

Interviewee: David Doyle

Interviewer: Saadia Ahmed

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Location: Online via Zoom

Length of Interview: 34:21 minutes

Saadia: Can you please tell us a bit about yourself? What do you think we need to know about who you are and what experiences have helped you become the person that you are today?

David: Okay so you know I originally trained as a printmaker and a ceramicist and did a double major in art theory at ANU. And really, you know, since I was 18, started working in community arts and cultural development in regional New South Wales, particularly around isolated farming communities, mental health, domestic violence, those kind of issues. So always working in community arts. Um. Then moved to Western Australia in 1991 and continued as a community artist working in Fremantle. Margaret River, Southwest, usually with complex population groups, then a group of us with some occupational therapists. DADAA in 1994. Working initially in a very large residential disability organization near Fremantle. Quite quickly it became apparent that most of the residents of that accommodation centre wanted to get into community. So we built very strong partnerships with a number of local governments in Western Australia and moved DADAA formally out of an institution and into the community. DADAA was right from the beginning, funded by the Australia Council for the Arts and Disability Arts, was a very emerging practice in Australia and concept at that time and sat under the old Community Arts and Cultural Development Board. So 100% arts funded for many years. Then DADAA you know, we were able to develop very strong relationships with family and community services, federal Health Department, Mental Health Commission and a number of corporates, which really started to to grow our work DADAA at that time became a health provider and a mental health provider formally under the Mental Health Commission. We also started doing a lot of remote work with Aboriginal people with disabilities in the Western desert, working in three very remote communities. Um kunawarritji Bonjour and punmu. And at the same time we started to do whole of town work in Albany, which is right down the bottom of Western Australia. And those projects were about, I guess, addressing the, the unique social context that people with

disabilities in Western Australia found themselves in. In Albany it was the invisibility of people with disabilities in the community. Uh, so a lot of our work at that time was about developing partnerships between the disability sector, the arts sector, the local government sector, state government and the Australia Council for the Arts training artists. Um, bringing a whole lot of very disparate groups together around a community on long term six year projects. Um, some of DADAA's best learning I think really came out of those large long-term regional projects. Uh, our policies and practices with artists working in the area, our partnership model. A lot of our policies and procedures around community ownership, identity and practice. We also started to document those very heavily and started to do a lot of publications. So quite significant books that really charted the long term journey of artists with and without disabilities and communities in starting to engage in arts and disability practice. And then we started really to replicate our regional model right across Western Australia into completely different contexts and around specific issues that were, were facing communities. Uh, across regional Western Australia. At the same time also running very large community arts projects in the city, workshop programs and ongoing. Always training artists to work in this context. Mm hmm.

Saadia: Okay, so now we talk about your motivators for the past so that have shaped your practice and have shaped you into the person that you are. So are there any experiences, events or people that stand out in your memory as really formative in terms of getting you involved in community art and disability art? And it can be a positive influence. It can be a not so pleasant influence.

David: I guess, you know, one of the really big things for me, you know, as as a schoolboy at 17, I was, um, trekking in Nepal, uh, and acquired, uh, meningitis and spent six months in Kathmandu. Uh, you know, went through a coma and, uh, you know, really came out of the coma. And that whole experience, uh, having to relearn to do everything, you know, to relearn, to dress myself, to relearn, to write, to relearn, to ride a horse. Um, you know, so having acquired brain injury through that and then later, you know, very severe epilepsy and I guess, you know, I, that all occurred at a time, um, where someone like myself from, uh, quite a medical family was quickly supported to pass. Okay. And, you know, that was really the objective was to pass. So, you know, to have that, that lived experience of disability. I'm not someone who has ever identified as a person with a disability because I feel incredibly privileged and, you know, very well

supported medically. Um, but it's always been a really interesting experience for me that, you know, really, I think, um, has focused me on arts and disability because I know what it's like to have a lived experience of disability. But, you know, I talk to a lot of my peers who are my age are in arts and disability globally, and nearly all of us who are around my age are a bit older, are were all supported to pass. So we talk about passing quite a lot. Um, which you know, is an interesting, um, you know, position to be in, you know, to identify or not. And I guess because I've worked for so long with people with severe and persistent disabilities and I look at my own life, you know, someone who has a great job, who has, you know, a home, who is incredibly independent, who drives, who makes all the decisions for himself. You know, I've never felt comfortable to identify. So that's kind of like probably, you know, a very key factor in my passion for arts and disability.

Saadia: Mm hmm. And any people. Whom you remember have played an important role.

David: You know, it's very, very significant numbers of people. Um, you know, I think back to very early chairs of data, particularly people like Helen Arrington. Um, a very strongly political people who really massive self-advocates and broader sector advocates very politically engaged. You know, Helen always said to me very early, you know, that arts and disability is political and never forget that. And that has been very strong with me the whole way, is that, you know, this isn't something we're doing, uh, art for art's sake. Uh. Or something that is soft. It's really about cultural rights. It's about human rights. It's about access. And it is political. Mm hmm.

Saadia: Yeah. So, yeah. So from what I gather, is that your own lived experience of disability and then also the way you are acknowledging your privilege, that the way you have been able to pass and also your other colleagues. So these are and then, uh, yeah, so these are the factors that have played an important role in the way you see disability art. If I'm not wrong.

David: Yeah, you know, I'm very aware that, you know, I am a middle aged, you know, gay man who's white with lots of power. Um, and I think, you know, we need to be really cognizant of our power, our influence and. And use it well. Mm hmm.

Saadia: Um, so, David, do you think that because of your lived experience of disability, like you say, that you had to relearn everything and all of that, It has also been a barrier in your art practice in any way?

David: You know, I haven't practiced art for a very long time. You know, I am, you know, a senior arts administrator running a big company and 120 staff. So, you know, I guess, you know, my practice now is really that strategic and direction for the organization, you know, driving the organization into new communities to new contexts. I've done enormous amount of work in Hong Kong and South Africa, you know, taking the work into new settings. You know, that is really, I guess where I get my passion from now is designing, you know, with communities and government, new responses to disability that are location, population, culturally specific.

Saadia: Hmm. Okay. Uh, so now coming to your present practice. So what motivates your work today? Because you're a very strong ally of disability art in Australia.

David: I think, you know, I am very obsessed at the moment with concepts of disability justice. I'm very obsessed with disability-led, you know, DADAA, DADAA to the point where it has 38% of its staff have a lived experience of disability. Um, my aim is for 50%. Um, you know that, you know, people think that disability-led can happen quickly. Sometimes disability led is a very complex, slow build and transition of power. Um, I love living in this time of NDIS where you see, um, you know, the incredible work of people like Julia Gillard. Um, you know, is really the architect of NDIS. You see the results where for the first time in Australia, people with disabilities have their own money and control of their own money. You know, that is incredibly important. You know, the biggest, uh, policy change really, in Australia since 1972. It, it's phenomenal. And I love witnessing every single day, uh, the transformative power of NDIS for artists with disabilities. It's not perfect. Um, it's very fraught, it's very complex and not everyone's getting it, uh, who should get it yet. But I think, you know, the NDIS is playing a really significant change in, uh artists - Australian artists with disabilities sense of power. Uh, control over the sector, desire to control the direction of the sector, direction of practice. Um, really interrogating issues like disability led allied practices and wanting to really take control.

David: You know, one of one of the projects I'm working on at the moment, which is just such a delight, is the Emerge Evolve Project with Caroline Bowditch at Arts Access Victoria. Uh, we got together and very early this year to look at, you know, what was happening nationally for our sector, but also for artists with disabilities. Um, and we really wanted to progress the concept of disability-led. So with some Australia Council for the Arts funding, we put out a national EOI for artists with disabilities who are really interested in coming up with a new model for disability arts that was led by artists with disabilities. And we put out an nationally, we got 86 incredible responses that were so political and amazing from right around the country. We selected nine a few months ago. We got them all together in Melbourne for a week and really, Caroline and my job is to coach those nine Australian artists with disabilities to interrogate their politics and to become the architects of a new national model for artists with disabilities. It's not for organisations, it's not for data, it's not for Arts Access Victoria, but it's for independent artists with disabilities and it was just such a beautiful privilege to be in that room for a week with those nine artists and see them really start to set their ambition.

Saadia: Uh, so when you started working in this area, which is the community art and then disability art, what was the response like from the community? Because as you mentioned, that you for you, empowering the artist is really important. It's not about DADAA, it's about empowering the artist. So what was the response that you got when you started?

David: Yeah, I think when we started, you know, the Disability Discrimination Act, which was really the first set of laws that Australians with disability have ever had, had really only came into being in 1986. So it was a very fresh set of legislation around them. It was very limited but also very powerful because it actually placed disability on everyone's agenda. Every government, every local government's agenda. So it actually started to, I guess, set the rights of Australians with disability in place. It didn't quite cover things like rights over your own body, uh, rights over certain decisions, but it was a beginning and it was really the beginning of the big access conversation in Australia.

Saadia: Okay.

David: So you started to see it start to become entrenched in other legislation like, you know, Australian building standards, things like that. So that was a really powerful body

of legislation. Then. You know, that was pivotal in in DADAA starting and if you actually look around the country, a lot of arts and disability organizations started post 1986.

Saadia: Okay.

David: Quite soon after, because suddenly there was a sense of, hey, people with disabilities in Australia have rights. We also saw at the same time, as a result of a very famous report called the Burdick Report, we saw the mass deinstitutionalization of Australians with disabilities. So you started to see the development of group houses for people with disabilities right in the community. So previous to this point, Australians with disabilities were largely institutionalized or, you know, living independently at home with their mum and dad and their family, but very large numbers institutionalized for life. So the Burdekin report at this time also saw the movement of people with disabilities from institution into community. So the community had to start to make a response as well. The whole disability and mental health sector had to start to make a response and go right. It's not just about giving people with disabilities or mental illness a home in community. Because it's like a mini institution. So you started to see the beginnings of the national social inclusion agenda. So Australia started to talk about "how do we meaningfully include people with disabilities?" and all these things were really, really critical in the formation of Australian arts and disability. And also the formation of DADAA, because there's all these policy agendas that we really started to pick up and they became very pervasive right across government. Um. And then later, you know, you saw Julia Gillard publish a very important report called "A Fair Go", which really looked up at, you know, Australia's incredibly privileged, wealthy country, but our wealth was not shared evenly and this was really the beginnings of the NDIS to going starting to look at right, if I'm born with a disability or have a car accident, I acquire a disability, or someone like me who gets meningitis, you know, trekking in the Himalayas. It's not my fault. I shouldn't have to bear the burden of disability, but the nation should. And I love the NDIS because I think it really echoes democracy.

Saadia: Uh, yeah. I think this is a very interesting insight on NDIS and how it has enabled people with disability to have an agency and a number of different ways. Um, now coming to your perception of practice. Um. Apart from DADAA, we know DADAA is doing amazing work, but are there any other art organizations or artists that you think people don't know about? But you would want to mention them in this interview.

David: I think there is a huge disparity of resources in Australian arts and disability. You know, I've had the privilege of working pretty well across the country in different, uh, for different government departments. I've done a lot of consultation nationally for the Australia Council for the Arts over the years in the area of arts and disability, So you get a sense as you move around the country that it's really Victoria and Western Australia have been able to build organisations of scale for arts and disability to some extent Queensland and New South Wales. But sometimes it's very hard for me to see it with other CEOs in, you know, like like all organizations, because I work for an organization of great privilege and I might be talking to Alice Springs, where they have one staff member. Uh, and 20 project to project budget. Or I might be talking to Tasmania where there is no state based organisation. There is a little organisation that limps along from project to project in, in Launceston. Uh, you know, likewise Darwin, you know, very small budget, very small capacity, very small staffing. Uh, South Australia is interesting because it's an organisation that um, access to art has been, you know, for a time was the most significant arts and disability organisation in the country, but then you know, has contracted.

Saadia: Okay.

David: So it's not even, um, and I think that's a real issue. Um, and it's a state issue. There is a lack of state investment in arts and disability organisations across the country.

Saadia: I think it's a very important point because coming from you, because you lead this organization, which is like, you know, apart from you, people have done such milestone, such iconic work. But then at the same time, you also acknowledge that everyone does not have that privilege. And I think that the acknowledgement of privilege is something that is going to be one of my greatest takeaways from talking to you today, whether it's your personal privilege or whether it's your privilege as an organization that not everyone has the access to it. Okay. So my next question is, do you think that in public, talking about the general public, the visibility of the work that DADAA does has increased or the visibility of disability art has increased among the masses?

David: I do.

Saadia: Okay.

David: And I also think that the perception of the work over the last 30 years has changed enormously.

Saadia: Okay. Uh, so, David, what are some of the important milestones that have happened in the disability arts in Australia? One is a Disability Discrimination Act that you mentioned. I think that's.

David: Yeah, that's critical. NDIS.

Saadia: Okay.

David: You know, I think that the National Disability Arts Strategy number one was incredible. Uh, you know, out of that you saw artists with disabilities for the very first time being able to apply to the National Cultural Fund in their own right as individuals. That was huge. People don't talk about that, pre that an artist with a disability could not apply to the Australia Council they'd have to come in as part of a community with someone like me writing it and designing it. And advocating on behalf of it. And it was incredible. I was lucky to sit on one of those panels and we got like little phone recordings of. I remember one guy, you know, out way out the back of New South Wales with Down syndrome, you know, living on a farm boot scooting on his paddock. You know, that was his application. And talking by telephone, it was the first time that, um, people with disabilities didn't have to write an application. It recognised that there was different capability - in numeracy, in literacy, in oral language skills. So it allowed for the first time all these alternative ways of artists with disabilities applying for funding to government. It was really significant. And it also started to get the disability agenda on every state arts minister's agenda. Every state arts body's agenda became a very important part of the conversation of the Cultural Ministers Council meetings, and it started to really elevate outstanding Australian artists with disabilities. I think about artists like Dan Daw, who you know, is ex Restless [dance] and, you know, used to go to Adelaide and, you know, watch him as a kid dance and just be amazed. And now, you know, he is an international dancer in his own right. Um. So it really started to support the career trajectory of artists with disabilities.....

Saadia: okay no

David:And unfortunately, you know, that, too, is, you know, we're still waiting on it.

Speaker3: Okay.

Saadia: So now coming to your politics, you mentioned that art is political. So my first question was about that is art political? But you have mentioned it already in the beginning of the interview. Uh, but is that creating, is art able to create a change in the way people think? And does that define the success of an artwork?

David: I think that art is able to and particularly disability arts. It's, it's able to start conversations that have never been had before from voices that have never been heard before from perspectives that have never been illuminated before. So it starts incredibly powerful conversations be that in a dance, visual arts, writing.

Saadia: And brings.

David: [00:28:59] Those new voices in. You know, to. Our cultural practice and it starts to expand, expand our know concepts of who we are as a nation, as a people. It starts to illuminate intersectionality, and I think intersectionality is one of the biggest things that is happening in our space at the moment, and I think that is because of the NDIS. Uh.

Saadia: okay

David: You know, you're starting to see multiple identities of people with disabilities. So it's not just a person with Down syndrome. It's maybe an Anglo-Indian with dance Down syndrome, who is also a dancer who's also trans.

Saadia: Yeah. That's very true.

David: You know, you got to look at people with disabilities not very long ago in Australia had no control over their bodies, their identity, their sexuality. All those sorts of things are starting to come into arts and disability practice. They are becoming the

thematic, the subject, the content, the power that is creating and driving work. It's very new and brave.

Saadia: That's Uh. Really, I'm really fascinated by your perspective on the politics and the role of and the agency that the artists now have and how it has changed. Uh, so do you think there's a commonality or consistency in how artists who public would identify as artists with disability, do you think they think about politics? Or is it very individual?

David: I think it's both. But I think it's cultural as well. I think it is social as well. So it's really around, you know, the context you grew up in, the time you grew up in. Um, it's around, you know, your, your family culture. And um, yeah.

Saadia: So again, it's intersectionality that plays a role in it because your culture, your sexuality, the privilege that you come from and all of these things that play a role in it. Uh, this was the end of our questions. Do you have any final thoughts? Something that I've missed out on asking?

David: I think probably the biggest thing that is happening right now is that huge power transition from organizations directly to individual artists with disabilities. You know, that is where I want to and I am placing my attention s to individual artists with disabilities.

David: Because there are these incredibly exciting point of claiming their power for the first time. And in lots of ways demanding their power. And they're also starting to really drive, Uh, the frameworks are in practice. They're starting to really interrogate things like what is an ally? Who is an artist with a disability? What makes arts and disability? What makes disability-led? And I think we're going to start to see some really great things happening, like, you know, get out of my space. You know.

Saadia: That's inevitable.

David: I think it is really inevitable and we need to be ready for that. And we need to ready artists with disability with all the skills that, you know, people like me have held and the contacts and the power, you know, it has to be transitioned. So we need to do a huge transition.

Saadia: I think it is so fascinating the way you want to you like, you know, despite like, you know, you acknowledge the privilege and everything. And at the same time, you strongly feel that the power needs to transition now and it needs to reach out to people. And I think that's. Yeah, it's really fascinating. And thank you so much, David. Thank you for giving us time.