

Easy English Summary

Disability Arts History Australia

Industry Report

October 2025

What is this Report about?

The Disability Arts History Australia (DAHA) website shares interviews, historical documents, website links, and other resources about the history of Disability Arts in Australia from the 1970s to the 2020s.

This report discusses what the research team learned about Disability Arts while creating this website, including what has happened, what is working, and what still needs to change to make the arts industry more inclusive.

The report is for artists, arts workers, allies, arts organisations, funders, policy makers, students and researchers.

It helps everyone understand the past, present, and possible future of Disability Arts in Australia.

What is in the Report?

Acknowledgements

The report begins with –

- **Acknowledgement of Country**, paying respect to Indigenous Australians, as the first artists on the lands on which this website was created.
- **Acknowledgement of the Disability Community**, thanking the d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists and allies who have long fought for access and inclusion in the arts.

Table of Contents

This report includes –

- information about the project, and the project team
- a timeline of key events in the history of Disability Arts in Australia
- a summary of key points raised in the historical documents
- a summary of key points raised in interviews with artists and allies

- barriers and issues d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists experience
- ideas for improving the arts industry to make it more inclusive for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists in the future
- a glossary of key terms and concepts in the report, with definitions

What does the Report say?

What is Disability Arts History Australia (DAHA)?

- Disability Arts History Australia (DAHA) an online archive
- It is a website that collects and shares the history of Disability Arts in Australia
- It includes interviews, historical documents, website links, a timeline, and other resources about the history of Disability Arts in Australia from the 1970s to the 2020s.
- It was created by artists and allies around Australia
- It was created with the support of funders and producing partners - the Australian Research Council, Creative Australia, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Curtin University, University of Melbourne, and Arts Access Victoria.

How did we build the Disability Arts History Australia website?


We used –


- Interviews with artists and allies
- Searches in libraries and online
- Digitising old records
- Coding by location, artform, community, and topic
- Categories based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) to code items related to Access, Education and employment, etc.
- Co-design workshops with d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists to come up with principles for collecting, organising and sharing documents via the website


to create the www.disabilityartshistoryaustralia.net website.

What does the Disability Arts History Australia website include?

When launched, in 2025, the website includes –

 **1661 Archival Records:** Annual Reports, Programs, Promotional Flyers and Cards and more, available via URLs or PDFs.

 **49 Interviews:** With d/Deaf, Disabled and Neurodivergent artists and allies, with Auslan interpretation, captions, and transcripts for each video

 **Search Tools:** To explore 10,864 people, organisations, and works associated with Australia's peak Disability Arts organisations, and filter for

location, artform, or topics such as Access, Education and employment, Participation in public and political life

1 Timeline: Important moments in Disability Arts practice, policy, and activism

📖 Reference List: Books, articles, reports and other helpful resources

📁 Curated Histories: Pages focused on specific themes such as Disability Arts Festivals or Government Policy, Strategy, and Funding

What do we learn from the historical documents 1970s-2020s in the Disability Arts in Australia website?

Disability Arts has grown from the 1970s to the 2020s. It includes –

1970s

- Disability Arts / Arts & Disability in schools, residential, community, and non-mainstream settings
 - Earliest Access Arts organisations established - Arts Access Society Victoria
 - Earliest Disability Arts / Arts & Disability Organizations established – e.g. Australian Theatre of the Deaf (1974), Arts Project Australia (1974)
 - Working in performing and visual arts

1980s

- Campaigns for Access, Inclusion, and Representation
 - Early research, early guidelines for inclusive practice, conferences
 - Further Access Arts organisations, and Disability Arts / Arts & Disability organisations established – e.g. Access Arts (1983), Back to Back Theatre (1987)

1990s

- Publication of Guides, Toolkits, and Resources
 - Australia Council releases first Disability Action Plan, research, fact books on practice in each state, guidelines for access for artists/audiences
 - Australia Council funds projects, programs, organisations
 - Additional Companies – e.g. Restless Dance (1991), No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability (1994), Weave Movement Theatre (1997), Tutti Arts (1999) – established

2000s

- Implementation of Policy
 - Australia Council publishes reports on Disability Arts / Arts & Disability practice, and economic studies of participation in the arts
 - Cultural Ministers' Council launches first National Arts & Disability Strategy (2009)
 - Victorian government publishes 'Picture This: Increasing the Cultural Participation of People with a Disability in Victoria' (2009)
 - Additional Companies established – Rawcus (2000), Second Echo Ensemble (2005)

2010s

- Funding for projects, artists, and arts organisations

- Establishment further Disability Arts / Arts & Disability organisations
- Arts Access Australia and DADAA publish information about barriers to employment for Disabled artists
- 2013 draft of proposed Creative Australia National Cultural Policy criticised for talking about 'tolerating' d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists
- 2014-2019 Australia Council announces funding d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists, publishes insights on support, and further economic studies on participation in the arts
- 2015-2019 Australian Government evaluates National Arts & Disability Strategy, shares results consultation about new policy
- 2016-2023 Screen Australia publishes 'Seeing Ourselves' reports on Disability and Screen
- 2018 South Australian Film Corporation releases Disability Screen Strategy
- Additional Companies established – A_tistic (2014), Studio A (2015), Murmuration (2015), Indelability Arts (2015)

2020s

- Recognition of d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists' role and leadership
 - Australian Government Office for the Arts releases new National Cultural Policy called 'Revive' (2023), then 'Equity: The Arts and Disability Associated Plan' (2024)
 - Creative Australia (previously Australia Council) releases further economic studies of participation, a report on the data called 'Towards Equity' (2022), and a report on consultation with Disabled artists called 'Building on Strong Foundations' (2024)
 - Screen Australia starts an Access Coordinator Training program (2023)
 - Queensland Government publishes Arts & Disability Plan (2024)
 - Additional companies established - Off The List Records (2023)

What do we learn from the interviews in the Disability Arts in Australia website?

In the interviews, artists and allies talk about programs that help make arts practice accessible, inclusive, and safe. They say we should –

1. Challenge

- Language and beliefs that focus on what we cannot do
- Lack of representation – or the right type of representation – of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists
- Barriers that make it difficult for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people to get training or jobs in the arts
 - Extra work to explain and ask for access
 - Confusing systems for education, jobs, and grants
 - Events, venues, and tours that are not accessible
 - Fast work pace and unfair ideas about what is "good" or "successful"

- Accessibility added too late—not planned from the start
- 2. Champion and create
 - Disability-led practice, made by Disabled people, based on our experiences, ideas, and culture
 - Changes d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists to teach, mentor, and lead
 - Sharing skills, techniques, and ideas between older and younger artists
 - Workplaces that are supportive, inclusive, and safe
 - Inclusion in local, national, and international events, festivals, and exhibitions, across all art forms – theatre, dance, music, visual art, film, writing, and multidisciplinary arts.
- 3. Value d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists’
 - Intersectional identities – being Disabled and Indigenous, or Disabled and Queer, or both
 - Strength, flexibility, and ability to adapt
 - Career paths that are different – not straight lines from emerging to established
 - Different ways to show success – projects, paid work, awards, and recognition
 - High quality and creative art work
- Address
 - Changes in laws and systems that affect artists’ career opportunities
 - Unequal access – some people get support, others don’t
 - The physical, emotional, and systems related work needed to keep going in an arts career
 - The way unstable work can effect an arts career
 - The need for long-term, reliable funding to support an arts career
 - How unstable work can break careers
 - The need for long-term, reliable funding to support strong career paths

What are the main recommendations in the Report?

What are the main recommendations from artists and allies?

- Health & Rehabilitation
 - Mentors are important
 - They help make inclusive ways of working
 - They support with identity, sharing personal information, and adapting to social barriers and changing capacity
- Equity & Non-Discrimination
 - Teaching, mentoring, collaboration, and leadership by Disabled people is important
 - It helps break down barriers, create new opportunities, and support career paths that are not straight or in one field
- Advocacy and Awareness Raising

- A rights-based approach is needed
- It must avoid tokenism
- It must support real, inclusive, Disability-led ways of working and collaborating to break down barriers
- Access
 - The Disability Arts community is diverse and includes many identities
 - Practice should grow from therapy, to community, to professional
 - A rights-based approach is needed to fix poor representation, low expectations, limited access, and pressure to hide disability
 - Disability-led practice, mentoring, collaboration, and sharing between generations help grow skills, techniques, and ideas of success
 - These also help build safe and inclusive models and spaces
- Education & Employment
 - Barriers include beliefs, processes, physical environment, digital environment
 - Fast work pace, confusing processes, and bias toward “marketable” work that appeals to mainstream audiences are also barriers
 - d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists’ ability to adapt and succeed in different ways should be recognised as a strength
- Participation in Public and Political Life
 - d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists’ adaptations, creative styles, and different training and career paths are a strength and a source of pride
 - Artists make choices about identity, how they are seen, and what they share, depending on the situation
- Participation in Cultural Life
 - Mentoring, working across different artforms, and community are important
 - These shape artists’ creative identity, style, and career – including how to keep careers going over time

What are the main learnings from creating the Disability Arts History Australia website?

- d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists have worked across the arts sector for a long time, alongside mainstream work
 - Theatre, Performance, Dance, and Visual Arts have been happening since the 1970s, with more work since the 1990s
 - Film and TV – especially full-length drama – was rare before 2000. The Other Film Festival (2004–), Screenability (2017–), and commissioning by ABC and others have helped grow this work
 - Music has been part of Community Arts and Access Arts programs, and is central to organisations like Tutti Arts (1997). In the 2020s, more projects support individual recording artists – like Off the List Records (2020), Headliners (2024)

- Collaborative, ensemble, and social enterprise models have supported Disabled artists
 - Long-running companies and ensembles have:
 - Helped artists who can't access regular education or jobs
 - Created inclusive ways to train, make art, and build careers
 - Given artists platforms to explore different artforms, technology, and new ideas
 - Supported artists to follow personal interests and make new work, which is later picked up by mainstream venues, companies, and festivals
 - Since the 2000s, there has been:
 - More co-programming with mainstream venues, companies, and festivals
 - More work in non-traditional spaces and digital formats, using Auslan, captions, audio description, and relaxed performance styles—built into the work from the start
- d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists still face challenges
 - They benefit from diversity conversations, but don't always feel seen
 - Access to take part depends on the artform
 - Accessibility is often seen in narrow ways—real barriers include attitudes, systems, physical access, digital access, and rules. These include pressure to work fast, make lots, and meet narrow ideas of success
 - Access is not built into systems from the start. Asking for access later takes a lot of work
 - Funding and support are not consistent. The effort to get support can break career progress and make it hard to keep going
- Key proposed actions include
 - **Change attitudes** – use approaches that focus on strength and rights
 - **Change ideas** – about speed of work, amount of work, and what “success” means
 - **Fix** barriers in attitudes, systems, physical access, digital access, and processes
 - **Recognise** the strength, flexibility, and ability to adapt of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists – they lead new ideas in art and careers
 - **Recognise** the many identities and experiences of Disabled artists – these help shape new ideas
 - **Move** power from organisations to individual artists
 - **Support** ways of working that are **led by Disabled people**
 - **Support sharing** and learning of skills, knowledge, and ideas **between older and younger artists – write down, share, and teach these ways of working**
 - **Support hubs** that help artists, organisations, artforms, and places share ideas

- **Plan** access into all systems, processes, and resources from the start

What would d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists want us to do right away?

d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists and allies have done a lot of work to make the arts industry more inclusive.

They have built a lot of strong, creative, professional Disability-led practices.

They believe there is still a need to do more work to

- Recognise and celebrate the history of Disabled artists
- Recognise the work Disabled artists and allies have done to lead change in the arts industry
- Make sure we are making our own decisions, and telling our own stories, in the way we want to
- Make sure we are in charge – not just included
- Make sure work is led by Disabled people – not just about Disability
- Address barriers that make it hard for us to do this

Artists and allies want us to

- **Represent** – stories that often missing or misrepresented in the arts
- **Include** – disability in arts policies
- **Shift** – attitudes to focus on strength and rights
- **Language** – our work in the way we want to describe it
- **Value** – the many identities and experiences of Disabled artists
- **Recognise** – the strength, flexibility, and ability to adapt of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists – we lead new ideas in art and careers
- **Fix** – barriers – including negative beliefs, difficult processes, physical and digital access to venues, events, and website
- **Change** – ideas about speed of work, amount of work, and what “success” means in the arts industry
- **Train** – artists and arts organisations in the approaches to access that we know work for us
- **Move** – power from organisations to individual artists
- **Support**
 - ways of working that are **led by (out and proud) Disabled people**
 - **sharing** and learning of skills, knowledge, and ideas **between older and younger artists – write down, share, and teach these ways of working**
 - **hubs** that help artists, organisations, artforms, and places share ideas
- **Fund** – Disability-led projects, for more than short-term periods, and pay Disabled artists fairly
- **Include** – Disabled people from the start, and plan access into all systems, processes, and resources from the start
- **Allyship** – listen, support, and share power with us

How do I contact the authors?

Contact Us



Visit the Disability Arts History Australia website at:

<https://disabilityartshistoryaustralia.net>



For media, interviews, further information, or enquires about tailored reports, contact Professor Bree Hadley, bree.hadley@qut.edu.au

What are some key terms / concepts in the Report?

Easy English Glossary

Some key words use in the Disability Arts History Australia Industry Report are –

- **Archive:** A collection of records and histories
- **Representation:** Showing the real experience of real people in stories
- **Accessible:** Easy to use for Disabled people
- **Inclusion:** Making sure everyone can take part
- **Disability Administration:** Extra work Disabled people do to manage life
- **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD):** A global agreement that says Disabled people must be treated equality, and have the same rights as everyone else, in all parts of life.
- **Deficit-based language:** Describing people by what they can't do
- **Disability-led practice:** Disabled people lead the work
- **Intersectionality:** Having more than one identity (e.g. race, gender, disability)
- **Cultural Safety:** Feeling respected and understood
- **Sustainability:** Having enough support to keep going
- **Allyship:** Supporting Disabled people to succeed