms such as ‘invalids’, ‘retards’, and ‘handicapped’, until mass genocide was offered as a solution by the Nazi regime in which disabled people were so de-humanized they were referred to as ‘useless eaters’.

The medical professionals have come to hold a great deal of authority and control over the lives of disabled people. A great deal of research into how our ‘social’ problems became medical ones has been taken by such writers as Foucault and Oliver (1993), who explain that in the 19th century doctors increasingly came to hold the power, “*doctors became a very powerful social force,”* and they decided on new systems in terms of social and economic controls that shaped and molded how disabled people were accepted or segregated into society (Potts and Fido 1991). Their words became all powerful with professionals coining phrases that labeled and categorized disabled people and set them into institutions that represented that particular impairment group. It had the effect of categorizing and setting apart from any notion of ordinary life and existence, and usually exposed to people with the same medical conditions.

The change in perceptions and attitudes towards disabled people was greatly highlighted through the emergence of the UK’s welfare state as this allowed disabled people’s lives to be more controlled and defined in terms of what we were able to do against benchmarks of ‘normal’ day-to-day activities. If disabled people failed the tests, they were destined to lead inferior, segregated lives all because their impairment would affect how they can participate in a particular activity. As Gooding (1994) explains that this power over disabled people’s lives allowed the medical professionals to have, *“..great power…through their functions as gate-keepers of the welfare state”.*

This is known as the Medical Model of disability (Barnes, Oliver) and as such is the prevailing view of assessing disability, and seen in the UK’s current Disability Discrimination Act (1995) definition:

***“A Physical or mental impairment which has a substantial or***

***long-term effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”***

It is the traditional way of viewing disability and can cause people to feel trapped and alienated as their diagnosis may mean they have no control of their lives as medical professionals and experts ‘know you better than you’, and can therefore tell you what you can do or, more likely, what you cannot.

We can find historical and recorded evidence that disabled people’s lives have been subjected to experimentation and extermination, from institutionalization, through to interventions today such as cosmetic surgery on babies with down’s syndrome (to make them look more ‘normal’), to cochlea implants being imposed on young children as opposed to non-intrusive solutions to deafness such as in the teaching of sign language, Davies (1997).

This medical model creates a fixed biological definer of disability and is one that is likely to remain in the foreseeable future. It is also one that is increasingly used as a determinate of how disabled people can participate in such areas as education and training. In the recent Marmot report [February 2010], the findings state that a growing older population will create severe implications for the UK’s National Health System [NHS], especially due to the increasing numbers of disabled people. There will not be the resources to support this group of older people, hence the need to, as he states, ‘ *increase life-expectancy in* *disability-free adults’*.

***“The population has aged significantly over the past 25 years.***

***In 2008, 16 per cent of the population was over 65 years old. If the current trend continues, 23 per cent will be over 65 years old by 2033, which represents 3.2 million people. The over fifties are the largest users of health and social care services. The impacts of the ageing population and levels of long-term illness and disability hold enormous [financial] implications for these services.” (***Marmot 2010)

There is no escaping this biological determinate of disability and with all the modern advances of technology and research we are still not be able to solve the issues associated with it which has a knock on effect as, according to Marmot it will increase as a ‘medical concern’.So it appears we have come full circle, from the equality and rights movement to include us, it now appears there are too many of us and we cost too much to keep alive. The value and worth of disabled people continues to be negated.

The flip side to the medical definition, is the Social Model of disability, a framework of understanding, that statutory bodies and global organizations are increasingly adopting into their policies. It was developed through the disabled people’s movement, specifically the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation [UPIAS] (1975), who put forward an alternative definition to disability, one that moved away from a medical definition to acknowledge the disadvantages or restrictions that prevail in mainstream society towards disabled people, caused by the fault of poor ‘*social organisation; which fails to take the lives and needs of disabled people into consideration in the developing of structures and systems.’* The underlying premise of such a definition is that disability is therefore external to the individual and that disabled people are actually ‘disabled’ by societies restrictions or barriers preventing full participation into everyday life experiences. The ‘Social Model’ of disability is a way of identifying and eliminating the ‘barriers’ to participation such as environmental, attitudinal and communication which prevent day to day involvement by Disabled People on an equal level to others within society. The very earliest developments of ‘Disability Arts’ began to articulate these approaches and depict the injustices through a variety of art forms such as cartoon, songs and cabaret. From the earliest origins of Paul Hunt’s (1972) challenge to form a lobbying group, there has been an investigation into what actually ‘disables’ disabled people? Masefield, cites Crow who explains that it is not her body and the difficulties she faces as a wheelchair user, but it was the factors outside her body that caused her issue, she was, ***“*** *being ‘dis-abled’; my capabilities and opportunities were being restricted by poor social organization*.” Masefield (2006).

Understanding the ‘Social Model of Disability’ can be life changing, as what actually ‘disables’ are societie’s structures which fail to include the disabled person. These are variable and interchangeable, be they physical environments to socio/economic factors. Therefore it is not a person’s impairment that disables, but external structures. A person’s impairment/s by and large cannot be fixed, whereas many societal barriers can by and large be eliminated or considerably reduced.

Within the disability movement there is quite clearly an understanding that ‘disabled people’are those people who self define as being ‘disabled’ by being excluded by society (Oliver 1993). Finklestein (1993), an early originator assisted in this discourse and began working on a way of redefining the actual meaning of the word ‘disability’*.* The result was to shift the focus from ‘disability’ meaning pertaining to the impairment or medical condition, to placing it in a social context, which became formulated through the publication of the ‘Fundamental Principles of Disability’ in 1995. Over the last thirty years, the ‘Disabled Peoples’ movement has been increasing in strength and status and many impairment groups have now aligned themselves as a collective identity forming views within the ‘social model’ framework and challenging the pervasive negative perceptions about their lives. This has taken place through campaigns and active lobbying for social change and calls for inclusion in everyday life opportunities. In 1991, the British Council of Disabled People [BCODP – a collective of controlled-led disability groups in the U.K.] celebrated its tenth birthday and launched a campaign for anti-discrimination legislation which in turn has helped formulate the current Disability Discrimination Act [DDA] 1995.

***“Disability is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organization”***

UPIAS 1975 cited Oliver( 1993)

This has led to an emergence of controlled-led, disability groups who have encouraged a more united voice with many other disability-led groups have formed as a result. It also led to the emergence of Disability Arts Forums [DAF’s] across the regions of England, which helped articulate and portray these issues through artistic expressions as the first ‘disability arts’ activities. Most of these organisations have now disappeared, just a few remain though the last ‘DAF’ changed to DaDa in December 2008, but whilst these were active, a flame burnt bright whilst societal changes took place, particularly anti-disability discrimination legislation.

The early disability movement in the UK started by looking back at history and captured work depicting that non-disabled people have controlled disabled people’s lives for hundreds of years. There was very little or no personal evidence or records from any peer groups; in fact there were no peer groups. The only information recorded about disabled people’s lives came from ‘professional’s’ such as scientists, doctors, teachers, story-tellers and the like in the form of scientific research or documentation. This history explains such things as how different impairments are expected to behave or manifest, or how to determine life chances and interactions with mainstream life, or what adaptations and aids can be given. This history had an effect to view disabled people in terms of being uneconomically viable or ‘uneducateable’, with some being put into institutions and nursing or residential homes to ‘care’ and support in a way that often took away personal choice and freedoms.

“***Incarceration in residential homes has been practised long enough for it to be accepted as a perfectly legitimate way of***

 ***‘caring’ for the ‘disabled’*.”** (Gooding 1994)

It was through activists such as Finkelstein and Hunt that the prevailing medical perceptions were challenged. It was disabled people themselves and their experiences that made the difference: an early motto became ‘*Nothing about us, without us’*! [Yeo and Moore 2003]. At the earliest stages of the emerging Social Model of Disability it became a vehicle to encourage disabled people to speak for themselves and identify with a human rights struggle along the same path as other oppressed groups.

The tradition has been that Disability Art work is firmly set within the cultural context created or informed by artists within ‘social model’ disability experiences. It upholds the notion that the experience of living or acquiring impairment/s can affect how you are able to interrelate and participate with the world around you, how it can determine how you communicate, what issues affect your daily living engagements which in turn can also affect your self esteem, your sense of belonging, your ability to ‘better’ yourself, your feelings of being outside and excluded from ‘mainstream’ life and general well-being.

The part ‘disability arts’ offer in portraying different approaches to prevailing and mainly negative stereotypes is arguably very profound. As Masefield (2006) explains, as society continues to patronize and pity disabled people, the arts created within the ‘disability arts’ context are inspired by the very experience of being a disabled person. ‘Disability arts’ can also hold up a mirror to the world and remind people that becoming a disabled person can happen to anyone, at anytime, from any background and from any place, as disability, in the views of Gosling (2007) is an intrinsic human factor, not confined to just a few unfortunates.

For many disabled people, disability arts provides a powerful symbol in allowing an acceptance of their impairments; this can assist to defy the stigma and negative impressions so that one can begin to value and affirm experiences of living as a disabled person.

***‘The generally agreed definition of disability arts, the one that we in the disability arts movement have found most accurately reflects what we are doing, is that it is “art made by disabled people which reflects the experience of disability”.***

Sutherland (2007 DAO),

In examining this historical context for Disability Arts, its earliest definition can be clearly shaped by two main factors: that it is based on the political expressions within the Social Model of Disability, and secondly that it can only be informed or created by personal experiences of living with impairments and facing disabling barriers on a daily basis. Its earliest origins alongside the emerging political disability movement for social change in the 1970’s, surfaced as a powerful way to articulate experiences of oppression, discrimination, stereotyping and other issues that affected disabled peoples life choices and sense of belonging. Many different art forms were used to articulate these notions with figureheads and role models emerging. Most notably Ian Stanton (b.1948. d.1998), and his political protest songs such as ‘ The Glee Club’ and ‘Piss on Pity’, Johnny Crescendo, the poetry of Sue Napolitano and others. One of the earliest father figures of this movement, Vic Finklestein created fictional narratives to tell of these experiences, specifically ‘No River to Cross’ (1992), is a story of an accessible village that was later turned into an animated cartoon to show how our lives are affected by social structures. It also contains a twist in that the tables are turned to humorously show how non-disabled people would not dare to tolerate with having to live lives that didn’t allow them to fully participate. It is a wonderful story in explaining the social model of disability and physical limitations of a ‘disabling world’.

All the discourse so far has led me to identify four main characteristics that I feel can determine a context for the creation of disability art work: the first two are fundamental elements which I feel must be present to give credibility to define a piece of works as Disability Arts.

A] Defined by the Artist

This remains one of the most important factors about Disability Arts work; it has to be deliberately defined as such by the disabled artists themselves. What distinguishes the focus on creating ‘Disability Arts’ is that the artist deliberately selects the term; it is not an automatic given. If they do not create the work within this context, then it should not be labelled it as such. I raise this point as many people will label any work produced by disabled people as ‘disability arts’ which has the impact of including everything with a board sweep of the brush and by doing so, fail to acknowledge the meaning, depth of thought or deliberate intentions of the artist/s involved in its creation and by doing so demeans its original intention and impact. Therefore, when the term ’disability artist’ it is used, it refers to those artists who create work within the context of ‘disability arts’ and should not be confused with those who define as ‘disabled artists’ and do not set out to create disability arts.

B] Personal Experiences as a Disabled Person

In 1981, Ian Dury (b. 1942, d. 2000) wrote a song in response to the first International Year of Disabled People, ‘Spasticus Artisticus’; this song was promptly banned by the British Broadcasting Company [BBC] largely as they did not comprehend its true intention. It was a song written by Dury, himself a disabled person to deliberately provoke thinking around what it meant to be a disabled being in the world. It heralded a ‘battle cry and an appeal for understanding”, [http://wapedia.mobi/en/Spasticus\_Autisticus. 20.04.2010]

***“Hello to you out there in Normal Land
You may not comprehend my tale or understand”***

***“So place your hard-earned peanuts in my tin***

***And thank the Creator you're not in the state I'm in***

Lines from Verses 2 and 3,

It is an arts work created by direct experience of living as a disabled person. The message behind the song continues to hold a resonance for the work of disability arts today as it continues to sound the battle cry, albeit with more than just music.

C] Political Context – The Social Model of Disability

This first emergence of ‘Disability Arts’, were arts that campaigned and highlighted issues such as discrimination and oppressive practices towards disabled people, is still as important today as it ever was. It was vital in creating, according to Gooding (1994) that sense of, *“an alternative culture – which plays an important part in cementing the sense of a ‘movement’ ”.* Therefore ‘Disability Arts’ are ‘*unashamedly political’*: O’Reilly (2007), deemed to have been pivotal to the “*self-emancipation of disabled people*,” which has gone on to affect and inspire the creation of disability arts ever since.

**“ *Disability Arts would not have been possible without disability politics coming along first. It’s what makes a disability arts different from an artist with a disability.”***

Allan Sutherland [1997]

Disability Arts has been a very concise and succinctly defined arts expression, and as the work of the Disability Arts agencies began to build in number and strength, commonalities based on the Social Model of Disability were shared and experienced across the UK. Disabled artists began to move across the land to create and show work, which in turn led to a great sense of belonging and identifying as a ‘disability community’. The essence of this was that disabled people themselves defined and shaped a cultural expression. This creates a ‘Disability Culture’, and as Barnes (2003) states,*‘….is a minority, a sub or subordinate culture’*, advancing ideologies and values, in this case largely based on the Social Model of Disability.

D] Holistic Model of Disability

As time has moved on, the remit of a ‘social model context for disability arts has been challenged, mainly due to more political representation and the development of the ‘human rights’ legislation, particularly with the publication in 2006 of Shakespeare’s, ‘Disability Rights and Wrongs’. He threw up a huge challenge to the prevailing social model of disability model and highlighted the failure to address the place and impact of the individuals impairments, declaring that we have been failing to acknowledge that,

**“*People are disabled by society and by their bodies*”** Shakespeare (2006)

This view point has created new debates around enhancing the social model, towards an affirmative one that views the disabled person as a whole, recognizing the variables in their lives; a holistic model of disability. It has also affected the work associated with Disability Arts. It has given more freedom for artists to explore their medical conditions and make statements about their personal feelings towards them. This has been a shift in Disability Arts, as previously the focus was on those issues outside the body, the social contexts alone.

To surmise, disability arts are work created by the direct experience of living as a disabled person, it articulates art from a political context, it is a journey made by disabled artist, it cannot be picked up in the same way a new dance or music style can, it is shaped by impairments and its associated personal experiences.

We are living in changing times, there is continuing public debate on the lives we lead, from disabled peoples existence can be called into question, to be seen in stereotypical terms. Disability arts creates a space to articulate and promote the sensitive issues, to voice the pain as well as share in the humour that living as a disabled person can bring; it allows public redress that challenge and provoke. As the Turner Prize winning artist, Yinka Shonibare has persistently heralded, Disability Arts is, to his mind, the **‘Last remaining Avant Garde’,** and as such the most edgy of art sectors, one that takes the punter into new places and creates new ways of experiencing arts. In fact it does what quality art should do.

Therefore for many, disability arts does many things: it can be deemed as a call to arms, a call to allow the ‘unspeakable’ to have a voice, the ‘unlovely’ a platform to be viewed and the downright ‘disturbing’ a place at the table to eat. The work can remind all people of their own vulnerability and mortality: it may show the frailty and degeneration of our bodies. The art it creates allows space to articulate feelings and deep expressions; it captures issues of oppression and a negative history and allows art to move into new unexplored places. It comes from a place of human experience and as such can arguably only be created as a subject matter by those who live and deal with this on a daily basis.

It will always be true to say that there will be some artists who feel that identifying with Disability Arts somehow negates and nullifies their work, with credibility only awarded if they create work within mainstream contexts, believing this is the place to be acknowledged first and foremost as an artist. This saddens me, as art can be powerful in the most unexpected of places, working with the most unexpected of people. I am reminded of my recent visit to Brazil and in meeting Afro Reggae, an arts collective who are based in the favela Vigario Geral, a community that forms part of the ‘underclass’ of Brazil. They state that ‘Culture is our Weapon’, being proud and strong about how the arts are used to put their issues across. They now travel the world sharing their arts and working in many established high class arts centres. Disability arts needs to do the same, yet the biggest challenge in producing work directly into the mainstream venues and spaces, is not because the work is not of high enough quality, it is because we continue to live in a world that stigmatises and views disability only as a negative and tragic experience, viewing our work only within a community arts framework. Until there is a will to change, we will continue to create work from the outside due to a whole plethora of reasons such as inaccessibility, ignorance, lack of appreciation or even care. It takes guts to keep on making art within such little acknowledgement, but for the world’s sake, disability arts tell of change and vulnerability; the certainties of our shared inheritance.

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1. DaDa acknowledges that Deaf culture is a distinct and separate culture to that of Disability. Therefore this discourse does not cover Deaf Arts, which needs separate chapter in its own right. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)