

Plain English Summary

Disability Arts History Australia

Industry Report

October 2025

What is this Report about?

The Disability Arts History Australia (DAHA) website shares historical records, conversations, links to websites, and other information to help us learn about the history of Disability Arts in Australia from the 1970s to the 2020s.

This report talks about what we learned about Disability Arts in Australia while we were making this website. We learned a lot about what has happened in the past, what has helped make things easier for us, and what still needs to change now to make it easier for us to make art.

The report is for artists, arts workers, people who help us make art, arts organisations, people who give us money to make art, students and researchers.

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

What is in the Report?

Acknowledgements – Showing thanks to important people

The report begins with –

- **Acknowledgement of Country**, paying respect to Indigenous Australians, as the first artists on the lands on which this website was created.
- **Acknowledgement of the Disability Community**, thanking the d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists and supporters who have fought for a very long time to make it easier for us to make art.

Table of Contents – List of what is included in the report

This report includes –

- information about the project, and the project team

- a timeline of events in the history of Disability Arts in Australia
- a summary of main ideas in the historical records
- a summary of the main that came up in conversations with artists and supporters
- problems d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists experience
- ideas for improving the arts industry to make it easier for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists to take part the future
- a list words used in the report, which explains what the words mean

What does the Report talk about?

What is Disability Arts History Australia (DAHA)?

Disability Arts History Australia (DAHA) an 'archive' – a website, which shares a lot of conversations, old records, and other information with anyone who is interested in the arts

- It is a website that collects and shares information about the history of Disability Arts in Australia
- It includes historical records, conversations with artists, information about what happened when, links to interesting websites, and other information to help us learn about the history of Disability Arts in Australia from the 1970s to the 2020s.
- It was created by artists and supporters around Australia
- It was created with the support of funders and producing partners - the Australian Research Council, Creative Australia, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Curtin University, University of Melbourne, and Arts Access Victoria.

How did we build the Disability Arts History Australia website?

We used –

- Conversations with artists and allies
 - Searches in libraries and online to find records
 - Scanning old records to make them digital documents we could share online
 - Tagging conversations to make it easier to find out what location, artform, community, and topic they are about
 - Tagging with categories based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) – for example, tagging with terms like Access, Education and employment.
 - Working together with d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists at workshops to talk about how we should build the website
- to create the www.disabilityartshistoryaustralia.net website.

What does the Disability Arts History Australia website include?

At the start, in 2025, the website includes –

-  **1661 Archival Records:** Annual Reports, Programs, Promotional Flyers and Cards and more, available via URLs or PDFs.
-  **49 Interviews:** With d/Deaf, Disabled and Neurodivergent artists and supporters, with Auslan interpretation, captions, and transcripts for each video
-  **Search Tools:** To find 10,864 people, organisations, and works, 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 information
-  **Curated Histories:** Pages focused on specific themes such as Disability Arts Festivals or Government Policy, Strategy, and Funding

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

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

1970s

- Disability Arts / Arts and Disability is happening in many places, including schools, group homes, community buildings, and other places that are not always theatres, cinemas, or galleries
 - The first Access Arts group was the Arts Access Society Victoria. It started in 1974.
 - The first Disability Arts / Arts and Disability groups included
 - Australian Theatre of the Deaf (1974)
 - Arts Project Australia (1974)
 - These groups worked in performing arts (like theatre, music, and dance) and in visual arts (like painting, drawing, and sculpture).

1980s

- Campaigns started to ask for Access, Inclusion, and Representation.
 - People began early research, wrote early guides for inclusive practice, and held conferences to share ideas.
 - More Access Arts groups and Disability Arts / Arts and Disability groups were created
 - Access Arts (1983)
 - Back to Back Theatre (1987)

1990s

- Publication of Guides, Toolkits, and Resources
 - Australia Council releases first Disability Action Plan, fact books on practice in each state, guidelines for access for artists/audiences
 - Australia Council gives money for projects and organisations
 - More Access Arts groups and Disability Arts / Arts and Disability groups were created
 - Restless Dance (1991)
 - No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability (1994)
 - Weave Movement Theatre (1997)
 - Tutti Arts (1999)

2000s

- Policy – plans or rules for things that should happen – put into action
 - Australia Council publishes reports on Disability Arts / Arts & Disability practice, and studies of participation and work the arts
 - Cultural Ministers' Council publishes first National Arts & Disability Strategy (2009)
 - Victorian government publishes 'Picture This: Increasing the Cultural Participation of People with a Disability in Victoria' (2009)
 - More Disability Arts / Arts and Disability groups were created
 - Rawcus (2000)
 - Second Echo Ensemble (2005)

2010s

- Money for projects, artists, and arts organisations
 - More Disability Arts / Arts & Disability organisations
 - Arts Access Australia and DADAA publish information about difficulties for Disabled artists wanting work
 - 2013 draft of proposed Creative Australia National Cultural Policy criticised for talking about 'tolerating' d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists
 - People criticised Creative Australia National Cultural policy, written and shared for people to give feedback on in 2013. It talked about only 'tolerating' Disabled artist – only allowing us to be there – not being glad to have us and thankful for what we can do. People thought using the word 'tolerate' was negative and not respectful.
 - 2014-2019 Australia Council gives more money for d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists, publishes information about work, participation, and supporting Disabled people in the arts
 - 2015-2019 Australian Government thinks about if National Arts & Disability Strategy is working, asks about making a new policy
 - 2016-2023 Screen Australia publishes 'Seeing Ourselves' reports on Disability and Screen
 - 2018 South Australian Film Corporation publishes Disability Screen Strategy
 - More Disability Arts / Arts and Disability groups were created

- A_tistic (2014)
- Studio A (2015)
- Murmuration (2015)
- Indelability Arts (2015)

2020s

- People show thanks for the work d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists do, and our talents
 - Australian Government Office for the Arts publishes
 - new National Cultural Policy called 'Revive' (2023)
 - 'Equity: The Arts and Disability Associated Plan' (2024)
 - Creative Australia (previously Australia Council)
 - more studies of participation in the arts
 - a report on how easier or difficult it is for different groups to work in the arts, called 'Towards Equity' (2022)
 - a report on what Disabled artists said we need to make it easier to work in the arts, called 'Building on Strong Foundations' (2024)
 - Screen Australia starts a training program for Access Coordinators, who work on film sets, telling people how to make it easier for Disabled people to work on the film set(2023),
 - Queensland Government publishes Arts & Disability Plan (2024)
 - More Disability Arts / Arts and Disability groups were created
 - Off The List Records (2023)

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

In the conversations, artists and supporters talk about what we should do to make arts practice accessible, inclusive, and safe. They say we should –

1. Speak up about

- People who use language that focuses on what we cannot do
- People who do not let us tell our own stories, in the way we want, and we think is fair and true
- Problems and barriers make it difficult for d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent people to get training or jobs in the arts
 - We need to do more work to explain and ask for access
 - We find systems for education, jobs, and grants unclear and confusing
 - Events, venues, and tours that are often not accessible
 - People who think work place should be fast, and the amount of work we create should be a lot, to be "good" or "successful"
 - Accessibility that is added in too late, instead of being planned from the start

2. Support

- Art that is led by Disabled people, based on our experience, ideas, and culture
- Working with, helping, and being helped by other Disabled artists
- Older and younger artists sharing skills, techniques, and ideas
- Workplaces that are supportive, inclusive, and safe
- Inclusion in local, national, and international events, festivals, and exhibitions. Inclusion in all art forms – theatre, dance, music, visual art, film, writing, and multidisciplinary arts.

3. Respect d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists

- Respect artists who have two or three ‘intersecting’ identities – being Disabled and Indigenous, or Disabled and Queer, or both
- Show thanks for Disabled artists’ strength, and ability to come up with new ways of doing things, that work for us and are exciting for audiences
- Understand that Disabled artists careers may look different – they may not go in a straight line from student, to new artist, to expert artist
- Have different ways to define success – projects, paid work, awards
- Celebrate the high quality and creative art work Disabled people are making

Fix

- Changes in laws and systems that change the chances we have to learn, work, and make art
- Unequal access – some people get support, others do not get support
- The high amount of physical, emotional, and system-related work Disabled artists have to keep going with their arts work
- The need to always keep trying long-term and reliable support and money to keep making art

What are the main recommendations in the Report?

What are the main recommendations from artists and allies?

- **Health & Rehabilitation** - Understanding how to look after our bodies and minds, including therapy, training, and learning new skills that work for us as people living with a Disability
 - People who help us are important
 - People who help and support us can help us think of new ways of doing things that work better for us
 - People who help and support us can give us ideas about how we want to describe ourselves, what information we want to share about ourselves, as well as new ways of working that we like as we grow older and change over time

- **Equity & Non-Discrimination** - fairness, treating everyone with respect, giving everyone the same chances, and extra help to people who face barriers
 - Teaching, working with other Disabled people, helping and being helped by other Disabled people, helps fix problems that lead to Disabled people being left out of things
 - It helps come up with new ways of working, keeping going with work, and making art – which might be working all the time, or once in a while
- **Advocacy and Awareness Raising** - speaking up for ourselves and others, sharing information so more people know about problems and can take action
 - Listening to Disabled people, and respecting what they say, will help fix problems that Disabled people face
 - Listening to one Disabled person, just so we can say we did this, without really making any changes, is not enough
 - To fix problems, we need to work together, and put Disabled people in charge of what happens when we make art together
- **Access** - Making things easy to use, easy to understand, and open to everyone
 - There are many different types of Disabled artists, with different experiences, and different needs
 - Disabled people should be allowed to do art therapy, community arts, and professional arts where they are making money
 - To fix unfair ways of thinking about Disabled people, which can make it difficult to tell people about our Disability, and difficult to take part in things, we need to respect what Disabled people say
 - Disability-led practice, where older artists and younger artists are working with, helping, and getting help from each other is good, it helps us get better in our work
 - This also helps build safe and inclusive ways of working and spaces
- **Education & Employment** – learning how to work, getting work, doing we want to do at work
 - There are a lot of problems that make things hard for Disabled people – ways of thinking, ways of working, and physical and digital environments that are difficult for us
 - Another problem that needs to be fixed is what people think about how fast artists should work, how much art we should produce, and how we know if we are doing well and making good work that people want to see
 - Disabled people can come up with new ways of working, and everyone should show thanks for this, because it is a strength
- **Participation in Public and Political Life** - Being allowed to take part, be active in the community, share our thoughts, ideas, and opinions, and make decisions

- Disabled people have different ways of learning, working, and keeping on going with work, and different styles of art. This is good. It is one of our strengths.
- Disabled people make choices about how they want to describe their identity. They tell other people different amounts, depending on what the situation is.
- **Participation in Cultural Life** – participation in the arts, to tell our stories and share our culture in our own way, including theatre, dance, music, film, writing, painting, and festivals
 - Disabled artists think helping and being helped by other people, working across different artforms, and working with community are important
 - These shape artists' creative identity, style, and career – including how to keep careers going over time

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

- d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists have worked across the arts sector for a long time, alongside mainstream work
 - Theatre, Performance, Dance, and Visual Arts have been happening since the 1970s, with more work since the 1990s
 - Film and TV – especially full-length drama – was rare before 2000. The Other Film Festival (2004–), Screenability (2017–), and commissioning by ABC and others have helped grow this work
 - Music has been part of Community Arts and Access Arts programs, and is central to organisations like Tutti Arts (1997). In the 2020s, more projects support individual recording artists – like Off the List Records (2020), Headliners (2024)
- Collaborative, ensemble, and social enterprise models have supported Disabled artists
- Companies where people work together as a team to make art, and helping people as just as important as making money, have helped Disabled people
 - Companies that have been around for a long time, from the 1980s and 1990s, have
 - Helped artists who have not been allowed to take part in education or to work
 - Thought up ways to train, make art, and keep going with work, that are better for Disabled people
 - Given us the chance to try new art forms, new technologies, and new ideas
 - Given us the chance to do what we want to do, make new work, and present that work at venues and festivals
 - Since the 2000s, there has been a lot more
 - Working together with big and well known venues, companies, and festivals

- Working outside normal theatres and galleries – including work on screens and on websites – using Auslan, captions, audio description, and relaxed performance styles
- d/Deaf, Disabled, and/or Neurodivergent artists still face challenges
 - They believe talking about diversity does help them, but Disabled people are not always talked about when people talk about diversity
 - Access to take part depends on the artform
 - When people talk about access they do not always understand all the problems – these include ways of thinking, ways of working, and physical and digital access to venues and events, that make it hard for Disabled people. These include pressure to work fast, make lots of work, and do what other people say is the right think in the right way at the right time.
 - Access is not built into systems from the start. Asking for access later takes a lot of work, and it can be hard for Disabled people.
 - The amount of funding and support for Disabled people changes over time. The effort to get support can make it hard to keep going in an arts career.
- Key proposed actions include
 - **Change attitudes** – use approaches that focus on strength and rights of Disabled people
 - **Change ideas** about how fast people should work, how much work people have to do, and what we think is doing well, getting a good result, and achieving the right ‘goals’ in the arts industry
 - **Fix** problems and barriers in ways of thinking, ways of working, and physical and digital access, that are not fair and make things hard
 - **Show thanks** that d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists are strong, and good at thinking of new ways to do things, in their arts, and in their careers
 - **Recognise** the many identities and experiences of Disabled artists – these help shape new ideas
 - **Move** power from organisations to individual artists
 - **Support** ways of working that are **led by Disabled people**
 - **Support** learning and **sharing** of skills, knowledge, and ideas **between older and younger artists – write down, share, and teach these ways of working**
 - **Support hubs** that help artists, organisations, artforms, and places share ideas
 - **Plan** access into all systems, processes, and resources from the start

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

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

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

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

- Show thanks for the great work people have done throughout the history of Disabled artists
- Show thanks for the work Disabled artists and allies have done to lead change in the arts industry
- Make sure we are making our own decisions, and telling our own stories, in the way we want to
- Make sure we are in charge, and can decide what we want to do – not just participating in work projects in the arts
- Make sure work is led by Disabled people – not just about Disability
- Fix barriers and problems that make it hard for us to do this

Artists and allies want us to

- **Represent** – stories that have been left out in the arts in the past
- **Include** – information about disability in arts policies
- **Shift** – change attitudes to focus on strength and rights of Disabled people
- **Language** – describe our work in the way we want to describe it
- **Value** – the many identities and experiences of Disabled artists
- **Recognise** – that d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists are strong, and good at thinking of new ways to do things, in their arts, and in their careers
- **Fix** – barriers that stop Disabled people doing what they want to do, including negative beliefs, difficult processes, physical and digital access to venues and events
- **Change** – ideas about how fast people should work, how much work people have to do, and what we think is doing well, getting a good result, and achieving the right 'goals' in the arts industry
- **Train** – artists and arts organisations to understand and use access tools that we know work for us
- **Move** – power from government and arts organisations to individual artists
- **Support**
 - Ways of working that are **led by proud Disabled people**
 - Learning and **sharing** of skills, knowledge, and ideas **between older and younger artists – write down, share, and teach these ways of working**
 - **Hubs** that help artists, organisations, artforms, and places share ideas
- **Fund** – Disability-led projects, for longer periods of time, and pay Disabled artists fairly for their work on projects
- **Include** – Disabled people from the start, and build access into all work from this start
- **Allyship** – Listen to us, support us, and share power with us

How do I contact the authors?

Contact Us



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



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

What are some key terms / concepts in the Report?

Words and Ideas in this Report

- **Disability Arts History Australia:** A website that shows stories, records, and history of d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists in Australia.
- **Archive:** A collection of records and histories.
- **Digital Archive:** A collection of records saved on a computer or website.
- **Arts Organisations:** Groups that help artists make and share their work.
- **Industry:** A type of business, where people do a type of work, e.g. arts
- **Project:** A plan of work done by a group of people. This project made a website to share Disability Arts history.
- **Funded / Funding:** Money given to help a project happen. This project got money from universities and arts organisations.
- **Records:** Old papers, photos, videos, or stories that show what happened in the past.
- **d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent people:** People who are Deaf or hard of hearing, have a disability, or think and learn in different ways.
- **Accessible / Accessibility:** Easy to use, easy to understand, and open to everyone
- **Inclusion:** Making sure everyone can take part
- **Participation:** Being part of something. Example: joining a meeting or making art.
- **Equity:** Fair
- **Captions:** Words on a screen that show what people are saying in a video.
- **Description:** Words that explain what is in a picture, video, or document.
- **Plain / Easy English:** Simple words and short sentences that are easy to read and understand.
- **Bias:** Unfair ideas or actions. Example: when a computer thinks disabled people are less important.
- **Representation:** Showing the real experience of real people in stories
- **Misrepresentation:** Wrong or unfair way of showing someone or something.
- **Power:** Being in charge, telling people how things are going to be done.
- **Labour:** Work that takes time and energy.

- **Cost:** Money needed to do something.
- **Upload:** Put something (like a photo or document) onto a website.
- **Search:** Look for something online or in a document.
- **Consent:** Saying yes to something. Example: agreeing to share your story or photo.
- **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD):** A global agreement that says Disabled people must be treated equality, and have the same rights as everyone else, in all parts of life.
- **Deficit-based language:** Describing people by what they can't do
- **Disability-led practice:** Disabled people lead the work
- **Cultural Safety:** Feeling respected and understood
- **Allyship:** Supporting Disabled people to succeed
- **Diversity:** different identities (e.g. race, gender, disability)
- **Intersectionality:** Having more than one identity (e.g. race, gender, disability)
- **Sustainability:** Having enough support to keep going
- **Disability Administration:** Extra work Disabled people do to manage life
- **Relaxed performance:** A show that is made more comfortable for people. The lights and sounds are softer. People can move, make noise, or leave and come back. It is good for anyone who finds normal shows too loud, too bright, or too strict.
- **Social enterprise:** A business that sells goods or services to make money, but also uses the money to do good things for people or the community. The main goal is to help, not just to make profit.
- **Collaboration:** Doing things together with other people.
- **Ensemble:** A group of people who work together to make art, music, dance, or theatre. Everyone in the group is important. They share ideas and perform as a team, not just as individuals.
- **Policy:** A plan, or set of rules, that says how we should do things