

Disability Arts History Australia

Industry 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, lack of funding and resources, 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.

The Evolution of Disability Arts In Australia

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.

However, this history is not well documented, and developing an archival record now creates a number of challenges

- The terminology used to describe and define d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent identity as changed over time
- Arts, media, and cultural industries have challenged use of medical and deficit based language
- The work of Disabled artists has not always been collected in mainstream cultural institutions, libraries, and archives
- Artists and organisations have held materials uncatalogued and undigitised in boxes, in their offices, or in boxes donated to State libraries
- Artists, organisations, and library staff have limited capacity to assist researchers in locating, cataloguing, and digitising material that has been retained
- Arts organisations may not consent to digitise and share content if not certain persons photographed / referenced understood the document was to be published

The Method

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.

The 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

The Archival Research

1960s and Prior

- Arts and Disability / Disability Arts in institutional and medical contexts
- Activist calls for legislative and attitudinal change begin to influence arts practice.
- In 1952, Dr Eric Cunningham Dax, Chairman of the Mental Hygiene Authority in Melbourne, starts an arts therapy program (now evolved into Dax Collection)
- Presentation/publication of some work by Disabled artists – e.g. singer Marjorie Lawrence performs in wheelchair (1944), Alan Marshall publishes memoir *I Can Jump Puddles* (1955)

1970s

- UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disability (1975) influences thinking about arts in institutional settings, including legislation, policy, attitudes, and language
- Documentary/advocacy film production – e.g. film on experience of Deaf Australians by J.M. Lovett and the Deaf Film Society (1970)
- Arts Access Australian Theatre of the Deaf (1973), Arts Project Australia (1974), and Arts Access Society Victoria (1977) established
- Australia Council for the Arts funds therapeutic, community, and professional practice, including Theatre, Visual Arts, Community Arts, Jewellery Making, Braile Book of the Year
- Largely parallel to mainstream programs, even if in same venues

1980s

- Shift from medical to social models reframes arts as self-expression and professional opportunity.
- 1981 International Year of Persons with Disability a catalyst for festival activity
- Film Australia produced series on lives of Disabled Australians (1981)
- Accessible Arts (1983), Accessible Arts (1986), DADAA (WA) (1986), Back to Back Theatre (1987), established, receive funding to support participation, practice, and career development
- Early symposia, guidelines, and toolkits to support practice – e.g. Accessible Arts 'Create Ability' (1989)

1990s

- In 1991, Dr Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu and his band Yothu Yindi have a mainstream hit with 'Treaty'
- Restless Dance Theatre (1991), No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability (1994), Tutti Arts (1997), Weave Movement Theatre (1997), Fusion Theatre (1997), Access2Arts (1998 – *formerly Arts Access SA and Arts in Action*), Incite Arts (1998 – *formerly Alice Springs Youth Arts Group*), Salubrious Productions (1999), and Disability and Disadvantage in the Arts (DADAA) National Network (1998 – *subsequently Arts Access Australia from 2004*) established
- TV Drama series 'House Gang' featuring actors with Intellectual disabilities, supported by Accessible Arts, airs (1996)
- Ian Cooper holds first National Braille Music Camp (1996)

- Arts in Action launches biennial High Beam Festival (1998) showcasing local, national, international work
- First Australia Council research report (1995), further symposia, guidelines, and toolkits

2000s

- National Arts & Disability Strategy (2009) launched
- Continued Department of Arts and Australia Council research, e.g. Arts and Disability in Australia: Research Overview (2018)
- Arts Activated Conference (2007-2021)
- New companies emerge across artforms, increased collaboration with mainstream artists, companies, and institutions
- Studio A (2000), Rawcus (2000), Second Echo Ensemble (2005), Ever After Theatre Company (2006), Rollercoaster Theatre Company (2007), Blue Roo Theatre Company (2009), etc. established
- The Other Film Festival (2004), Focus on Ability Film Festival (2009), Sit Down Shut Up & Watch! (2010) festivals launched
- Writers, e.g. Gayle Kennedy's life writing in *Me, Antman, and Fleabag* (2007) recognised

2010s

- NDIS rollout (2013 to 2020), shift from block funding to individual funding
- Australia Council announces first dedicated funding for Disabled artists (2014)
- Meeting Place Arts & Disability Forum (2012-2024)
- Undercover Artist Festival (2015), Flow Festival (2017) launched
- Sprung!! Integrated Dance Theatre (2012), Indelability Arts (2015), Aha Ensemble (2015), NuunaRon (2018 – First People's Disability Network), established
- Sydney Film Festival launches ScreenAbility program (2017)

2020s

- Music – e.g. Off the List Records (2020)
- Creative Writing – e.g. Growing Up Disabled in Australia ed. Carly Findlay, with 50 d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent authors (2021)
- Festivals – e.g. Alter State launched by Arts Access Victoria and Arts Centre Melbourne (2023)
- ABC, SBS, drama and documentary screen production, e.g. What Does Australia Really Think About... Disability? (2021), Hardball (2024), Headliners (2024), Austin (2024)
- Continued Department of the Arts and Creative Australia research, policy, and funding, e.g. Towards Equity: A Research Overview of Diversity in Australia's Arts and Cultural Sector (2022), Building Strong Foundations: Research on Arts and Disability Needs and Opportunities (2024), Equity: The Arts and Disability Associated Plan (2024)

The Interviews – Key Insights

In the interviews, artists and allies discuss program initiatives that have created tools, techniques, and frameworks to support safe, inclusive practice, in which artists can challenge negative perceptions, advocate for change, and build pride.

There is, artists and allies say, continued need to

1. Challenge

- **Deficit-based approaches** to access, equity, and diversity.
- **Under- and mis- representation** of d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent people
- **Assumptions about the content, quality, and marketability of work** by d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent people.
- **Attitudinal, systemic, physical, digital, and procedural barriers** that limit opportunities for education, employment, and career advancement –
 - The labour of advocacy and awareness-raising
 - Unclear systems for education, employment, and grant applications
 - Inaccessible events, venues, and touring platforms
 - Extreme work pace and exclusionary definitions of quality, market appeal, and success
 - The incorporation of accessibility as an afterthought, rather than from the outset in the design, development, and evaluation of programs

2. Champion and create –

- **Disability-led practice**
- Opportunities for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists to **teach, mentor, and lead the development of the work**
- **Intergenerational** connection, collaboration, and knowledge exchange
- **Culturally safe, inclusive, and supportive work environments**
- **Inclusion in local, national, and international events**, festivals, and exhibition programs.

3. Value d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists' –

- **Intersectionality**
- **Resilience, adaptability, and strength**
- Distinct, **non-linear, and transdisciplinary career paths**
- Expanded **definitions of career success**—including major collaborations, commissions, paid work, awards, and other forms of recognition
- **Creative excellence**

Address

- The impact of new legislation, policy, and systems over time
- **inconsistency** in who can access support, when, where, and how
- the **physical, psychological, and administrative labour** required to support
- the way non-sustainable practice can **disrupt career trajectories**
- the need for **dedicated, reliable, long-term funding** to support sustainable career development paths

Recommendations

Health & Rehabilitation

- Mentors are important in creating inclusive work models, and navigating identity, disclosure, and adaptation in response to social barriers / our own shifting capacity

Equity & Non-Discrimination

- Disability-led teaching, mentorship, collaboration, and leadership are critical to address barriers, create opportunities, and support non-linear and transdisciplinary career paths

Education & Employment

- Attitudinal, systemic, physical, digital, and procedural barriers – including demanding pace of work, confusing processes, bias towards perceived-to-be-marketable work – are barriers
- d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists adaptability and alternative paths to success / alternative definitions of success should be recognised

Access

- Diversity and intersectionality of the Disability Arts community
- Move from therapeutic, to community, to professional practice
- Rights-based approach to address under- and mis- representation, low expectations, limited access, compulsion to pass
- Disability-led practice, mentorship, collaboration, and intergenerational exchange knowledge exchange to expand technique, skill, and definitions of success, create cultural safe more models and spaces

Advocacy and Awareness Raising

- A rights-based approach, that avoids tokenism, and advocates for authentic, inclusive, Disability-led approaches and collaborations to address barriers

Participation in Public and Political Life

- d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists' adaptations, aesthetic innovations, and alternative training, production and career pathways – whether producing work related to disability identity or not – are a strength, and a source of pride
- Strategic choices about identity, positioning, disclosure depending on context

Participation in Cultural Life

- Mentorship, multidisciplinary engagement, and community are critical to shaping artists' creative identity, aesthetics, and careers, including career sustainability

Recommendations

- Health & Rehabilitation

- Support d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists in navigating identity and disclosure, including change over time.
- Reject deficit-based medical models, and advocate for social and rights-based models.
- Recognise d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists' resilience in adapting art forms, methods, and careers in response to attitudinal, physical, digital, and procedural barriers, physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive capacity, and change in capacity over time.
- Remove attitudinal, systemic, physical, digital, and processual barriers to access – including barriers for artists with learning, cognitive, and sensory difference – and address the pressure, expectations, and pace of the industry.
- Build access into work plans from the start, not as an add on after work is complete
- Create inclusive, supportive, enabling environments to make work.
- Enable intergenerational guidance, mentorship, leadership, collaboration, and knowledge exchange to support Disabled artists in shaping and sustaining their professional practice, artistry, and career.

Recommendations

- Equity & Non-Discrimination

- Recognise and support lifelong aspirations to engage in education, employment, and creativity.
- Acknowledge that d/Deafness, Disability, and Neurodiversity shape opportunities, approaches, art produced, leadership, and advocacy.
- Support non-linear progression of careers, including movement between multiple artforms, roles, and work contexts.
- Recognise d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists' resilience in adapting art forms, methods, and careers in response to attitudinal, physical, digital, and procedural barriers, physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive capacity, and change in capacity over time.
- Value and invest in Disability-led practice – artists with lived experience teaching, mentoring, and leading the language, priorities, and programming of the work – industry recognition of value of this work
- Recognise the Disability community relationships and collaborations that serve as catalysts for career advancement

Recommendations

- Advocacy and Awareness Raising

- Acknowledge the historical pressure to conceal disability, and the continued challenge of navigating disclosure, visibility, and identity in an industry that sees disability as both a problem and a marketable product.
- Recognise the contribution, legacy, and achievements of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists in creating change from the 1970s forwards, including a shift from therapeutic to professional framing of Disability Arts practice.
- Support efforts to resist, challenge, and change historically limiting representations of Disabled people – labels, stereotypes, tokenism, and 'inspiration porn' narratives.
- Address the under- and mis-representation of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists.
- Recognise and reflect the diversity and intersectionality of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists, including First Nations, BIPOC, and LGBTIQ+ Disabled artists.
- Remove attitudinal, systemic, physical, digital, and processual barriers to access – including barriers for artists with learning, cognitive, and sensory difference – and address the pressure, expectations, and pace of the industry.
- Challenge assumptions about content, quality, and audience for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists' work, and act to change these perceptions.
- Educate industry and audiences about the disability rights movement, and Australia's position relative to other countries, including equal education, employment, and economic opportunity, and equal pay.
- Invest in training pathways, and work opportunities for both emerging and established artists – residencies, commissions, and programming to support career advancement
- Ensure adequate, equitable, and sustained funding for long-term participation, profile, and reach as a priority to support sustainable career pathways.

- Address ‘tokenistic’ engagement with d/Deaf, Disabled, Neurodivergent artists as a ‘marketable’ area of practice without really addressing issues for artists
- Value and invest in Disability-led practice – artists with lived experience teaching, mentoring, and leading the language, priorities, and programming of the work – industry recognition of value of this work
- Enable intergenerational guidance, mentorship, leadership, collaboration, and knowledge exchange to support Disabled artists in shaping and sustaining their professional practice, artistry, and career.

Recommendations

- Access

- Acknowledge the historical pressure to conceal disability, and the continued challenge of navigating disclosure, visibility, and identity in an industry that sees disability as both a problem and a marketable product.
- Address the physical, psychological, and emotional impact of any requirement to minimise identity and needs in professional environments – burn out
- Recognise the contribution, legacy, and achievements of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists in creating change from the 1970s forwards, including a shift from therapeutic to professional framing of Disability Arts practice.
- Respect that work of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists may or may not provide a personal, authentic, or political expression of lived experience, to push for sector, system, and attitude change – it does not always need to do this.
- Support efforts to resist, challenge, and change historically limiting representations of Disabled people – labels, stereotypes, tokenism, and ‘inspiration porn’ narratives.
- Address the under- and mis-representation of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists.
- Recognise and reflect the diversity and intersectionality of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists, including First Nations, BIPOC, and LGBTIQ+ Disabled artists.
- Reject deficit-based medical models, and advocate for social and rights-based models.
- Uphold access – including legal requirements for access – as a right, required for equity/equality, not an advantage or cheating in a competitive industry.
- Acknowledge diverse motivations, approaches, and contexts for Disability Arts practices – therapeutic, community, political, mainstream professional practice
- Confront inequality in/within the Disability arts community, including preferential treatment based on perceived level of disability, internal hierarchy, and/or lateral violence.
- Remove attitudinal, systemic, physical, digital, and processual barriers to access – including barriers for artists with learning, cognitive, and sensory difference – and address the pressure, expectations, and pace of the industry.
- Address the disproportionate expectations for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists and leaders
- Challenge assumptions about content, quality, and audience for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists’ work, and act to change these perceptions.
- Address systemic change and equality – e.g. impact of shift to NDIS model on employment, as both an enabler, and a source of inequity/administrative burden.

- Support later entry into industry, and later progression from early to established career stages.
- Value broader understandings technique, skill, success in institutions and the industry
- Build access into work plans from the start, not as an add on after work is complete
- Recognise the importance of culturally safe space, which welcomes, affirms, fosters trust, confidence, and creativity, in incubating high quality work.
- Enable intergenerational guidance, mentorship, leadership, collaboration, and knowledge exchange to support Disabled artists in shaping and sustaining their professional practice, artistry, and career.
- Value and invest in Disability-led practice – artists with lived experience teaching, mentoring, and leading the language, priorities, and programming of the work – industry recognition of value of this work
- Support Disability-led review, criticism, and evaluation.
- Expand mainstream coverage of Disability Arts, and d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists' work.
- Support engagement with a range of audiences to break down barriers, build understanding, broaden opportunities
- Share recorded histories, tools, techniques, frameworks, models, and resources to extend project value beyond initial iteration – including simple, low cost approaches to improving access
- Ensure adequate, equitable, and sustained funding for long-term participation, profile, and reach as a priority to support sustainable career pathways.
- Educate industry and audiences about the disability rights movement, and Australia's position relative to other countries, including equal education, employment, and economic opportunity, and equal pay.
- Invest in training pathways, and work opportunities for both emerging and established artists – residencies, commissions, and programming to support career advancement
- Use collaborations – long term work with d/Deaf, Disabled and/or neurodivergent artists as peers, allies, and kin – to shift perceptions, and make inclusive practice a standard for the industry
- Strong local, national, and international arts/disability arts community in which we feel we belong and are welcome, including through arts events and festivals
- Recognise the value of cross-artform and cross-cultural collaboration to create platforms for Disabled artists

Recommendations

- Education & Employment

- Develop and implement coordinated cultural and organisational policy for equitable participation.
- Remove attitudinal, systemic, physical, digital, and processual barriers to access – including barriers for artists with learning, cognitive, and sensory difference – and address the pressure, expectations, and pace of the industry.
- Eliminate attitudinal, physical, procedural, and digital barriers to accessing venues, events, and organisational systems.
- Address barriers to touring to maximise profile and impact – including difficulty securing venues, high remount costs, absence of strategic touring frameworks,

systemic bias toward proven/marketable work, and requirement for broader scale or intensive touring.

- Challenge assumptions about content, quality, and audience for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists' work, and act to change these perceptions.
- Dismantle gatekeeping – including confusing or unclear systems, processes, and preferences in training, employment, and grants.
- Address systemic change and equality – e.g. impact of shift to NDIS model on employment, as both an enabler, and a source of inequity/administrative burden.
- Recognise d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists' resilience in adapting art forms, methods, and careers in response to attitudinal, physical, digital, and procedural barriers, physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive capacity, and change in capacity over time.
- Support non-linear progression of careers, including movement between multiple artforms, roles, and work contexts.
- Economic considerations shaping sustainability of artistic career – chronic precarity funding/resourcing, reliance on short-term/project grants, lack/lack of consistent operational funding, high competition with non-Disabled artists and organisations, impact of loss of funding/resourcing on advancement
- Respond to economic considerations shaping sustainability of artistic careers – including chronic precarity in funding/resourcing, reliance on short-term/project grants, lack of consistent operational funding, high competition with non-Disabled artists and organisations, and the impact of loss of funding/resourcing on advancement.
- Ensure adequate, equitable, and sustained funding for long-term participation, profile, and reach as a priority to support sustainable career pathways.
- Establish and maintain dedicated disability arts funding, resources, and infrastructure – including funding schemes, sustained position and organisational funding, sustainable state/national disability arts organisations, continued availability of accessible studios/residencies, national disability arts festivals/events, and coordinated touring networks.
- Recognise paid work, commissions, mentorships, appointments, first sales, international festival/exhibition selection, and major collaborations as key milestones of success.
- Expand program eligibility.
- Expand definitions of success
- Recognise the importance of culturally safe space, which welcomes, affirms, fosters trust, confidence, and creativity, in incubating high quality work.

Recommendations

- Participation in Public and Political Life

- Recognise the long labour required to create meaningful change, from participation, to awareness, to advocating for equal rights to employment.
- Acknowledge the historical pressure to conceal disability, and the continued challenge of navigating disclosure, visibility, and identity in an industry that sees disability as both a problem and a marketable product.
- Address the physical, psychological, and emotional impact of any requirement to minimise identity and needs in professional environments – burn out

- Support efforts to resist, challenge, and change historically limiting representations of Disabled people – labels, stereotypes, tokenism, and ‘inspiration porn’ narratives.
- Address the under- and mis-representation of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists.
- Remove attitudinal, systemic, physical, digital, and processual barriers to access – including barriers for artists with learning, cognitive, and sensory difference – and address the pressure, expectations, and pace of the industry.
- Challenge assumptions about content, quality, and audience for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists’ work, and act to change these perceptions.
- Address systemic change and equality – e.g. impact of shift to NDIS model on employment, as both an enabler, and a source of inequity/administrative burden.
- Reject deficit-based medical models, and advocate for social and rights-based models.
- Uphold access – including legal requirements for access – as a right, required for equity/equality, not an advantage or cheating in a competitive industry.
- Understand the relationship between art, identity, and politics – often inseparable.
- Recognise that the lived experience of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people – and the presentation of this experience in art – is inherently political.
- Recognise and reflect the diversity and intersectionality of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists, including First Nations, BIPOC, and LGBTIQ+ Disabled artists.
- Address different experiences of privilege, non-privilege, bias, and discrimination.
- Confront inequality in/within the Disability arts community, including preferential treatment based on perceived level of disability, internal hierarchy, and/or lateral violence.
- Recognise that disclosure of (intersecting) identity in Disability Arts is inherently political, and that casting, programming, and exhibiting work by Disabled people can challenge stigma, change perceptions, address internalised ableism, and build pride.
- Support art making as a means to contribute to understanding, confidence, and pride in d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent identity, as well as professional opportunities.
- Value difference as an asset to and in artistry.
- Acknowledge d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people’s ability to adapt art methods, art forms, and career paths to work for their physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive reality as a strength – including adapting to changes over time.
- Support individual and organisational champions shaping approaches, and creating opportunities for others to succeed.
- Support non-linear progression of careers, including movement between multiple artforms, roles, and work contexts.
- Support later entry into industry, and later progression from early to established career stages.
- Educate industry and audiences about the disability rights movement, and Australia’s position relative to other countries, including equal education, employment, and economic opportunity, and equal pay.
- Invest in training pathways, and work opportunities for both emerging and established artists – residencies, commissions, and programming to support career advancement
- Expand program eligibility.

- Expand definitions of success
- Recognise the importance of culturally safe space, which welcomes, affirms, fosters trust, confidence, and creativity, in incubating high quality work.
- Value and invest in Disability-led practice – artists with lived experience teaching, mentoring, and leading the language, priorities, and programming of the work – industry recognition of value of this work
- Enable intergenerational guidance, mentorship, leadership, collaboration, and knowledge exchange to support Disabled artists in shaping and sustaining their professional practice, artistry, and career.
- Share recorded histories, tools, techniques, frameworks, models, and resources to extend project value beyond initial iteration – including simple, low cost approaches to improving access
- Respect that work of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists may or may not provide a personal, authentic, or political expression of lived experience, to push for sector, system, and attitude change – it does not always need to do this.
- Support a balance of politics and artistry.
- Respect artist-first identification.
- Acknowledge the emotional labour of storytelling to shift attitudes, systems, and structures.
- Provide support for strategic decisions around identity and disclosure in different projects and for different audiences.
- Develop growing interest in producing, presenting, and exhibiting amongst mainstream cultural institutions.
- Develop broader recognition as a result of presentation in mainstream contexts.
- Support Disability-led review, criticism, and evaluation.
- Expand mainstream coverage of Disability Arts, and d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists' work.

Recommendations

- Participation in Cultural Life

- Recognise that the lived experience of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people – and the presentation of this experience in art – is inherently political.
- Support art making as a means to contribute to understanding, confidence, and pride in d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent identity, as well as professional opportunities.
- Support art making that challenges assumptions about d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people, critique lack of access in society, and in the arts, media, and cultural industries
- Respect that work of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists may or may not provide a personal, authentic, or political expression of lived experience, to push for sector, system, and attitude change – it does not always need to do this.
- Prioritise connection with mentors, organisations, and the Disability community as key to d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people's art making.
- Support the participation in multiple artforms – and in multidisciplinary forms – that is often central to d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people's art making

Key Insights

d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists have long worked across the sector, parallel to mainstream

- Work in Theatre, Performance, Dance, and Visual Arts has been happening since the 1970s, with a significant increase in volume since the 1990s.
- Work in film and television – particularly full length drama – was limited pre-2000, The Other Film Festival (2004-), Screenability (2017-), commissioning via ABC and other channels, has increased practice
- Music in Community Arts and Access Arts programs, and central to the work of organisations like (Tutti Arts 1997), increase in initiatives to promote the work of individual recording artists in 2020s – e.g. Off the List Records (2020), Headliners (2024)

Collaborative, ensemble, and social entrepreneurship models have supported Disabled artists –

- Long running companies/ensembles have
 - served as a training ground for artists who cannot access conventional education and employment paths
 - developed inclusive approaches training, creative development, and career development that support artists
 - provided platforms for artists to pursue transdisciplinary creative practice, new technologies, and other innovations
 - supported artists in the ensembles to pursue individual interests and projects, which ‘sprout’ into new work, subsequently commissioned by mainstream venues, companies, festivals
- There has, since the 2000s, been
 - Increase in co-programming with mainstream venues, companies, and festivals
 - work in non-traditional physical and digital incorporating Auslan, captions, audio descriptions, and/or relaxed conventions into work from the outset or into the aesthetics of the work

d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists still confront challenges

- Benefit from, but do not always feel visible in, current discourse about diversity in the arts, media, and cultural industries
- Access to engage remains varied depending on the art form
- Accessibility is viewed in limited terms – the full spectrum of systemic, attitudinal, physical, digital, processual barriers includes expectations around pace and output of work and definitions of successful work
- Access is not designed into all systems, processes, and resources from the outset, having to ask / ask for ad hoc arrangements is a lot of labour
- Inconsistency in funding, support structures, or burden of labour to secure support structures, disrupts career momentum and sustainability

Key proposed actions include

- Attitude change – strength and rights based approaches

- Transform expectations around pace of work, output, and definitions of ‘success’ in the industry, as well as addressing attitudinal, systemic, physical, digital, and processual barriers to access
- Acknowledge the strength, flexibility, and adaptability of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists as a valuable resource driving aesthetic and career innovation
- Acknowledge the Intersectionality of Disabled artists as a valuable resource driving aesthetic and career innovation
- Shift power from organisations to individual artists
- Support Disability-led approaches, models, and practices
- Support intergenerational knowledge exchange and collaboration to document, disseminate, share, and training in these approaches
- Support hubs to share innovations between artists, arts organisations, art forms, and geographical locations
- Support design for access into all systems, processes, and resources

Immediate Actions

This research demonstrates the work the field has done to develop Disability-led approaches that are methodologically rigorous, aesthetically innovative, and professionally sustainable.

The recurring theme throughout the interviews and archival research is the **effort** that has been—and continues to be—required to make the industry inclusive of d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists.

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Using the Website

USING THE WEBSITE

Discover the data for yourself

- ✓ 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

🖥️ 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

Glossary

- **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD):** International treaty that outlines rights Disabled people are entitled to, in relation to issues such as Health and rehabilitation, Equity and non-discrimination, Advocacy and awareness raising, Access, Education and employment, Participation in public and political life, Participation in cultural life, Independent living and living in the community, and so on
- **National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)** funds support workers, allied health workers, and assistive technologies for Disabled people in Australia
- **Deficit-based language:** Talking about what d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people cannot do, rather than our strengths, and what we can do
- **Disability-led practice:** Work that is governed, managed, and created by d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people
- **Intersectionality:** The multiple factors, such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability, that intersect as part of our identity, and impact our experience of privilege or non-privilege
- **Medical model of disability:** Defined disability as an individual problem caused by our physical, mental, or sensory impairments.
- **Social model of disability:** Defines disability as a social problem caused by attitudes, systems, processes, physical or digital infrastructure that does not welcome different bodyminds
- **Critical model of disability:** Addresses disability in terms of systemic injustice, power, and rights
- **Arts and Disability:** arts, media, and culture led by allies working with disabled artists
- **Representation, Underrepresentation, Misrepresentation:** Whether an historically marginalised group is portrayed, portrayed enough, or portrayed in the way this community feels is reasonable, in arts and media, including via the community's own self-expression
- **Tokenism:** Including a single, stereotyped representation of a person from an historically marginalised community, to appear inclusive, without actually providing diverse people opportunities for education, employment, self-expression
- **Inspiration Porn:** Defined, by Stella Young, as portraying Disabled people as amazing just because they have done things that are ordinary things for all humans

- **Gatekeeping:** Power holders controlling access to opportunities for education, employment, self-expression
- **Aesthetic Innovation:** New and/or cross-disciplinary approaches to the content, form, or audience engagement in the work of d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists
- **Cultural Safety:** Places, relationships, and people that make us feel that our lived experience, identity, and culture is understood, welcome, and valued
- **Disclosure:** Deciding to tell or not tell people that we identify as a member of a historically marginalised community, including if we feel safe to tell people this
- **Labour:** The physical, psychological, or emotional work required to manage barriers to access for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people, the fatigue this labour creates
- **Intergenerational guidance/mentorship/collaboration:** The sharing of knowledge, skills, and approaches to addressing barriers and making art amongst different generations of emerging, established, and senior artists
- **Non-linear career path:** A career that does not follow a straight line from education, to emerging, to established, and/or does not include the typical features of a career
- **Sustainable/Sustainability:** Having the physical, psychological, emotional, educational, economic, and environmental resource to support a liveable career, and a liveable life