

Interviewee Name: Morwenna Collett

Interviewer Name: Annie Rolfe

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Transcript

Annie: Morwenna, can you tell us a bit about yourself? What do you think we need to know about who you are, where you're from, and, you know, what experiences have helped you to become, um, the person that you are today in terms of your work in disability art?

Morwenna: Uh, yeah. My name is Morwenna Collett, and I'm a consultant specializing in diversity, access and inclusion. I work primarily with arts and culture organizations, government organizations, universities, anyone who, anyone will have me really and a lot of the work that I do is working with organizations to help them improve their practices around access and inclusion so that their work includes everyone. Uh, I've got a background as an artist myself. I started life as a musician before moving into the arts management side of things, and disability became part of my life about 20 years ago, and it was at the Australia Council when I was working at the Australia Council where I first had the opportunity to kind of intersect my professional life as an arts manager and my own personal experience of disability by getting to work on a couple of disability projects there around disability action planning, I got to design the first targeted funding program for artists with disability at the Australia Council. Um, and yeah, from there it's been my, you know, my sort of passion, the thing that I care deeply about. I've had a long career working in arts funding agencies and I've been the CEO at Accessible Arts in Sydney where I now live on Gadigal land. Um, and yeah, I suppose some of the things that have helped, help me find the pathway that I've found, which is like many, like many others in arts workers with disability, hasn't been particularly traditional, I suppose you know a number of things and someone who has hidden disability, so I've certainly used that to my advantage and I'm very conscious that that allows me a certain amount of privilege that some of my other colleagues haven't had and I think on the whole I've managed to work in supportive organizations that have helped me through professional development, sort of build, build and hone my my skills, I suppose. So

having, yeah, having a career in organizations that have been inclusive themselves and provided opportunities, I guess, and you know, also very aware of that privilege, you know, that I've been able to do that and not the case again for a lot of my colleagues. So yeah, that's a little bit about me.

Annie: And so if I take you back to after you left school, what how did you start out in, in this area?

Morwenna: So I was desperate to be an orchestral musician. I studied at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music straight after school and yeah, disability. I'm someone that lives with and that became part of my life in my just at the end of my first year of university so that put a bit of a spanner in the works around things sort of at that time it was something that was affecting my fine motor skills, which for a classical musician is, is tricky um, and also I think, you know, where the classical music industry was at 20 years ago, um, things are starting to shift and change now and I'm, you know, hopefully helping to create part of that shift and change but it certainly wasn't a place where I could really see myself as someone with access requirements being able to have you know, stable, successful careers so that was part of the decision, I guess, to move into the arts management side of things and sort of from there, I, like many musicians do, did a lot of teaching. My first job out of uni, I moved to a, took a very unusual tree change. Something changed. A tree change is the right word, but moved to Wagga Wagga to go and teach at the Conservatorium of Music there and then I, then I got a job at Arts Queensland and that's sort of where I carved out my career working in arts funding agencies, which I did for sort of, there ten years, I think really before consulting. So yeah and I love, you know, love consulting. I love working for myself and the freedom that that affords and the ability to, the ability to actually make real change in organizations and think that was something I was finding frustrating back that, Um, yeah. So, uh, yeah. Yes.

Annie: So you were talking about your start to in classical music. Um, so were there experiences, um, or events or people that stand out in your memory as really formative in terms of getting you interested and involved in, um, classical music?

Morwenna: I think like many people, I think music was something that I did at school and was lucky enough to have a couple of great teachers along the way, and it was just something I was really, really interested in. I guess in terms of formative experiences, no one thing really stands out. Obviously had a, I lived, went to a school regionally. Toowoomba had some great kind of regional wide music camps, that kind of thing, which, you know, sort of cemented that idea of as this was, you know, the arts was something that I wanted to have a career in and just, yeah, just love, just loved, loved/ still love music. Yeah. So, yeah.

Annie: And what about that change then, into disability arts advocacy? Have there been people or events that have helped influence that change for you?

Morwenna: Yeah, absolutely. So yeah, for me, as I mentioned, working in disability arts is something I first did through the Australia Council when I was when I was working there, and I guess I had a number of formative experiences meeting some amazing, incredible disability sector elders. I remember, you know, working with people like Gayle Mellis and Emma Bennison in particular, Michelle Ryan, you know, being able to kind of meet them and engage with them through my work was, you know, really, really critical and actually in terms of a really transformative experience, I attended the first, not the first sorry, the second Unlimited Festival in London in 2014. I was their first international intern, I negotiated to go and work on that festival and for me, that was my first kind of, oh no, it's my second kind of exposure to international arts and disability practice. I'd previously been to Washington and the Kennedy Center to be, I was involved in a thought leadership kind of convening that Betty Siegel put together. And that was amazing, too but Unlimited think was where I really fell in love with the art by artists with disability and just realized that they are making some of the most groundbreaking, incredible experimental, cutting edge work, artistic, you know, artistic work on the planet, and that this was an area that I really wanted to kind of dedicate myself to, yeah, working with those artists and supporting their incredible art making. So yeah, I think Unlimited was a really a big kind of aha moment for me in wanting to pursue this area. Yeah.

Annie: And where was disability art getting its funding and resources from at that point?

Morwenna: In Australia.

Annie: In Australia? Sorry. Yeah.

Morwenna: Um, similar to now, you know, some, some disability peak bodies are funded, very few are funded by the Australian Council. Many are funded by state and territory governments. Um, back in 2014, that was the year of the first ever targeted funding program at the Australia Council. I think Arts Access that had a targeted funding program before then and I was part of the Australian Council's what they call the cultural engagement framework and that was the sort of diversity framework I guess if you like and we had seen just how low the numbers of applicants with disability were coming to the Australian Council, it was less than 2%. Um, and obviously that's nowhere near on par with population so that sort of gave us the business case to, to develop that targeted funding, which I think has been really instrumental in terms of just getting more artists with disability funded um, it has had, you know, it has translated through to Australia Council programs generally being more accessible and inclusive so funding rates outside of targeted funding programs are also being positively impacted. Still not, you know, nearly enough but yeah, definitely making change. So, you know, funding stuff for any artists, um, particularly tough for artists with disability and the additional barriers that can be in place and I'm really excited to see now what some funding bodies are doing like Creative Victoria I think is has got sort of an interesting approach to funding access requirements or access costs on top of funding cap amounts and um, you know, I think they're, they're taking quite a proactive approach to funding in this space. So I'm interested to see, um, yeah, what they're up to and what happens next with their funding. Um.

Annie: Yeah so, um, what do you think the drivers and barriers to the success of disability artwork were and has that changed?

Morwenna: Well, I suppose one of the biggest barriers is really attitudinal. It's around the fact that there's this perception that the quality of art being made by artists with disability is not as good as artists without disability. I guess some people think of your sort of day program therapy style art making rather than actually understanding that there are many professional artists with disability out there making incredible work and I guess in part that is because we haven't had enough exposure here in Australia to really, um, a high volume of really incredible, uh, you know, art making and also in

Australia it's really difficult to get to see everything like going to Unlimited I could see more artists with disability in a week than could probably see in a year in Australia so just the volume.

Annie: Wow.

Morwenna: It is difficult and I think that's where that perception comes from, is there's just not enough artists with disability on our stages and on our screens to really shift that perception for a lot of people so I think the biggest barriers absolutely are attitudinal and um, and then, you know, just systemic barriers around pathways, whether that's through grant programs being inaccessible or inaccessible and inaccessible employment opportunities. Um, you know, obviously now we've got some great internship programs for people with disability, but internship programs and entry level things are great, but sort of what happens next? And I think, um, you know, we're doing quite well now, providing some entry level type things but I think, you know, what is that pathway all the way through up to establish whether it's artists or arts workers as well. What does that look like?

Annie: Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah. So what motivates your work today and has your motivation changed over time?

Morwenna: Well, I think first and foremost, for me it is about just on the whole falling, having fallen in love with the work of artists with disability, and that's a big driver for me, but another big driver around my work that I do as a consultant is having been able to witness some of the some of the impacts of being able to help arts and cultural organizations become more inclusive is something that really kind of gets me out of bed every day. Um, I do a lot of work with organizations on events, on festivals, on disability action planning and training, helping them to embed access and inclusion into their hearts and minds. And you know, just this year I've worked on Mona Foma Festival in Tassie on Sydney, World pride, about to work on my Dark Mofo in Tassie as well and just seeing, seeing the impact for audiences and for artists with disability getting to be part of those events is awesome and it's absolutely, you know, it shouldn't be anything out of the ordinary, but we know that there are so many barriers and basically most arts cultural organizations need someone to hold their hand as they figure out how to do this work because it's not your own lived experience how do you know what's important to

prioritize in terms of an access program in your festival or whatever it might be? So, yeah, guess I'm driven by by art and also just by actually seeing that positive change can happen when you work with organizations over a period of time.

Annie: Yes. Yeah, absolutely. Um, I'm interested to hear your views on the visibility of disability art, um, and how that's changed over time. So 20 years ago, do you think people, um, were aware of disability art, um, you know, say in music, for instance, your, your art form.

Morwenna: No not at all and barely aware of it now I think. Yeah what can I say about visibility, I think. Yeah, it certainly wasn't even something that as someone with lived experience that was on my radar for probably ten years at least after I was out of my life. It wasn't something that I saw reflected on, in sort of you know mainstream stages or things that I was engaging in in my work so it didn't even occur to me until about a decade later that this was a field or this was a this was a thing that people could do what people did and, um, yeah, I think obviously now diversity, equity, inclusion is getting talked about more than it ever has been before. Um, we're seeing that really led by the corporate sector. It's actually kind of really building that in um, and really it's only been for the last 3 to 5 years that that's gained a lot of traction and um, disability of course is kind of in that bucket um, so not always thought about, um, perhaps as discreetly as it should be when it's in that bucket but I think because of the sort of changing landscape of conversation around diversity, equity and inclusion, it has helped the visibility of disability and access in the arts and beyond as well.

Annie: Yeah. Um, it's interesting you say that it leads into the next question. Um, what do you think the public would say are the key milestones or big, major happenings in the history of disability arts in Australia?

Morwenna: Well, I don't think the general public would know too much at all, quite frankly. Yeah, I think when I think about what they think are, I guess, I think of things that are really, uh, driven by the community for the community, disability arts community. So obviously things like, I remember when Meeting Place started in maybe 2013 or so, Art's Activated, obviously played a key role as well in terms of being a gathering and a major kind of networking opportunity to bring people together and I think in Australia because of our geography and being so disparate um, those moments

are really special, really key because we don't have an opportunity to come together as often as perhaps you know is easier in other places. Maybe, yeah but gosh for the general public, I yeah I don't know. I'm struggling to think of anything that people would know about. I'd love to know what others have said to that question.

Annie: So from your experience and your knowledge of the key milestones, would you say NDIS was part of that?

Morwenna: Yeah, I mean, of course if we're talking not just about art and disability but disability generally, obviously that's the main, the biggest policy shift around disability within Australia and how many, how many years? And I suppose obviously that's been an incredibly positive thing on the whole, but without its challenges of course and I suppose what that's done is it's brought disability into the sort of general vernacular, perhaps more than it has been it had been previously. So, yes.

Annie: Has it been positive or has it created a change for disability arts?

Morwenna: I think there's a lot of opportunity there and certainly companies like Back to Back, it really made that work well for them. I think there's a lot of arts organizations that haven't known really known how to really capitalize on that and um certainly when it first started trying to work out whether what's the word to be accredited or what's the right word to I forget the word, you know, to be an organization that's registered with the NDIS or not was a big decision. A lot of arts organizations haven't, haven't really figured that out yet at all and it's been what's coming up for ten years next year? Right. So back to back was obviously lucky because they were in one of the very early pilot sites of the NDIS being in Geelong so that was an advantage for them so they've made it work well but yeah, feel like there's a lot of opportunity potentially there for organisations to engage with the NDIS more definitely.

Annie: And the disability arts organisations themselves coming about. Um, would they be milestones do you think?

Morwenna: Yeah, I mean I think they're all in existence sort of before I sort of really came onto the scene. Yeah, exactly. So of course but you know, that's going back to

about 30 or 40 years probably for some of them so yeah, before my time but yeah, absolutely. I mean, obviously one of the challenges we have is that the service delivery and the sort of outputs of those organisations are very different in different states and territories. Not every state and territory has one. So Access Arts, Australia is not currently funded um, you know, do we need a federated model or not? The Arts Disability peak bodies has a tender out for that at the moment the Australia Council are looking at that. So you know, time will tell, but I suppose that has been a challenge because those organisations don't have any sort of consistent data so artists have had different levels of service from those organisations in different parts of the country. Mm hmm.

Annie: Yeah, it's what about artists themselves? Have they been artists who have had, um, influence on that history? Disability artists.

Morwenna: Yeah, of course. I mean, certainly, you know, think of some of our elders in the community, like Gaelle Mellis and her incredible show, 'Take Up Thy Bed and Walk' in 2014 for one of the one of the kind of first major shows to really use creative and aesthetic access in production. That's an incredible work. Think what Michelle Ryan is doing with Restless Dance in Adelaide is really interesting and Michelle's own practice too, of course. Um, yeah and you know, there's countless others, but Kath Duncan in Melbourne being another one with her advocacy and her work with Quippings. Um, so many, uh but and I suppose, you know, also we've got to talk about the ones that left. Um, you know, Caroline Bowditch and Dan Doyle and people like that who just couldn't, you know, at the time when they left, couldn't, couldn't see a place for themselves here in Australia and we're so lucky to have Caroline back and for Dan now to be coming back and touring because Australia is now ready for them um, and you know, it was so great to see people like Anna Seymour going and now working in an international company like Candoco but I think for a long time a lot of our artists of disability just had to leave because there wasn't that wasn't that sort of professional pathways avenues, professional work there to be had in Australia. So we lost them. Um, and you know, Caroline Bowditch will be leaving at Arts Access Victoria next year and I think her plan is to go back to her own creative practice and so, you know, can't wait to see what she does and I really hope, you know, I really hope that she can carve out. I'm sure she will but carve out some amazing things, you know, creatively here in Australia. Um,

because yeah, I think that's one of the really sad things that happened is we lost a lot of great artists. Um.

Annie: So do you think art should be political? Um, by that I mean changing in how people think and act and treat each other?

Morwenna: I think that is the intrinsic nature of art, that it has the ability to do that. Absolutely. It doesn't have to be. People can make art about whatever they want to make art about. That certainly has the power and the ability to be political. Yes.

Annie: Yeah. So is it part of how we should define success or is it about aesthetic quality or both?

Morwenna: No I think art can be successful when it's not political. I think it's personal choice and the artist is to the sort of art that they want to make. I think there's a lot of pressure sometimes on artists with disability that they have to make work that is, you know, an advocacy tool or an activism, you know, taking a particular activism stance and I think artists should just be able to make about whatever they want to make art about and sometimes that might be taking a political stance and personal lived experience and other times it might just be making a really great dance piece about dwelling, or whatever. Like it doesn't. Yeah. Don't think it's. Don't think it should be the only measure of success.

Annie: Yes. Okay. So do you think artists, um, want to be identified as deaf or disabled or neurodiverse? Or do you think and with pride, or is it about just being another artist?

Morwenna: So that's incredibly personal choice for each individual artist to make. Yeah, I think, you know, I think we are seeing more artists with disability now, having that as part of their identity front and center more than we've seen before as we've got more cultural safety around disability in our art sector now, people are more comfortable to disclose and perhaps they have been before. We're now having things, you know, we're now having conversations around things like access riders which are so new know. Um, so I think we as a sector, the arts sector is more open to conversations about accessibility now, which impacts then how people may choose to identify or not. But you know, for some artists, of course it's a really important part of their identity, particularly if

it's something that they make their work about um, for other artists or they just want to be known as a good dancer or a good theatre practitioner or whatever and that's absolutely fine too so, um, yeah, I think that's an incredibly personal decision but what I am heartened to see is that there seems to be, you know, increased safety in our sector and therefore more comfort in people being able to identify how they want to identify.

Annie: And would you say that's the same with how people identify as first nations or culturally and linguistically or um, LGBTIQ+ plus.

Morwenna: Yes and no. I suppose the thing about disability is that, you know, 80% of us have hidden disabilities, so there is choice to make around identity. Obviously not every person of colour its necessarily the case uh and I, you know, I suppose, uh. I suppose, you know, we don't have any. There is still so much work to do, of course in this space as well but we've been having the conversations about things like First Nations art and artists for a lot longer, I suspect, than we've been really open and talking about artists with disability or access to inclusion in the art sector so we don't have.

Morwenna: You know, we don't have kind of set standards in the same way that there are, you know, welcome to country, for example. It's not a set standard that every event is Auslan interpreted so I suppose the thing about disability is that we are that is challenging as we're an incredibly broad church with so many different types of access requirements and sometimes bundling us all into one lot, it's maybe not that helpful either.

Annie: Yes, absolutely um I'm not sure of how much you're involved in the in the music scene. Um, you did a fellowship at Churchill Fellowship, didn't you? Have you seen, um just focusing on music. Have you seen a change in, um, disability art in terms of music over the last 20 years?

Morwenna: And when you say disability art, I guess you're talking about musicians with disabilities.

Annie: Musicians with disability.

Morwenna: Yeah. Yeah. Look. Guess. All right. We've, more of them are coming out of the woodwork now than perhaps have previously and music's an interesting art form, of course, because it's primarily a listening art form. It's not necessarily something where we see the artist and again, not every disability is visible. So I think there are a lot of musicians out there with disability that we just don't know to see that they don't identify or, you know, haven't been asked or whatever. So, you know, for a long time I was keeping a little black book of musicians. I was aware of that identified and that's starting to be out in the open now. I think, you know, we've had good success with artists like Altar Boy when they're playing at the Apple Awards tonight in Sydney, you know, So we're starting to see more contemporary musicians with disability kind of come to the fore and a lot more kind of weirdly, it's something that I think a lot more kind of media and journal, journalism is picking up on now. You know, I feel like I said, some sort of article about music and disability at, we don't know, 2 or 3 months now there's some article coming out about something. There was a great one last week on Off the List Records, great record company that works with artists, musicians with disability and yeah so absolutely compared to 20 years ago it's it's come a long way but it's still I would say one of the outcomes that's behind in terms of that sort of front and centre disability conversation.

Annie: Yeah, that's. That's really interesting. Um. That there most of the questions. Is there something we haven't asked about that we should that we really need to understand about the evolution of disability art or your work?

Morwenna: Nothing. No, nothing springing to mind. I think we've sort of covered it all in a reasonable amount.

Annie: Yeah, that's great. Okay. Thank you, Morwenna, for your time.

Morwenna: Yeah. Pleasure. Good luck with the project and look forward to seeing what happens to the archive.

Annie: Yeah. Wonderful. Okay.