Interviewee Name: Daniel Savage
Interviewer Name: Erin Scudder
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Transcript

Erin: Yeah. Yeah. Awesome. Okay, well, we'll get straight into it then. So, to start, can I please invite you to introduce yourself however you would like to?

Daniel: All right. So my name is Daniel Savage. I'm, a contemporary disabled artist focusing primarily on photography, video, and performance. My practice spreads around a little bit. I also work quite heavily in, advocacy in the arts, particularly around accessibility and inclusion and have done work in a kind of a curatorial role as well, working across both kind of festivals and, contemporary art exhibitions. but it is much more in the art space than the performing art space that I inhabit so I've touched over across a little bit, especially when working with arts institutions and, you know, either in an advisory capacity, uh, just for a little bit of background. So I'm 36. I am a straight cis male wheelchair user, grew up in Australia, uh, to New Zealand parents, but pretty much been based in Canberra my whole life and my whole kind of artistic practice and career as well. I studied at the A.N.U. School of Art. so was lucky to actually go through a kind of a university arts education system. and I, my disability is acquired later in life, so I became a wheelchair user when I was 21. So that was actually while I was at art school. Took some time off, returned to art schools and ended up doing, an honours in photography and digital media with a focus on kind of photography. And then I've been practicing in various degrees since then. you know, you know, arguably I'll probably still be considered an emerging artist, but in certain spaces I would be considered reasonably established.

Erin: Yeah. Amazing. so just diving into your, past practice and things you've done up until this moment in time. can you talk about some of the experiences that help you, helped you become the artist that you are today?

Daniel: Okay. So from, uh, it's [there's] probably two sides of it. There's a technical perspective and then like a creative perspective. so I always had a strong interest in photography growing up. So it came from actually an interest in animals. My Mum talks about my favourite book as a child was An Encyclopedia of Animals, and it was just going through all the photos. and then we've always had National Geographic from a very young age. So I always had an interest in photography and animals and photographing animals. My Mum used to take me to the zoo and give me a disposable camera, and I would just run around and take photos of all the animals and then as soon as I was able to study photography, I did that growing up in Canberra, I was really lucky that from, I think year 8 or 9 in high school, I was able to study photography. We had a darkroom at my high school, so I took that course whenever I could…Basically from year eight, throughout my entire high school [and] college [years], I was always doing photography, I came from quite an academic family, so I did a lot of, science, chemistry, physics, English, maths, all that. And then photography was like my kind of creative outlet but I never did arts, so I never actually studied the arts, just photography.

Daniel: I was very much, in my earlier life, interested in becoming a wildlife photographer or a, kind of press correspondent photographer. I… went really heavily into manual black and white photography. I got my manual camera, learnt to print, and studied that all the way through to year 12, and had some good early experiences as well, where I had really great photography teachers. Again, full access to a dark room in years 11 and 12 at my college. and a teacher who basically just let me go in there whenever I wanted. If there wasn't a class using it, I could just go in and print. and gave me access to all their old cameras that they had, which is really great. and the first kind of outside of a school kind of exposure I had was I got to go on the NGAs, high school intern program. So when I did it, it was a really short program, I think we were just there for two days and … it was like a representative from each state and I got put forwards as the Act representative, which was amazing. and it was one of my earlier exposures to art as a photography as art. Imants Tillers, who's a painter based in Goulburn, had a retrospective on at the time and he was there and he came and chatted to us.

Daniel: I still have [a piece of] his work [it] is made up of a bunch of different tiles, and I still have one of his tiles, we made him a tile and he gave us one. So it sparked a bit more of an interest in, "oh, I can see a connection between like photography, contemporary art, photography, and even like printmaking", because a lot of his art was

kind of like, his art was interesting because it was reproduction, and he was repainting things he'd seen in other artworks and kind of combining things. Anyway, uh, so then going to university, I was tossing up between physics and art, and I asked the A.N.U. Whether I could study both. And at that time they said, no, that wasn't possible. You couldn't do a double degree in physics and art. So I did a double degree. I studied a double degree in film and arts so I did academic film studies and photography. I dropped the film studies after the first year. I did a bit of like gender studies and stuff as well. just because it wasn't the course I was looking for. I didn't feel like they had a very strong program, and even one of the courses I wanted to study, they had to drop because they didn't have enough people. But doing that Gender studies again, kind of made me start to think more about, like what rather than just be a photograph being like of an animal or documenting something about like, okay, you know, film art has kind of meaning and layers to it and that sort of thing.

Daniel: And I had already gone down that [path] because I was going to art school. Their school is kind of interesting, A.N.U. School of Art, that it's set up on the Bauhaus system and to some degree. So it's very workshop focused. you spend the first six months just doing core, so not even doing photography. I had five classes which were 2D, 3D colour theory. So it was very much ‘oh, all I've done is photography and never painted or drawn or anything, now do everything but photography’ as a like a six months [experience] to get you to build a core understanding of things. So that was kind of interesting and [I] had some really great teachers, I just went, look, I don't draw, I don't do anything. They're like, oh, that's great, because we don't have to unteach anything from you. So they just kind of let me get - be really free with what I did. So it kind of was really fun to experiment and play around a little bit, and then you go really heavily into your first year and second year about learning technique [in your chosen course].

Daniel: [They have] probably the best darkroom facilities in Australia in their new school of art. [They have] both digital [facilities] and a dark room, massive printers, massive mural studios, huge like industrial commercial printers. So [I] went really heavy into learning even more how to print but then I quickly transitioned into digital photography and to some degree, that was actually a choice because I'm vegan and film isn't vegan. So I had to kind of like, it was always a little bit of a tension to me. Since I could get a digital camera and you could start to do some really great stuff with them, I kind of transitioned over. But [I] took all those skills and knowledge that I learned from kind of

my printing. and then, I was kind of coming into my third year and I was a little bit lost as to what I was actually making work about. I was experimenting and trying a lot of stuff, but it's something. It's something people talk about a lot at art school. It's kind of like, poor little middle class white boy syndrome. It's like, I don't actually have anything to make art about. I didn't have any struggles. I grew up from a very supportive environment. So it was just kind of like, okay, I can take photos, but what am I trying to say? What's something a little bit stronger? I'd always been photographing people [and] myself.

Daniel: And I was interested in the idea of the way we perceive people and playing characters almost a little bit. So I've done a little bit of kind of playing into, who are you supposed to be? And who are people generally supposed to be, but often using myself, because I was there and I would happily stand in front of a camera or shoot myself for hours, where as I didn't want to necessarily put other people through that. So then I had my spinal injury, and when I was 21, and I took a about a year or a year and a half off to recover and then come back and then really [had to] decide whether I wanted to go back into photography and the arts. And I did. So I came back and I took it at a much slower [pace] so my last year [of my degree], I did one year just focused on photography. [At] a half load and then just focused on my theory and then did an honours [year full time] to kind of wrap it all up. and it was a lot more centred and concentrated at that point. So from that point on, I started really looking into this idea of, I'd had this experience of what the world was like without a disability, and then all of a sudden, seeing the world with a disability, and the way the world saw me and the way I navigated the world, I was in … all these same environments, in the exact same experiences, but the way every, like everything just I'd gone back to working as a D.J. In a bar in the city that I worked at before, but the way people treated [was] hugely different, So I started looking at that as [the] core of my work, often using myself, my own experience, to reflect kind of the world around me.

Daniel: And while I was interested in the disabled experience, I actually really saw an opportunity to use that to get people to reflect on their own experience and that was kind of the main goal for my work. People found disability interesting, and I was always looking at, how can I use that to make you reflect on yourself, even if that's the way you're impacting me or the way you're viewing me? So that was, that was kind of, yeah, the core of my work. That was kind of the generation of my artistic practice. And then I

was really lucky to get a lot of really good opportunities coming out of art school. because I already had kind of exposure and being in art school, I got all these connections.

Daniel: Canberra has a really small, tight knit art scene. The exposure you get at A.N.U. Art school, like we had desks in the school, we could be there almost 24 hours a day. You knew all your teachers. You could go up to them whenever, there was always time for you. So it was unheard of … when I heard of other schools that said that like, ‘oh, we've got 300 people in a photography class and we have to book in to get 15 minutes for that teacher.’ That was like insane to me. Anyway, so I got a residency with the Canberra contemporary art space for a year, which is one of the CAOS galleries around Australia, which are these kind of, they've been going forever, not for profit galleries, which exposed me again to a bunch of other artists and curators. I did a residency with the Australian Network of Art [and] Technology (A.N.A.T.) where I got to go to the UK and meet a bunch of great artists there and then started connecting with a lot of Disability Arts organisations as well and that kind of led me down a path of trying to bring together ()these two communities, because I was in a contemporary art scene, but it wasn't very accessible, and I didn't see a lot of other people with disability in it. And then I started reaching out to this Disability Arts scene, and everything I heard from them was, “we're really disconnected from the contemporary art scene. They won't let us in. It's really inaccessible.” So I started being in this space where I started not only doing that with my practice a little bit, but also talking to the different sides about, well, here's how you can kind of transition in there and then try and use that foot I had in the door with more contemporary arts organisations to go, here's all the people you're missing and why you're excluding them even though you don't realise it. Also being in the A.C.T. there's no, uh, Disability Arts organisation, like Peak Body. There's no Accessible Arts, New South Wales or anything like that in the A.C.T. So I became the person that people went to, because if somebody asked about arts and disability [people] were like, “well, we know this guy Daniel, he's just happens to be there and he'll talk to you.” So again, it put me in front of a lot of people that I probably wouldn't have got exposed to and gave me some opportunities, to, to just be in front of people and then talk and then go back to other states and have a chat to people and that sort of thing. So that was really positive as well. I probably answered more than the question, but yeah.

Erin: No, you've done a really good job at answering the kind of the whole first section, really about past practice. You've talked a bit about, you know, some standout facilitators or some highlights. You've talked a little bit about barriers and obstacles in terms of, for example, not having a Disability Arts organisation in A.C.T. The next section concerns present practice, but was there anything else you wanted to add?

Erin: Like sort of past practice.

Daniel: Look.

Erin: Highlights?

Daniel: From - so I mean, I've only touched on them really briefly, but things like, I think it's really important. I can't overemphasise the impact being exposed to key people at key moments had on my career, and it being one [experience] led to another, and how so much of that centered around just me being at art school and art school wasn't the most accessible place in the world. It would have been even less accessible if apparently, like 3 or 4 years before me, somebody else in a wheelchair hadn't come [before me]. It's a heritage listed building. And they had this tiny little lift that they managed to build into the building after years. Basically, by the time she'd left, there was a lift. Without that, it would have been a nightmare for me to be there. I basically wouldn't have been able to do it because photography was on the second floor. Yeah. So like I said, being there exposed me to practicing artists, to teachers, to my whole, like, my contemporaries in the art scene, getting a degree everything I learned was amazing and great, and that was really important. But then just having the grad show and being up for the opportunity to have a residency and having talked to those people before getting to it and being told, "oh, you should go to this gallery and talk to this person and just make sure they know your name so that when they come to the art school to look at the grad show, they'll look at your work and then you might get a residency". So then that residency, I said, meant that when somebody else was looking like, oh, we're looking for people.

Daniel: This kind of opportunity either I got told you should put your name in and we'll back you or they will put you forwards. I applied for an Australia Council grant the first year out of art school, and it was because I had a show that was given to me as part of

that residency. So that gave me the backing of a big gallery to say, like, yeah, they're supporting me and putting on a show [of my work]. So then I got funding from an Australia Council grant, which again, now I've got a credit that says I've got an Australia Council grant and I put a show on [a solo show]. So I've got that to go to the next opportunity and the next opportunity. So yeah, it was all those connections [that] were so important and I think the barriers I heard of other people facing to get… into those doors is, it would have a huge... If I didn't have that, it would have been extremely hard. And then there's a question about would… I have had the energy to keep going if I had to keep dealing with the curator I was supposed to go talk to was in a gallery that was inaccessible. It's like, okay, well, I'm not…. not going to get in front of them. And if you're not in front of them, you can't even show them your work. So it doesn't matter how …good your work is if no one sees it. Yeah. That's such a big part of.

Erin: Yeah that connection it's foundational. Yeah. thank you for that rich history. And I also really enjoyed hearing what you said about connecting contemporary art world and Disability Arts world. In terms of your present practice, what are you currently working on or passionate about and what's motivating you at the moment?

Daniel: I'm actually in a bit of a lull period with my own work so it's, it's kind of multiple factors. I mean… being 36, I'm moving into kind of an older age. So you very much start to have to consider, “well, what is my long term future look like” as far as housing and looking after myself, all that kind of thing. [An] Arts practice doesn't fund anything. So I'm working full-time in the public service alongside my art practice, and before I was working part-time in the public service and kind of balancing that out. And then now I have more responsibilities as a more senior position [at work]. So it does make it very tricky and then Covid put a damper on a lot of things, but I would say … what I'm working on now is trying to both frame what I want as a practice for myself. So what's the balance between the work I want to make, what or where I want to aim for and what that means, like more broadly but it was also a bit of a transition in, I started really exploring digital technology as a space for more experimentation. So rather than just like kind of direct photography [practice] with a, like a 2D output, looking at things like, augmented reality, virtual reality, and even just kind of more general digital experiences.

Daniel: And part of that was, potentially looking into the opportunities that that opens up, for the type of work you make, but also kind of audiences you can engage with. I've

always had a little bit of a frustration just personally, that, like if you put work in a gallery, it only gets seen by so many people. And even from an idea of access, it's like, “well, it's only people who can get to that gallery.” It's from an access point in and of itself and then having to find a gallery to try show your work. You can show your work online but does that have the same impact, especially if you've kind of built it and designed it [the art work] to be seen in a gallery. I think seeing work in person actually… is really impactful. But at the same time…I was kind of really keen to go like, “okay, well, is there other ways you can experience art, if you design it. That makes it a little bit more democratic?” Of course, then I kind of hit a couple of barriers where it's also a discussion like, “well, it's a little bit democratic if it's digital, you can access it anywhere but if you have to have an iPhone or, you know, a certain level of technology access, is it still kind of democratic, and accessible?”

Daniel: So I started playing around with a lot of stuff, but I also then realised, no one really makes, whether it's a film or an app or anything like that, no one really makes it on their own. It's normally a team of people that build these things. So I was trying to learn skills myself that I'd never done before. And then when I talked to other people, they're like, “oh no, you have like a sound engineer and you have this person, you have these kind of people, or you find somebody who knows how to code, build that bit for you, and then you build another bit.” So it's a tension between okay, that sounds good, but I also have seen other people who have just gone, “like, can you remake my work in 3D?” And I'm like, that's not what I'm interested in. It seems kind of a little bit lackluster. So yeah, so I was [going] back and forth with that and I still don't know where I'm going. The other tricky thing is it moves so quickly that it's kind of like by the time you start playing with something, it's kind of like, “oh, don't bother the learning to code, because soon you'll be able to [have a computer] do that for you, and you just need to tell it what you need in plain language,” or, you can make your thing.

Daniel: But then there's all this extra stuff you need to build around it, because it's like legal requirements, because you’re going to be putting it on people's phones and it's like, are you going to be hosting it on the cloud [etc] anyway. There's lots of technical extra stuff that I missed as well, so I'd be making little fun stuff that I think is interesting and has an opportunity to go somewhere. Similarly, I've done a little bit of kind of like video work. That's been interesting. It's been more kind of experimenting, I think. So I think my practice at the moment is experimenting. It's kind of working out what I'm

doing, what I'm making, where I want to go and how I can have a engaged practice. I think actually still, there's something that's having an impact, but that balances with kind of where I'm at in both my life and my career. The other side of it would be before things kind of quieted down a little bit, I moved to having a lot of focus on.

Daniel: I was doing a lot more work in advocacy and curatorship as well. I put on a big in-person exhibition of digital technology based Disability Arts from Australia and lthe UK and Europe at the Belconnen Arts Centre in Canberra and we had, so brought a bunch of work in that was really great. And…with a fellow curator, Hannah, we put on, a kind of digital arts festival, Disability Arts, but hosted it all online and tried to make it with talks and showing work and a bunch of different stuff, and that was really great. The other side, there's always those elements as well that when you start to take on too much and wanting to do [a lot of] stuff, it's like that then does reduce your own practice as well, because it's like, okay, I'm focusing on all these other elements. So I've kind of pulled back from that a little bit as well, just because I kind of go, “is that something I really want to focus on?” But if I do, I don't want to kind of half do everything. I want to kind of decide, like really where I fall [as an artist etc].

Erin: Yeah. I love how you touched on the, the next question about, you know, where does your work showcase and visible? You've talked about it from the point of view of, you know, what's accessible for a big range of people. How can people, other people best experience things? And also, you've talked about it in terms of making opportunities and making spaces as a curator. So it leads really nicely in, the next couple of questions are about, you know, historically and now, how do you feel about where your work has been showcased and seen? And also, how do you feel about the content that you feel supported and empowered to make?

Daniel: So I think I was very lucky that, well, I don't know if it's lucky, but compared to the experiences of other disabled artists that my work is primarily been seen in a contemporary art context, I think most people who knew me, especially know me or have seen my work, especially when I was making a lot more work and showing it more broadly, saw it as I was a contemporary artist who was making work about disability or that involved disability, rather than as a disabled artist who's just making work in the disability community and that again, that was because of the nature of my pathway going through an art school and into a kind of a contemporary art context. So often I

was potentially being and this was because, this was, uh, what was it? I think… I think 2009 is probably when I graduated, and started really making work and showing work a little bit more publicly, I guess, just showing stuff at school. There wasn't, you know, there was disabled artists, and disabled [themed] work, but there wasn't a lot being spoken about or like kind of directly being referenced. There were pockets all around Australia, and other than that, it was like people were in really specific spaces or working in their own stuff. Anyway, so I was… I was really happy about that because people were kind of looking at it a certain way, and because my work was often playing with these ideas around perception, I was playing with those ideas of especially when people, if people didn't know me, and they saw my work [before meeting me], you know, I made work where it it was hard for people to, to tell whether I was disabled or not.

Daniel: And that was kind of part of the intention. It was like them having to second guess about whether you can tell whether someone's disabled, even if there's like a wheelchair. And digital photography really lends itself to that because you can manipulate things. And even just the way my disability manifests, I can stand up and move around a little bit so I could do things that people kind of see a wheelchair and don't expect but yeah, so I was quite happy with that. They were all kind of like smaller contemporary art spaces. I've got work that had been acquired by government, the ACT Legislative Assembly, and I believe it's… I don't know if it's still showing. They moved the collection around a little bit and [I had] some other work that had kind of been purchased. A few little spaces and 1 or 2 works have been shown, and in a couple of group shows that I got some kind of positive reactions.

Daniel: And then some of it was starting to be shown as well, more later on in spaces where alongside other disabled artists work, and there was other kind of disabled art curators as well that were starting to come up, and that was really positive too because I could start to… or I was being asked like, like for this last exhibition to curate a show, or to talk about other disabled artists. And that gave me an opportunity as well to really bring in, like, highlight other artists who I thought were… like their work was at a level that it could be shown anywhere. It wasn't like it had already justified itself that it should be in that space, and it was just giving it the opportunity to be there. I had a… I had a teacher at art school who was from, she grew up in Paris, but she was from, based in Prague and she talked about often being included in shows in her early career as the, like, token woman artist in the show.

Daniel: And she said “you can tell them to get stuffed and say, you're not going to do it, but that, to some degree, that disadvantage is yourself. Uh, that it's better to say yes and then make work so good that it's undoubtable that you should have been there in the first place. And if you can make it better than everyone else's, that's in the gallery”. So they kind of go, well, we want her as the person next and if you really need to, you can make work that basically says fuck you to whoever invited you in the show in a tokenistic way, which I've done in a couple of shows as well. Like I, I made a work for a festival where I was invited to show in an empty penthouse apartment in a, in an area called New Acton, which is kind of like a very expensive, rich housing development that likes to frame itself as being very arty. They're called the Art Not Apart apartments. Anyway, there… I asked for it like they asked me to join, like, kind of kind of last minute. I asked if they knew my work. They knew what I may work about. They said “yes”. I was like, “okay”. Asked to view the space…the main space was completely inaccessible to a wheelchair.

Daniel: So it was like a little entryway and then the rest of the apartment was up a flight of wooden stairs and on top of that, there was an internal elevator that was broken like halfway, which I just thought was really funny. So I made a performance work. I said, look, “I'll still be in the show”. And I showed some… a couple of what my works downstairs, and I made a work I performed in the space. It was basically getting people to acknowledge as they came into the space and going upstairs that they were in a privileged position, like I was in a disabled position to be able to access and view the work. I made them take this like disabled wheelchair user stamp with a circle and a cross through it as an acknowledgement that to mark them the way my chair marks me and because of people wanting to do it, they ended up having to line up half an hour to go upstairs to look around for five… like it turned into this whole thing. So I made work about that. And, then, you know, they had to go out and have this stamp on their arm for a week and try to explain why they had it and all sorts of stuff. So, so I kind of got off track there, but -

Erin: No that's amazing. Yeah. Thank you for telling me so that.

Daniel: That's all right. So I've, I've always tried to make work that will stand like if, if, if, if it's in a space that I need maybe once or twice I've made a work and gone like nah

that could be better. But I've always felt it was at a level that should be shown in contemporary spaces. It is… and I'm also, uh, to some degree arrogant enough that you potentially. That's probably been one of the main frustrations.

Daniel: I've always been arrogant enough, and I think to some degree, you need it as an artist to think my work should be seen by more people. I thought what I was saying in my work was relevant and, and the reason I do make work, some work I make for myself, and there's elements of my work that I make for myself, but I make work to be seen. I made work in art school about that, that we were asked to do a project about what's at the core of your practice and the way I look at work. It says something when no one's looking at it. And that's the thing that I, I say with it and then when somebody steps in front of the artwork, there's a new meaning created by their experience. And then what they bring in is reflected to the, the art work. And as soon as they step away from it, that ends and a new person steps in and there's a new kind of meaning or conversation that created in that moment. And then somebody might step back who's been there before and things have changed. It might be a new meaning. And so I'm always, without an audience like my… I don't see my artwork as really saying anything. Like even if the audience is me, then it's like, okay, it's saying something in that moment so I do get frustrated sometimes.

Daniel: I've got a lot of artwork in the garage and under the bed where I'm like, I kind of… It's hard to convince someone, to because my artwork is often me and large scale like to have a life-size photo of me, like in the hallway or something like that. Like it could be a bit odd, but so to generally sum it up. Yes, I'm kind of comfortable with where it is and where it's being seen but I would have, I would have liked to have been able to take that next step. And I think it's something that it's not just in the Disability Arts scene, it's in the nature of the work that I make. It's non-commercial, and I knew that really early on. My work isn't commercial. It's, it has, to some degree, a social and a conceptual message and I try to make my work aesthetically pleasing. I still want, like, I see that as really important to grabbing people's attention and bringing them into the conversation. I don't I think you can actually make work confronting that is also appealing as well like confrontation can be an appealing element like the, the digestion shit machine at MONA in Tasmania. People are drawn into that just because it's so kind of confronting in the first place but it's done in like a good, precise way. So I'm always

very particular about my work and the way it's presented and the way it's viewed and the aesthetics around it, because I want to draw people in to what I'm saying.

Daniel: They're not looking at it. Like I said, there's no meaning. So what's the point of it? But yeah, but it makes it very difficult then to fund your own work and to have a kind of like, okay, I'm not going to have a commercial practice so either I have to push really hard into working with galleries and getting grants to fund my own work until potentially I get to a position where I've got enough of a name that people or institutions might collect it. But, and that's, you know, I have some work in the A.C.T. Legislative Assembly and, and 1 or 2 other, like, other places like that. But I sold, like one artwork, I think privately, because it's just it's not really the type of work you can, you can hang up and the, the one work I sold privately was a little bit of a tongue-in-cheek, playful work that was in a members show, and it was another artist bought it for an art curator because it was kind of like an inside joke sort of thing, and he just had it on his desk because it was a talking piece and like, you know, when it came up so I do find that's, that's, I guess the only tricky thing. So the not where my work is shown but where my work is collected.

Daniel: It's, it's really hard, I think. And I think it's a, uh, a just an inherent, thing that would affect the Disability Arts movement more than, say, just general contemporary art. How do you, how do you make your work appealing and engaging enough that it can then lead to a sustaining your own practice? And there are like sometimes you get lucky and there are elements of your work that may be really engaging and people either want to collect or act and I think there's a lot of artists that are like that. It's like, if you could, if you could find the trick to do both, where people really, like, enjoy seeing your work, even if they don't like, if they get 1% out of the meaning you're trying to get, you're like, okay, I'm having an impact. And it helps me like continue career and continue saying what I'm trying to say. And then when I get the big MCA show, I can again have like 90% of the exhibition be that fun, entertaining. And then I've got like one room that's an extra step of something that I know no one would ever buy but I can kind of say it's work. So I, I'd always been picturing, what I would do when I got like, the Tate Turbine Hall, even when I was at art school. I'm like, there's all this stuff that I want to do that I actually need a certain scale and funding to actually get across.

Daniel: And I was always trying to do smaller works and then like, exhibitions kind of go like, can you see what I would try to do if you gave me kind of that bigger budget or that I had that more time or that money. And unfortunately, it's just, you know, that does, that does take it out of you and like doing that exhibition we had the residency and I got the Australia Council grant funding. You know, I was spending, like staying up to like 3 or 4 a.m., building stuff in my garage and doing stuff and working with, like, these big digital printers and stuff. Hours and hours to get it right, because that's what needs to be done to get the work. And that's really hard to like, maintain. And sometimes it can be a little draining, even if you get a really positive reception when you do have the exhibition on to go, like, cool, I did that. I got to show it for two weeks. Maybe 500 people saw it and then I'm like. And then you try to get it shown in other places and, and sometimes they're like, oh no, we want to show new stuff. And you're kind of like, But I've got this really great stuff that only 500 people. So and I really want. So yeah. Anyway, so that's, that's probably my only, my frustrations with the,

Erin: I'm just going to say, and people like me often like, it's like if you missed your chance to see something, you're like, I know. I want to see it again. Please showcase it again.

Daniel: Yeah.

Erin: I'm just going to move on to the next question. So the next set of questions are to do with Disability Arts in Australia.

Daniel: Mhm.

Erin: I want to sort of just, address what you sort of haven't touched on already. So it's a couple of things. What degree of awareness do you think the public have of Disability Arts in Australia? And also, what do you think have been some of the key milestones or big major happenings in Disability Arts in Australia over the last 50 years? So awareness and major happenings.

Daniel: Yeah look, uh, it depends what kind of audience you're talking about as far as awareness. Uh, I would say the general public does not know what Disability Arts are, and if you just said that to them, they would think, uh, you're talking about, uh, like

rehabilitation practices or like just inclusive arts practices. The general like which, you know, actually I think is really important has a place and it's actually really great artists who have come out of that and transitioned into a more like professional practice but I think if you said Disability Arts, that's what they that's what they think and I think most of the public would also immediately think, learning or intellectual disability. So whether it's, Down syndrome or somebody with a different type of learning disability or intellectual disability or even neurodiversity. yeah, we've... ah on the residency i went on it was based in Adelaide and the UK with Anna. We had ten disabled artists all together from kind of backgrounds, and we actually had some really interesting conversations around things like that the hierarchy of Disability Arts, like this unspoken hierarchy about who, not necessarily even internally, like the way that disabled people decide, you know, what's better or what's above each other, but often more to do with like funding and support and exposure.

Daniel: So which of the areas that get a lot of funding, get a lot of exposure and get a lot of support as far as like Disability Arts is concerned? so it is, it's, you know, it's very much I bet there is some knowledge of. I mean, and now Back to Back Theatre. Uh, thank God they're finally getting a lot of the recognition that they've been deserving for years and I would say the award they got this year is one of those watershed moments. And I think Back to Back Theatre have had a couple of those but still, it would be things like Back to Back Theatre, it might be things like Bus Stop Films. So it is also even more so. The performing arts as well, I think has a much higher recognition in Disability Arts and what people think of it, you know, you do have some like, painters and contemporary artists like Digby Webster and, uh, I can't remember his name off the top of my head, but, he does cheeky dogs and, various arts awards you have, like, even actors now who've got a little bit of a bit more of exposure or in the public space.

Daniel: But beyond that, yeah, I don't think there's an understanding or recognition. I think in the contemporary art scene, it's very similar. It's, uh. Well, they're over there if they know about it at all. And then maybe one of them will jump from that over to us at some point, and they'll leave that behind and start to make contemporary art that, that, that there is this kind of line between the two. It's like, well, are you making Disability Arts? And then you can be in those exhibitions or are you making contemporary art?

Erin: Yeah.

Daniel: Which is you know, it's one of the things it's like I've tried to I did, I very much frame myself in a contemporary art scene, but I would consider my work Disability Arts, because of the nature of what I'm making and that I think it's very hard to say that you don't… The hand of an artist is never in the work. I think that's almost like, insane. I know people who there's artists - just the whole practice is just trying to remove the hand of the artist as an experiment and argue whether you can ever do that. It's like, you know, if you have a disability, it's going to be within your art. And then to a degree, you can argue it's Disability Arts, but I also understand people who don't want to be framed like that.

Daniel: But then the question for me is, is that because of the way people treat Disability Arts, or is it because of the way you view your work? So it's - I would like to think we could get to a place where just because you… it's framed as Disability Arts, that doesn't mean there's an inherent like connotation towards the nature of your work or what you're trying to say, or, you know, anything like that. Like, I, I really like Mike Parr as a performance artist and I referenced his work a lot in mine and some of this more, some of the stuff he wrote about. And he has a disability. He has, uh, one arm amputated, but he's never spoken about in terms of Disability Arts or his disability, I don't think is almost ever mentioned, and he doesn't talk about it, but he even does stuff like he, he's made work where he's strapped a camera to his amputated arm, or he stuck it through a hole in a wall. And I'm like, if that's not Disability Arts, like, what the hell is? Anyway, so I think, like I said, there's a huge separation and sometimes I think there's a need to do it, to argue or to try to establish ourselves and gain funding and some recognition and to champion Disability Arts as its own space.

Daniel: But it's tearing down those walls as well, I think is really important. It's like, how do we how do we use that and amplify it and then bring it over so that we're seen alongside it. So you can look at things like, you know, in Indigenous art that it be held on par with broader contemporary arts. And it is still a large frustration of mine that that's not done and that things are kind of quite segmented or they're not given the funding that I think they deserve, but it's also a larger system issue. You know, the idea that our education system isn't accessible, that then leads into a non-accessible higher education system, including like the arts community that then, yeah studio, sorry artist run initiatives and smaller galleries aren't accessible and then the medium galleries

aren't accessible and then our national institutions both aren't accessible and don't have stuff like there's no register of what work is made by disabled artists in our major collections, or what portraits in our National Portrait Gallery are of people with disability like. So. There's so many larger societal issues that we're kind of dealing with, which also then kind of interact with like arts and disability.

Erin: I just want to jump in there to pick up on something, because that leads really well into one of the identity questions.

So just given what you were just talking about, I wanted to ask you how you would like to be identified as an artist. And what are some of the terms that you see as being important descriptors for your creative identity?

Daniel: To some degree, I don't really care how people identify me as an artist, but I think I care about the way they then treat me or respond, depending on those… that kind of identification. So it's less about the way they identify me and more about what that means for the way they treat me and my work, if that makes sense.

Erin: Yes I think so.

Daniel: So I, I'm very happy to be identified as a contemporary artist. I'm very happy to identify as a disabled artist. I think a lot of the time it's very contextual and it's probably more that I don't think any element should be seen like, as excluded from it and it's just… But what are you talking about? And what elements of me as an artist are relevant to that conversation? So I, I probably kind of look at it the way I look at when I'm speaking at like a conference or an event or something, and I'm doing something like a self-describing myself at the start of a talk. So especially, you know, most of the time when you do like an audio description of yourself, you're probably doing it for people who have a blind or vision impairment. And I think about the descriptors I use is what's relevant to this conversation and the space I'm in and what I'm talking about and who I'm talking to that somebody should be aware of to frame my answers or to help them frame where my answers are coming from. So looking at me, I mean, you could argue that there are certain things about the way someone looks that identifies them as, you know, straight or gay or cis or not.

Daniel: But I add that into a conversation that's around diversity, because that's a diversity element of me and my personal experience that would probably change or shape the way people look at the work or the things I'm talking about. And it just gives you kind of that added context and whether you have a visual impairment or not, you probably can't tell by just looking at me whether I've had that lived experience. So I think that's similar for my work. I generally, I would just say I want to be seen as an artist.

Erin: Yeah.

Daniel: And then everything else is just about the context of the conversation. So I don't want the fact that I'm disabled to be like, written off and ignored because it's so hugely impacted my experience and the way I make my work that I think it's relevant but at the same time, I don't want, I almost don't want anything front ended when people engage with my work like ideally people, it's the, you know, it's the thing somebody walks in a gallery, ideally somebody walks into a gallery, looks at my work, gets an initial response, and then, you know, maybe reads the plaque next to it, maybe reads the bio about me that gives them another layer. So they're all just layers that kind of shape the way people might interpret my work or, or the exhibition or anything else or what I've said or, and you know, if you're the kind of person who really does want a front end that and go into with kind of like, oh, I've got an opinion and then maybe my opinion will change from that work.

Daniel: I mean, that's fine as well. That's kind of up to you but I, I think it's almost kind of interesting, what others choose to frame my work as or choose to focus on when talking about me or my work, because I think it says less about me and it says more about them, and it says more about the context that they think about my work or they come into it so I think I would get and I… and I am… I think I am also talking from a position of privilege because I haven't been shoehorned into one little box for most of the time. It's… I'm actually the one that's come in to kind of create environments in the exhibitions. I'm doing stuff and going like, “no, no, I'm, I'm disabled. We need to talk about that as part of it”. Like I have, rather than ignore it and push it aside and go, “no don't worry about that. Just treat me like one of you guys.” I've gone like, “no, no, this is really important to me and you guys need to be having this conversation.”

Daniel: You know, I went to another conference that was talking about, like, arts policy and all sorts of stuff, and it was at Parliament House, and I had to be at the back of the theatre. It was a nightmare getting there in the first place, and it was put together really last minute and all sorts of stuff. So I was at the back of the theater. I had to talk to a bunch of people to even get a microphone to try arrange it beforehand because it was really hard to comment. And I was like, there's a reason I'm at the back of the room, and the only way any of you knew I was here is now that I've got a microphone, you have to turn around to see me. It's like that this is such a visual representation of the way the arts has often treated the disabled community. If they're in the room at all that, I thought it was really relevant. So. Yeah. So I guess that, it's, it's that I don't really mind, but I think it's a really kind of big kind of question. I think it's really dependent.

Erin: This is a huge question as well and it's definitely related. Is your art political and if so, in which ways?

Daniel: I mean. It's really hard to say. I mean, I would, I would say other people would say my art's political. I would say not all my art's political, but it depends whether you feel that, in acknowledging that the… not only the, the physical actions that we as individuals take, the way we build our and the way we build our built environments, the way we construct our societies, the rules around them. But even just the way we view and engage other people has an active impact on them and their experience. If you think that's a political position, then yes, my work is political.

Erin: Mhm.

Daniel: But I would say I don't think I've… I don't think I've ever made work that is purely like for a visual aesthetic, which is to me the only work that's potentially not political. I would say if you think having a stance or an opinion is political, then my work is political.

Erin: Yeah.

Daniel: But at the same time. I often see my work as asking a question, or creating a space that there is a question and I'm not necessarily trying to say this is the right answer or that's the right answer. And that's part of what I was talking about, about I

don't think my work has a set meaning - it changes when somebody stands in front of it. that it's not that if you didn't get the exact, this exact thing, you're wrong because, uh, how do I know what you're bringing to it? It's… Here's what I'm bringing to it. What do you take from that? And what's… So you're never wrong, in your opinion, of my work. The things that I'm like.

Daniel: I don't know how you got that. And I was definitely not trying to say it, but you got it, so. Okay, that's interesting. If I don't want you to have that reaction, how do I change my work? So I never see it as like a failing or oh, well, you're just wrong. I might sometimes look at it and going, “I couldn't have planned for that.” And I don't think I could ever curtail that opinion, so sure okay, cool like, somebody might be offended by somebody in a wheelchair. I'm like, “okay, cool fine” I'm just, I'm not going to work around that but I, I… my work, I do think, sits in the idea of like it. You know, I, I was trained as a conceptual contemporary artist that my work has a meaning that it's creating behind it. It's not just an element on its own. It doesn't just sit out there in the ether, it's connected to the person who made it. It's connected to the people who view it. It's connected to the environment it's shown in and the work it's shown next to and that will probably change. Like that will change over time. Like as soon as like … give out, give somebody else has it work, it could be shown in like a different context and stuff like that. And then it could be political. You could argue your work was entirely apolitical, and then somebody shows it in… even just the creation of art. And this is probably getting pretty wanky, but art making art in and of itself and saying that has value is a political stance.

Erin: And so I really like I like how you flipped.

Daniel: Do we. It's...

Erin: Oh, sorry, I really enjoying how you question to ask Like, what would it even look like? What would it even mean to make art that's not political or anything that's not political? Yeah.

Daniel: I would say art that's not political is design to some degree, maybe, but that might be having a go at designers.

Erin: Yeah that's like a whole other conversation.

Daniel: Yeah, that's… that's a whole… that's a whole other thing. Yeah. Like, yeah I think I think arts, art is yeah. in and of itself like I said is, is political and that's fine. We shouldn't be.

Erin: So last of the set questions more or less how do you think we should define artistic or creative success?

Daniel: Okay. Uh, just before we move on that, I will quickly say that I do want to say sometimes my art is very political...

Erin: Yeah

Daniel: ...in the sense that I am intending to make a point. So that work that I made in the gallery that wasn't accessible, you know, putting a stamp on people's arms where it was a wheelchair guy with a circle and a cross around him that was a playful political statement. And, I will say I have described it for when I make political statements like that. I describe it as, often people can either they say like, you know, you use a, you know, use cotton wool approach or like an iron fist approach, like you smash someone over the head or you try to really gently bring them along to you, with you. And I describe sometimes my work when I make that kind of thing as, like a cotton fist. So I try to hit somebody with something, but the bruise doesn't, like, show up for a couple of days, so they feel like it's like, “oh, I'm being brought in. This is nice. I really like this” but then like, maybe 2 or 3 days, they're like, “oh, I'm the problem.” Or, you know, they, they realise there's this other level to it - folded into it anyway, so what was our what was the question?

Erin: I love that cotton fist. I'll be using that, if that's okay with you.

Daniel: Yeah. Go for it.

Erin: The other question is around success and how you think we should define artistic or how you define artistic creative success?

Daniel: Yeah. So this I mean, this kind of comes out from that idea of like, is art political again? And what I was saying, like making art itself, you know, can be considered political, especially when, you know, if you're talking about art that is funded by the public rather than private, then it is a political, you know, how much arts funding there is is a political choice, which we saw really, starkly when there was a few years ago that changed to create what, what is now Creative Australia and their funding. So yeah artistic success… I used again, I used to be really wanky and think that like, art had to have meaning and that art just for aesthetic value was, that that was designed that it's like if you're just making it to look pretty, then why are you doing it? If you're just making it for yourself like, why are you doing it? I'm still a little bit of the opinion, that I, I think making artwork for yourself is fine and I think it's really great. It's really healthy if other people like it, that's great and I don't know if you'll want to cut this from the interview, but it's just a quote that I really liked and it's from, it was from it was paraphrasing the that teacher I had that was from Prague and it was, make your work for your self is, is kind of like masturbating. Like it's great. It's healthy, but don't come on a canvas hanging on a wall and ask me to love you for it.

Daniel: Like, there's, there is, I think, a little bit of like and this idea that the artist is, the other side of this artist creating work, they should just create work from themselves. And it's like then people should just like it because they're saying so much about it and it's like, “no, no, I think you have to think about the environment you're creating art in”, and you should if you do just want to make up for yourself and then people like it, that's great, or people get really moved in it. But if you're actively making art and to engage with it and take something away from it. And either you get funding from a public body or, or, or are people paying you for it to display it then. And I think our frame like when talking about success, like in that context, what is success and how can you measure it? And I think again, I think it depends where you are in your practice. I think it's really important to acknowledge that that doesn't happen instantly, that the, the idea of an artistic genius being birthed you know, and, you know, at from three years old, you just knew they were going to be this amazing artist that was going to change this world. It's like forever art is been about like learning from each other and the world, and it's practice like it's an artistic practice that we get better at and we fail and we make mistakes.

Daniel: So I think, success… it… as far as the artistic community is concerned, is about creating pathways for people to both create, learn from and experience work that kind of like speaks to each other and reflects on the world. I always thought it was… People thought it was funny that… So my father's a physicist. Okay. And we live in Canberra because he, he, he taught at the A.N.U. He was head of quantum sciences at the A.N.U. for like the end of his career here and that's you know, that's part of the reason I always did science and stuff like that. So they always thought it was a bit odd. There's like, oh, he's a theoretical quantum physicist and I'm over here doing art. But they also knew I, you know, I was fairly intelligent and smart, and they're kind of like those two, they're like, those things seem really like disconnected. And I used to try to argue that, like, the things I liked about physics were a lot of the things I liked about art - is that you could ask these really big questions, and then you were trying to come up with answers. It's just in art often they're more like social questions and we're coming up with the answers ourselves, but we're never really settling on them. Whereas in physics, often they kind of eventually go up with, well, I actually think this is it. And then let's spend the next 50 years trying to actually prove if that's real or not, whereas in the arts, then somebody else is just going to ask a question and then another question, another question.

Daniel: But it's like I the kind of theoretical and creativity that was involved in both of them, I thought was actually kind of really comparable and really interesting and if you didn't have people asking those big questions, it, they're both, it's both that kind of feeling of like, the more what are we here for if like, not to ask these questions and engage with each other and kind of keep moving forwards. But I also do think now there's, uh, like, there's a space for just creating work that also just brings joy, to like, to each other and to other people. And whether that's like one other person who just really likes the work that you make, I think there's value in that. And or if it's bringing it to like tens of thousands of people who kind of love the work or are moved by it, like there's so, there's such a varied experience across the world that it makes sense that we have such a varied experience and reaction to art. So it's really hard to say like, this is art and this is what art should do, because, you know, there is people that stand in front of a Rothko and weep or, you know, weep with joy. And I've tried that. I've stood in front of a Rothko for five minutes and nothing and then there's other stuff that's, you know, like this really heavy, complex work or that seems really bland.

Daniel: But then you get into, like, the ideas and what they were thinking about that other people think is like a complete wank. But, but that to me, like I found amazingly interesting. And it, it led me to ask another question and ask another question. And that was something that I really like engaged in with works when they kind of had those elements. But still at the same time, I'll go through a gallery and like look at something for a second if it doesn't engage me straight away, like, yeah, I'm done, I'm fine. I don't feel like I need to give that time. Even if somebody says, you know, people have said, that's a famous artist and you really shouldn't. They do amazing work. It's like, well, they do, but it doesn't engage me. So to me, it's fine that they exist in a space and they contribute to the community that means that there's other work that may have been built off that, or just alongside it, or have no connection that I get to engage with and love and experience.

Erin: Yeah.

Daniel: So again, I don't know if that actually says, you know, how we should measure art or what success looks like, because I think it's so hard to narrow that down that it's success is that there's an artistic community where there is space for everyone, and we value that, even if it's not the thing that I like or that moves me because I know it has an impact on someone else, or it moves someone else.

Erin: Yeah. I love that. We've come to the end of the, set questions. But speaking of big questions, you were talking about that being something that connects physics and art. The last little bit is for me to ask you if there's anything I haven't asked you that you'd like to touch on before we wrap up.

Daniel: I don't think so… I mean, it's there's, there's lots of things to talk about in the arts. Then there's lots of things that I think are important. And it's, it really depends because it's like I said, it's everything from like discussions around what, what… how our society more broadly responds to people with disability and supports them and stuff to then be an enabling people to go into kind of Disability Arts. It's the way we look at disability and what that means for the way we look at Disability Art or respond to it. there's questions about like, like what we were talking about, like, what is art? What is design? Where does like visual arts versus performance art sit? Where does… I think

there's a lot of questions we need to ask ourselves as well, like within the Disability Arts community.

Erin: Mhm.

Daniel: There's so much tension between like where like one individual's access needs crosses over with another person's access needs or what's, what's the tension between artistic, creativity or independence versus the like, uh, the needs of access for an individual to engage with that work? Is it okay to make work that certain people can't engage with, like that? I think there's bigger questions there that, that the community ourselves hasn't really necessarily touched on.

Erin: Yeah.

Daniel: But there is still that then need to, like, present ourselves as not a homogenous group, but with like a certain level of direction and agreement to be able to have any change be made in society more broadly, that we're always just like, well, we can't have a go at anyone in the Disability Arts community because then it looks like we're in-fighting.

Daniel: And then what does that mean for when we're trying to ask for stuff outside the Disability Arts community? So it's kind of a question, I think. I think maybe the only thing you know, I'll leave it on is whether it's the arts or it's, like disability. And being an inclusive society, I think, broadly speaking, I've always framed it as like it's a value judgment. People, people often say like, oh, well, we, you know, we just can't because of X. Or it was… it's just a bit too difficult to do that or it would mean we can't do XYZ or, you know, well, we wouldn't even exist if we had to do all this stuff to make it accessible because it would cost so much money. But ultimately it's a value of judgement, whether it's an individual making a decision, an organisation or us as like the Australian society. It's like, what do we value? What do we think is important and where are we going to put our time, effort and money towards? Because you could, you could have a gallery's at a half the size but more inclusive. You could… you could put more funding towards the arts and less to the military, like it's… they're all values that you could charge everyone more taxes like that, to make arts that's not necessarily going to appeal to everyone. Or

you can put it towards a football team that also creates inclusion and it makes people feel engaged.

Daniel: You can put it towards the Paralympics that make people feel included, engaged and supported. So it is always going to be a value judgement. And I think, I think the way we think about ourselves - again, I'm talking about society more broadly, like Australian society, you know, not just the Disability Arts community, doesn't necessarily align, always align with the decisions that we have made. And sometimes that's not through people's own fault, but just kind of a lack of knowledge and awareness and on the impact making other decisions might have. But it's also a problem that I don't know how to solve other than talking to people, which is what I have tried to do either in like things like this or in my work, and that's another space that I think, I guess it's a chicken and egg. The more uh, the more exposure that's out there - it's, it's one of the things that has the potential to change people and change people's minds at like a core level, so that maybe not in tomorrow or the next election or whatever, but over time, that exposure and that engagement will lead people to be more inclusive and more engaged and just see things as like, that is something we should value, because it's maybe it's something they value in their own personal life, or they acknowledge the experience and joy that it's brought them, and realise that if we can kind of engage that with others, that they deserve that.

Erin: Thank you so much…. that really rich and yeah deep insight.