

Disability Arts History Australia

Archivist Report

October 2025

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Country throughout Australia.

We acknowledge that these lands have always been places of storytelling, and artistic and cultural expression.

We pay respect to Elders past, present, and emerging.

Acknowledgement of Disability Community

We acknowledge the labour, advocacy, and artistry of the artists and allies who have worked for more than fifty years to make the arts, media, and cultural industries more inclusive for the d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent community.

We thank you for dealing with discriminatory systems and institutions, including systemic ableism, lack of accessible training, production, presentation, and exhibition opportunities, and lack of understanding of our crip time, space and methods.

We hope to follow your example, making and holding space to support the practice and the pride of future generations.

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The Project

Disability Arts History Australia is an online archive that documents the transformative impact of artists, arts organisations, and allies working in Disability Arts in Australia from the 1970s to the 2020s.

It is the outcome of a research project funded by the Australian Research Council, Creative Australia, Queensland University of Technology's Centre for Justice, and Curtin University's Centre for Technology and Culture, in partnership with the University of Melbourne and Arts Access Victoria.



d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent Australians

d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people in Australia live with significant barriers to education, employment, and self-expression.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2022 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers indicates 33% of Disabled people over 15 have completed Secondary School (compared to 66% of the general population), 17% have a Bachelors degree (compared to 35% of the general population), and 47% are employed (compared to 80% of the general population).

The statistics can be significantly worse for some cohorts – for example, only 5% of Autistic Australians have a Bachelors, and unemployment rate for Autistic people is 18% (compared to 10% for other Disabled people, and 3% for Australians generally, who are seeking work) – including Disabled Australians who also identify intersectionally with other historically marginalised identities.

Disabled Australians face bias, barriers, and discrimination in all spheres of social life – discussed at length in Australia’s recent Royal Commission on Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation – and morbidity, mortality, and health outcomes for Disabled Australians are also worse than for other Australians.

Eligibility for support to navigate these barriers – including the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF), National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and Disability Support Pension (DSP) – is variable amongst d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent Australians.

d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent Australians in the arts

In their continued reporting on arts employment and economics in Australia, David Throsby and Katya Petetskaya (2023) demonstrate that – though 16% of artists identify as Disabled in 2023 (compared to 9% in 2017) – experience for these artists is still “significantly worse on every indicator.”

In our project, and in prior reporting from both Creative Australia and Screen Australia, d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent Australians report

- Under- and mis-representation across artforms
- Inconsistent access to service provision, including Disability Arts/Arts and Disability peak bodies
- Need for investment to address barriers to access – including attitudinal, systemic, processual, digital, and physical barriers
- Need for investment in long-term, sustainable, Disability specific funding and resources to support career development and sustainability
- Need for allyship – awareness, cultural competency, cultural safety
- Specific barriers for First Nations, LGBTIQ+, Regional artists

Documenting our histories

Libraries, archives, and collections in mainstream cultural institutions are not value neutral. The materials collected – or not collected – are influenced by power holders, who make decisions about which voices, works, and histories are worth collecting and displaying and why.

This can result specific groups being over-, under-, and/or mis- represented in arts review and criticism, as well as libraries, archives, and mainstream collecting institutions.

The history of Disability Arts in Australia has not historically been well documented in mainstream libraries, archives, collections, and data sets, or the data sets associated with specific art forms and arts communities.

For example

- A search of the terms d/Deaf and Disability in >30,000 records in Design & Art Australia Online (DAAO) (2010-Date, <https://www.daaao.org.au/>), identifies
 - 17 items associated with the term Deaf – at least 2 artists are identified as d/Deaf in other sources, in other cases the word is unrelated or an acronym for something else (e.g. DEAF 96 = Dutch Electronic Art Festival)
 - 30 items associated with the term Disability – again, at least 4 are identified in other sources, though others are identified with art therapy with Disabled and First Nations people
- A search of the terms d/Deaf and Disability in over 100 records in Queer Australian Arts (2023-Date) identifies
 - one artist, who is identified as disabled in other sources
 - one artwork, though whether the artists using the title d/Deaf is d/Deaf is not stated
- Search for terms 'Autism' and 'Neurodivergent' identify no items in either database.

The impact of under- and/or mis-representation

- Both 'forgetting' and 'denial' of lived experience
- Lack of
 - control over our own social, cultural, and political representation
 - 'beyond anecdotal' evidence of
 - social, cultural, and political realities
 - impact of issues of key concern – including concerns about who has power, control, and choice
 - efforts to address diversity, equity, inclusion
 - efforts and approaches that have or have not worked to create change over time
 - consensus (or conflict) around what still needs work
- Compounded over time
 - Lack of support, knowledge, training to curate our own history creates more under- and/or mis-representation over time
 - retroactively collecting, collating, and disseminating work histories to address this becomes more difficult over time

Addressing impact of under- and/or mis-representation

There have been efforts by members of the community to address our underrepresentation, in Australia, and internationally, for example

- Iain McIntyre (2023) has created a People With Disability Australian Protest Timeline, supported by the Commons Library's Making Advocacy Accessible project, <https://commonslibrary.org/people-with-disability-australian-protest-timeline/>
- Shape Arts (2018-Date) has published the National Disability Arts Collection and Archive (NDACA), with over 3,500 items including oral histories, photographs, and other documents available, thanks to support from Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts

Council England, and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <https://www.the-ndaca.org/collection/>

- Bree Hadley, Morgan Batch, Nimal Wijesiri, and Donna McDonald (2016-Date) have added over 1500 records to the AusStage Australian Live Performance database, with support of 2 Australian Research Council Linkage, Infrastructure, and Equipment (LIEF) Grants, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au>
- Some long running companies, like Back to Back Theatre, www.backtobacktheatre.com, have received digital archive projects documenting work on their website

however, the Australian data sets are subject, artform, or arts organisation specific.

Developing a Disability Arts archival data set

Disability Arts in Australia has developed alongside activism, and reform in legislation, policy, and service provision, over the last five decades.

It has played a critical role in asserting our right to self-expression, participation, employment, and economic opportunity.

In initiating the Disability Arts History Australia project, we have learned that our under-representation is not – or, rather, not just – a result of lack of value attributed to our voices, work, and histories. It is certainly not lack of volume of Disability Arts / Arts and Disability Practice over the past decade.

The challenges involved in creating an archival data set of Disability Arts in Australia include

- our historical (and continued) underrepresentation
- our historical (and continued) education, employment, and economic Exclusion
- accessible Archiving

Historical under- and mis- representation

- We are most significantly underrepresented, and/or misrepresented by power holders, in extant data sets, data bases, archives and collections
- Work has not been collected, or has been categorised as ‘therapeutic’ and ‘community’ work, with minimal information captured
- Work has been using a range of different approaches to define and describe d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent identity over time, making it difficult to discover work, and differentiate work about/with/by Disabled people
- Some collecting institutions have started redacting or changing language used to describe work to minimise participation in problematic, pathologised, and deficit-based descriptions of Disability in the past – e.g. removing work using words such as ‘Deaf and Dumb’ or ‘Retarded’ or other terms no longer in use today
- Artists and arts organisations involved in Disability Arts / Arts and Disability
- May not have had capacity to create, distribute, and retain copies of Annual Reports, Programs, Promotions and other records
- May have large volumes of uncatalogued and undigitised materials in boxes in the office, or boxes donated to State Libraries

- May not have capacity to assist researchers to locate, sort, and prepare this material for cataloguing, digitisation, and dissemination
- May not have clarity over whether participants photographed or represented in material from decades prior were clear the content was to be published and consented to this
- May have to consider whether they should – in light of permissions, consent, and copyright considerations – consent to researchers collecting, digitising, and publicly disseminating materials
- Artists, arts organisations, and allies may choose not to consent to share materials for a range of reasons – from capacity, to concerns over Disability-led curatorship of site, concerns over accessibility of site, or our own crip space, time, and energy flows
- Difficulties compounded over time, as recollections and records become harder to trace – including through passing of early leaders, and unintentional destruction of documents e.g. mould, mildew, fire

Education, Employment, and Economic Exclusion

- We are the most excluded from education, employment, and economic opportunity
- We have – as a result of continued exclusion from education/employment – less access to grants and infrastructure to support the labour of creating, constructing, and maintaining a data set or database, including research funding
- We have less employment income to draw on to sustain ‘volunteer labour’ to create data sets, databases, and websites compared to other Australians
- We have more ‘disability administration’ – including managing medical, allied health, and engagement with government agencies, often described as a ‘job alongside the job’ of managing typical life administration and employment – which constraints the time we have available compared to other Australians
- We have different physical, sensory, and cognitive abilities, which – depending on type of impairment – can severely impact the time, energy, and effort it takes us to do research in inaccessible physical and digital collections, enter data into inaccessible data collection software (e.g. Excel, CSV) and enter data into inaccessible data sharing software (e.g. Omeka)

Accessible Archiving

- We have – as a result of continued exclusion from education/employment – less d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people trained with the knowledge, skills, and resources required for tasks like categorisation, coding, creating data driven websites, and maintaining data driven websites
- We have greater difficulty accessing labour – from within our community, or allies – to maintain data sets and database sites after funded period, including
- Identifying, collecting, categorising, and digitising (additional) materials
- Preparing data sets for use – whether on our site, or other sites – e.g. Excel, CSV, JSON, coding of sites into Creative Commons or bespoke HTML platforms
- Hosting, maintaining, and updating searchable data sets and sites
- Researching and writing tailored reports, training packages, and other content
- Addressing questions from stakeholders about the data set and site
- We have greater difficulty aligning data sets and data sites with ‘interoperability’ plans to support transfer of data and documents between sites, because the

principles, software, and systems determined by other archivists without us do not provide the physical, sensory, and or cognitive accessibility we require – as authors, and as audiences

- We thus do not have as many people ready to take up legacy management of data sets and data sites as other cohorts without these barriers

Our Methods

Approaches

This research project has used

- Interviews with artists and allies, capturing lived experience and sectoral memory
- Library and web searches to identify public records, media, and organisational histories
- Digitisation of archival records held individuals, companies, and libraries, including to date uncatalogued materials
- Coding of content by
 - **Location** – States, National
 - **Art form** - 'Theatre and Performance', 'Dance', 'Music', 'Visual Arts and Galleries', 'Craft and Textiles', 'Film and New Media', 'Digital Arts', 'Creative Writing', 'Multi Arts', and 'Festivals'
 - **Approach** - 'Community Arts', 'Outsider Arts', 'Arts Therapy', and 'Regional Arts'
 - **Community** – 'First Nations Arts & Artists', 'CALD Arts & Artists', 'LGBTIQA+ Arts & Artists', 'd/Deaf Arts & Artists', 'Blind or Low Vision Arts & Artists', and 'Neurodivergent Arts & Artists'
 - **Content** – 'Grant', 'Award', 'Education and employment', 'Health and rehabilitation', 'Equality and non-discrimination', 'Access', 'Advocacy and awareness raising', 'Participation in public and political life' and 'Participation in cultural life,' categories adapted [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UNCRPD\)](#)

Results

- Collaborative development of
 - a timeline of key moments in social policy, arts policy, and arts practice
 - a list of relevant industry reports, books, and articles
 - curated artist, artform, and community histories
- **Co-design of principles for a website** sharing archival documents, interviews, and other resources
- Creation of website
- Steering Committee, and End User representative, testing of the website for navigability

The result is the www.disabilityartshistoryaustralia.net website, created in collaboration with over 100 d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists and allies.

This website does not – and cannot – present a complete history of all artists, arts organisations, and events over the last 50 years.

It does provide a platform to assist artists, producers, policy makers, researchers, and students to understand the history, and the work still required to create a more inclusive industry.

Our Website

At launch, in 2025, the the www.disabilityartshistoryaustralia.net 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
- 📅 **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

Implications for Future Archival Practices

Participants in our research frequently emphasised the need to transform broken education, employment, and social systems, not just allow us access to these systems, on non- d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people's terms.

In terms of increasing our leadership and control over our representation in libraries, archives, collecting institutions, and other data sets, the learnings from this project with implications for future practice include –


- Labour
 - knowledge, skills, and training to do the work
 - payment for members of Australia's most economically excluded cohort to undertake work
- Accessibility
 - tools, software, and systems
 - for authors and for audiences
- Funding
 - for collecting, collating, coding, uploading, and maintaining (additional materials in) data set and site
 - for accessibility features that will always be required (for addition of content) – Auslan interpretation, Audio description, caption, etc.
- Commitment

- To ensuring Disability-led curatorship and community archiving of work related to d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people
- to set standards for language, description, and categorisation
- to set standards for Australian data sets/sites – including interoperability and transferability – that include physical, sensory, and cognitive access standards

Visit the Website

 Visit the Disability Arts History Australia website at:
<https://disabilityartshistoryaustralia.net>

- ✓ Browse to discover the rich history of Disability Arts in Australia over the last 50 years
- ✓ Learn about the early leaders in the field, current innovations, and future aspirations
- ✓ Search for artists and arts organisations to learn more about their work
- ✓ Create tailored reports, training programs, or public events about specific topics

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

Glossary

- **Mainstream Cultural Institutions:** Are established, and in Australia typically publicly subsidised, places that display art – libraries, museums, and archive.
- **Accessible:** Eliminating attitudinal, systemic, processual, physical and digital barriers to access for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people
- **Accessible Archive:** A data set of records, including online, which eliminates attitudinal, systemic, processual, physical and digital barriers to access for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people – as authors, and as audiences
- **Community Archiving:** An historically marginalised community leads the collection, curation, dissemination, and presentation of records of its own history
- **Interoperability:** The ability of different data sets, systems, and dissemination platforms to support transferal of document references and records from one to the other
- **Disability Administration:** The physical, psychological, and emotional labour and time required to manage medical appointments, engagement with health services, and government agencies that is a unique addition to day-to-day life administration for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people

- **National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS):** An Australian funding system that provides support workers, health professionals, and assistive technologies for Disabled people.
- **Employment Assistance Fund (EAF):** A government-funded program assists employers of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people to provide specialist support (e.g. Auslan interpretation) and assistive technology (e.g. mobility equipment)
- **Disability Support Pension (DSP):** An Australian government welfare/social support payment for people with mobility, sensory, and/or cognitive disabilities that limit capacity to work
- **Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability:** Australian inquiry into discrimination, harassment, and abuse of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people in education, employment, health, and social services, and the public sphere more generally.
- **Deficit-based language:** Describing d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people in terms of what they cannot do, rather than focusing on their strengths.
- **Disability-led practice:** Work that is governed, managed, and created by d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people.
- **Intersectionality:** The idea that multiple parts of a person's identity—like race, gender, sexuality, and disability—overlap and affect their experiences of privilege or disadvantage.
- **Arts and Disability:** Arts, media, and culture created by allies working with disabled artists.
- **Representation, Underrepresentation, Misrepresentation:** How a historically marginalized group is shown in the arts and media, and whether they are portrayed enough and in a way that feels authentic to the community.
- **Cultural Safety:** Spaces, relationships, and people that make you feel that your lived experience, identity, and culture are understood, welcomed, and valued.
- **Sustainable/Sustainability:** Having the physical, psychological, emotional, educational, and economic resources to support a liveable career and life.

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