

# A World Shaped by (Disabled) Artists

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**Abstract:** Next Wave imagines a world shaped by artists, but what might a world shaped by disabled artists look like? Next Wave is an experimental arts organisation based in Melbourne, that supports artists to dream, connect, exchange ideas and develop new skills for themselves and their creative practice. It is intergenerational and prioritises relationships and development over presentation and outcome. In Australia, 1 in 5 people identify as disabled. It is a statistic that is regularly quoted, but rarely considered in its complexity. This paper shares insights into the arts and disability sector in Australia and draws on the writers' experience as a non-disabled producer, advocate and ally for disability rights in the arts. This paper explores ideas around re-evaluating productivity pace, embracing meaningful connections through 'nongkrong' (hanging out), prioritising care in a society that values competition over community, and shares a vision for a world shaped by disabled artists.

**Keywords:** arts, leadership, care, inclusion, disability, Australia

## 1 Introduction

Here's a hypothetical: what would a world shaped by disabled artists look, feel or sound like? How would it be experienced? Take a moment to imagine this world for yourself.

Now, think about what we know about our world right now that makes this question feel difficult to achieve? What would we need to change in our society to start imagining what this new world might be like? Is the system really broken? Or is it working perfectly well for those who keep the status quo in check?

What does it mean to be an artist, let alone a disabled artist, today? Who gets to be an artist? And who doesn't? We know that the role of the artist is critical in our lives. Creative expression is vital to a healthy, functioning and open-minded society. Art helps us to understand the world, changes our opinions, instills hope and embeds our values, translating experiences across time, space and cultures. Art fundamentally helps us to interpret the world, and better understand ourselves and others.

In this paper, I will offer my perspective on the current arts and disability landscape in Australia, share details of inclusive creative practice, and explore some of the things that I believe need to change within our current systems, structures and leadership models to create a more accessible, sustainable, diverse and care-filled creative industry. I will ask us to imagine a world shaped by disabled artists. One that prioritises process over outcome, community over competition, and

relationships over institutions. I will urge us to re-evaluate and challenge our relationship to productivity, speed and pace, and question who this is working for. I will urge us to pay attention.

## **2 The Arts and Disability landscape in Australia today**

In Australia, over 4.4 million people identify with disability. That's 1 in 5 people [1]. We know that the likelihood of disability increases with age, with 2 in 5 people with disability being over the age of 65 . Disability affects us all at some point in our lives, temporarily or permanently, either directly or through our loved ones. It is the only marginalised group we can join with no warning. Which begs the question, why aren't we paying more attention? CEO of Arts Access Victoria, Caroline Bowditch reflects, "as a society, we still view disability as something that happens to other people, or as the worst thing that could happen to anyone, something best avoided if possible" .

This paper is written at a time where the landscape in Australia is shifting and there is a ground swell and growing recognition of the need for change. Over the past four years, Australia undertook its biggest-ever investigation into the abuse and exploitation of people with disability. Last month in September 2023, the Royal Commission handed down its findings with 222 recommendations that call for systemic change across all areas of society [2]. Phasing out segregated education, establishing a federal government portfolio for disability and creating a disability rights act were among some of the key recommendations. Australia's Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) is now over 30 years old, so it is unsurprising that advocates are calling for the Act to be updated to reflect the nuance, complexity and contemporary thinking about disability[3]. "Our segregation is perpetuated by Australia's laws, policies and frameworks. For too long we've been sidelined, and our human rights have been violated; a radical overhaul is needed," says Nicole Lee, president of People with Disability Australia (PWDA) [3].

There are calls to transform the DDA in accordance with the social model of disability, which recognises that people are disabled by the societal barriers (physical, attitudinal, and environmental) they face within the community, rather than the medical model which suggests that people are disabled by their impairments. Across the arts sector in Australia, there is a general uptake of the social model of disability. However, despite a reasonable level of understanding and awareness, d/Deaf and disabled artists and arts workers continue to be siloed in the creative industries, leading to systemic exclusion, a lack of professional growth opportunities and considerable barriers to funding, employment and full participation in creative life [4]. Around one in ten artists in Australia have disability, and one third of these artists experienced unemployment between 2010 and 2015 compared to one quarter of artists without disability[5]. Of those who were employed, they earned 42% less than their non-disabled peers[5]. We also know that access to arts engagement and employment in the creative industries is compounded by intersecting aspects of identity. There is a need to ensure program development and policy change supports d/Deaf and disabled artists, participants and audiences that are inclusive of the breadth and diversity of disability.

To support the growing need for national standards and equitable approaches to working with the disability community, the National Association Visual Arts (NAVA) revised their code of practice earlier this year to include a section on Access Rights for d/Deaf and disabled people [6]. This outlines the responsibilities of organisations, employers and artists to support inclusion and

participation for d/Deaf and Disabled artists and arts workers across all aspects and operations of Australia's contemporary arts. It includes practical policies and best practice recommendations that support d/Deaf and Disabled people's needs and boundaries, time considerations, access costs and self-determined decision-making[6]. Similarly, the national funding and advisory body, Creative Australia, is currently undertaking a national needs analysis and audit to determine through consultation where the gaps and opportunities are in arts and disability service providers, capacity building and sector engagement – asking the sector where they should best place their investment over the next five years.

So, there is seemingly good work underway. And yet, despite there being a great deal of goodwill in the mainstream arts and cultural sector, and an acknowledgement that things should change, many organisations still claim they don't know where to start. Proud disabled leader, consultant, and advocate, Morwenna Collett, reminds us to “just start somewhere. It doesn't have to be perfect on day one” [7]. Many arts organisations are engaging access consultants like Morwenna to work with them to develop Disability Inclusion Action Plans (DIAPs). This is a step in the right direction to addressing access and inclusion in their workplaces – for staff, artists and audiences. However, something we must be mindful of – as Morwenna points out in her recent paper *More Risk, More Play: Creating an Inclusive Culture*, “‘Diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ are being used frequently now, along with ‘equity’, ‘belonging’, ‘access’ and ‘representation’, but what do these terms actually mean? One of the obstacles to transparent discussion is the terminology which is loose, changeable and poorly understood. If we're not careful, we can spend more time trying to articulate what we're doing, rather than getting on and doing it” [8]. It is well understood that language and priorities vary between organisations, with some choosing to focus on developing Disability Action Plans (DAPs) while others are integrating this into their broader Access, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ADEI) work. Nevertheless, the thing they have in common is the imperative for practical support, action, and accountability.

So, how do we move beyond the words on paper, and into the action? In 2021, Creative Australia (then Australia Council for the Arts) released a research report called *Towards Equity* which found that; “Australians with disability are much more likely to create art than those without disability, offering perspectives and lived experiences that challenge and redefine aesthetics. Many are creating important art that pushes boundaries” [5]. Supporting this claim and acknowledging the complexity, Caroline Bowditch says “Disabled artists are some of the most lateral, creative thinkers and problem solvers you will ever have the privilege to work with. Why? Because we constantly need to find solutions to situations or environments that aren't welcoming or accessible”[9].

Enter inclusive creative practice, which places d/Deaf and disabled artists and their communities at the center of the work. Inclusive creative practice offers opportunities for engagement and participation in response to d/Deaf and disabled artists interests, aspirations, and needs[10]. More often than not, inclusive arts projects rely on working in partnership, recognising the need for a variety of skills and resources [10]. In many ways, this gets to the crux of the argument of visioning a world shaped by disabled artists – it cannot be done alone.

In the paper *Quick Trust and Slow Time: Relational Innovations in Disability Performing Arts Practice*, the writers' share that "it is inclusion of disability culture relationships and concepts, as much as ramps and inclusive language, that makes a practice feel safe for disabled artists – and this, we argue, is what the mainstream sector has to learn and what the disability arts sector has to teach about improving the inclusivity of the creative industries" [11]. *Quick Trust and Slow Time* shares important insights into the sophisticated ways that d/Deaf and disabled artists negotiate access and integrate disability aesthetics into their creative practice [11]. Through the *Last Avant Garde* research project [10], the team developed a unique set of insights into the various strategies disabled artists employ when making and devising work [11].

This research revealed three key components of access in disability arts practice, which were considered critical:

1. Logistical access: this involves providing physical and technological access like ramps, interpreters, and hearing loops. This is often the focus in the mainstream arts sector, through access policies, plans and procedures.
2. Ideological access: this relates to using disability-inclusive language, awareness of disability discourse and flexible training and production methods that accommodate artists' needs and preferences. This access component is often the focus in scholarly accounts of disability arts practice.
3. Methodological access: this refers to the specific models of disability arts training and collaborative methods that draw from shared disability culture and history of surviving social oppression, that leads to the innovative aesthetics of which Australian disability arts is celebrated [11].

The writers of *Quick Trust and Slow Time*, Bree Hadley, Eddie Paterson and Madeleine Little were all involved with the development and delivery of *The Last Avant Garde project* and outline that one of the key findings of this project was that while the above access components are not well understood, they do intersect and build upon each other [12]. "Such negotiations and interactions between a spectrum of different bodies and minds rely on the ability to be flexible to various 'speeds' of participation and connection. Paradoxically, we suggest, to work towards *quick-trust*, collaborators must first be able to work at different speeds and pay attention to *slow-time*" [11].

In its simplest definition, aesthetic access in practice refers to access being integral to the creative process and outcome, rather than an add on or afterthought. In many examples, such as the work of Michele Saint-Yves, stories told with embedded access create work that all people can enjoy and provides a unique, care-filled and inclusive experience, that pays attention to the artists needs as well as the audience's needs. In devising *Clock for No Time*, a work that embeds access in performance and audience-inhabited spaces, Michele Saint-Yves talks about one of the biggest challenges being "integrating multiple, often conflicting, access points into the design and performative aspects of the show, as well as including neurodiverse and dementia creative elements all in together for the first time" [13]. She reminds us that it is possible to "provide accessible and inclusive productions without being cost-prohibitive: it's a matter of planning and preparation" [14].

### **3 Relational ways of working and prioritising care**

Next Wave is an experimental arts organisation based in Melbourne, that works with artists from across the continent, to support them to dream, connect, exchange ideas and develop new skills for themselves and their creative practice. It is an organisation that I have worked at as the Lead Program Producer for the past eight months. It is an organisation that I believe is trying to do the work differently.

Next Wave is guided by values of Justice, Friendship and Care which prioritise learning, exchange and relationships. In a new era of experimentation, we want to increase accessibility for artists who engage with us and our programs. Not only is there an appetite for it, but there is also a critical need for diverse models and new approaches to knowledge sharing and creation. Working with artists at different stages of their career development and helping relationships to form and flourish is more necessary than ever in a society that values competition and productivity over community.

Historically known as a Festival, Next Wave will turn 40 in 2024. It's 'coming of age' can be seen in a new decentralised approach to supporting artists and their practice through year-round programming. We support emerging artists through programs like Kickstart and are growing an intergenerational focus through a collective leadership model – our Artistic Directorate, who are made up of eight mid-career independent artists from each state and territory across Australia.

Curation as Care is a framework that was co-designed by the first Artistic Directorate in 2021 and guides Next Wave's curatorial practice and approach. Seemingly 'radical' ideas of Justice, Friendship and Care as actions hold us to account in the rigor of our work, and reminds us that we do not operate under a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. This framework challenges the creative sector's perception of aesthetics, knowledge and power, prioritising creative practice and process over presenting finalised outcomes.

Curation is an intrinsic part of all arts organisations. It is a multi-layered, conscious and unconscious process that extends far beyond the moment of an artist call-out or peer review panel. Inherent elements of labour, gatekeeping, literacy, initiation, relationship and hierarchy are involved in all selection processes [15]. Through curation, we aim to remove the workload of extensive and highly competitive artist call outs that favor certain social, cultural and economic conditions over others. Instead, using the values of Justice, Friendship and Care, we commit to proactive curation done with rigour, transparency and integrity. In simple terms, we prioritise and extend relationships, we help old friends to meet new friends, and we challenge existing models that maintain the status quo.

It is important to note at this point here that in theory, this sounds great – idealistic even. In practice, it is of course much messier than that. It is often uncomfortable, and we don't always get it right. Embracing experimentation and trying to do things differently means that you almost certainly never get it right the first time. To return to the sentiment from Hadley et al. relationships take time to grow, but once they're established, relationships create safety [11]. Allowing for slow time to establish these relationships respond to one of Next Wave's seven principles in Curation as Care; Moving at the speed of friendship. This principle recognises that "friendships exist beyond time-specific engagement bound to events and programs" [16]. In other words, it's about giving

relationships (new or existing) the time and space they need to develop, so that trust can form, and they can be tended to with care and durability.

For me, ‘Moving at the speed of friendship’ provides a way in for d/Deaf and disabled artists and arts workers working on the fringe of a largely ableist arts world. It offers flexibility and a responsive, relational way of working that encourages people to bring their whole self [16]. Importantly, it implicitly trusts that going at the speed that is necessary, not the speed that is expected, will benefit the artist, their practice, Next Wave as an organisation and the art sector as a whole. It supports the purpose of this paper, which is to imagine a world shaped by disabled artists. It encourages us to reflect on the speed at which we work, who it works for, and question the sustainability of this as a society.

For Indonesian artists, the concept of ‘Moving at the speed of friendship’ is not new. I first encountered the term ‘nongkrong’ – an Indonesian slang term from Jakarta meaning ‘hanging out together’ [17] – when visiting Kassel for documenta15 in 2022. Understanding nongkrong as a practice that needs to be nurtured and tended to through conversation and togetherness was an important realisation for me in terms of what needs to change within the Australian arts sector to be more inclusive, accessible and at the heart of it; collegiate and collaborative.

In a capitalist society that prioritises competition over community, it is difficult to focus on collaboration, particularly in a post-pandemic world, where we are all just trying to get by. As Kate Larsen shares “in spite of a more competitive funding landscape than most of us have ever experienced, we need to resist the panic to invent more ambitious programs, and instead focus our gaze inwards...we need to move from a ‘less is more’ to a ‘less is necessary’ mindset – and we need to do it now – to support our teams to draw breath, recover and reset.” [18] I would argue further to say we need to do it to ensure no one gets left behind, in particular d/Deaf and disabled peers for whom many continue to be impacted by the long-term effects of Covid19. Now is the moment we need to collectively stop. Reassess. Recalibrate. Reconvene.

#### **4 Looking ahead: where do we go from here?**

It’s time to get the big questions answered. What would a world shaped by disabled artists really look like? Beyond blue-sky thinking and a well-meaning sector, what practical change is needed? To help answer these questions, I turned to my d/Deaf and disabled peers – the artists I admire, and the leaders doing the work. And yet. From what I know about working with d/Deaf and disabled artists over the past ten years, they are tired. Tired of the endless advocacy. Tired of the segregated system that puts ‘disability arts’ into a box. Let alone a ‘checkbox’.

As my friend and Theatre Director, Dan Graham says “I would love [to see a world] that disability doesn’t need to be a concept – it’s part of us, but it’s not all of us. I may be a neurodiverse director, but I’m also a queer director, and I’m also ‘Dan-the-director-who-hasn’t-paid-off-his-hecs-debt’”. Dan asks us how we can make disability part of the discussion, without the segregation? How can we create inclusivity and safety, but at the same time “not have to always be the ‘neurodiverse’ Director?” The very thing that Dan tells me that he is pushing back on is the thing that so often stands in his way – grappling with the self-doubt of artistic merit.

Back to Back is one of Australia's most celebrated and successful theatre companies. "Over the last 35 years, Back to Back Theatre has made a body of work that questions the assumptions of what is possible in theatre, but also the assumptions we hold about ourselves and others" [19]. In a nod to Dan's visioning of a world shaped by disabled artists, 'disability' isn't mentioned on Back to Back's "About us" section of their website. The ensemble's groundbreaking and sharp-witted productions hold a mirror up to their audiences, and spits back at us the assumptions we have as a society about disabled people. Artistic Director, Bruce Gladwin, says "Our objective is to make the best art possible". Like Dan, disabled artists and performers are "claiming the right to both control their own narratives and to put on productions judged not by the context of their own life stories but on merit" [20].

As an audience member for the 2019 production *The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Becomes*, a performance about the impending threat of artificial intelligence, I distinctly remember the moment that I felt the shift in power; a collective reckoning for the audience as our unbearable fragility is played back to us loud and clear: once AI takes over from human intelligence, the 'normal' people (as the actors called us) will be deemed as inferior as intellectually disabled people are now; "Get used to having a label around your neck. Others will highlight your limits. You won't have rights over your own body" [21].

Another important success of Back to Back is its business model. By prioritising the creation of repertoire, and rejecting the reliance on short-term, project-to-project funding, the company centralises deep care of the ensemble's way of working, and challenges our expectations around pace and output. I remember Alice Nash, then Executive Producer and Co-CEO of Back to Back, saying of the company that they work at the pace of the performers (the pace that is necessary), and if that means developing one production over four years, rather than four productions over one year then, well, that's just the way it is.

Back to back is a democratic model that can only work with time, resources and mutual trust. I would argue that this should be true of most healthy, functioning relationships in the arts. As demonstrated by Back to Back, with time comes important, groundbreaking and outstandingly good art. Isn't this what we all need? Why don't we just collectively slow down? Probably because – as Marisa Georgiou states in their recent article – the attention economy insists that we are visible and relevant, and under a model that exists on scarcity and funding precarity, "we must present unceasingly as capable, professional, autonomous, available, personable and engaged as we individually compete for limited opportunities" [22]. They go on to say, "the industry needs to be fundamentally reorganised as an issue of urgency." Georgiou imagines a world where "our funding bodies adopt accessible and generous processes that fundamentally support artists, rather than gatekeep funds from them using arduous application processes, and attention-based indicators of worthiness" [22].

Ultimately, we need new models and a collective shift in the sector. Beyond the burnout and impossible labour standards that the creative industry enables, our current operating systems simply do not work for d/Deaf and disabled artists – it's impossible to go at the speed of the system. I believe we need more disabled producers for disabled artists, but not at the cost of either the producer or the artist – so, perhaps we are not yet ready in our current system.

In a world shaped by disabled artists, we need more disabled leaders. To me, that means inclusive succession planning, which is done with care and consideration, and doesn't just handball the leadership position from one non-disabled person to the next. To those reading this paper in a position of power within an organisation, I urge you to think about what substantial and sustainable changes can you make to your role that will create more space for d/Deaf and disabled leadership in the future? Could your position exist within a co-leadership, decentralised or distributed model that shares the workload and brings more voices to the table?

Belinda Locke, a gentle friend and incredible theatre-maker and disability advocate, earnestly reminded me; opportunities have grown for disabled artists in Australia, through the legacy of decades of tireless work by powerful d/Deaf and disabled leaders that have come before us. We need to learn from and with more d/Deaf and disabled people in our industry. Belinda urges us to “really” listen. Community care must be prioritised over competition, and the sector needs to pay attention to how it is behaving, who it is exploiting, and question what real action is underway. As poet, Andy Jackson recited at the ceremonial closing sitting of the Royal Commission: “...enough with the closed doors adorned with diversity and inclusion statements” [23]. The words are no longer enough – show me the work that you are doing to shake up the system.

## **5 Conclusion**

In summary, I am hopeful. We can see the sector changing before our eyes. Yes, the change is slow, but the momentum is building. Through models like Next Wave we have the space to experiment, to grow, to play, to get things wrong, to learn and then try again – and what a privilege that is. We need to find more partners to join us here, in the messy space of figuring it out (of slowing down and ‘hanging out’), in testing new models for collective and distributed leadership, which pry the door open just a little bit further to practice inclusive, relational ways of working. There is groundswell in this moment, with recommendations for new ‘fit-for-purpose’ disability legislation and mainstream peak bodies like NAVA revising their code of practice to include Access Rights for d/Deaf and disabled people. The sector is catching up; writing their DIAPs and AEIPs and adjusting their policies and processes to match. We are seeing more d/Deaf and disabled artists on our stages, paving the way with award-winning works that embed access as core. To strengthen our relationships, we need to meet the person in front of us where they are at, with humility, warmth, generosity and respect – a gesture, in my mind, we would all hope to be granted ourselves. Ultimately, a world shaped by disabled artists should be no more radical than a world shaped by artists. Instead, perhaps what is needed for our sector is a reorientation and reorganisation – of power, pace and productivity.

## **Acknowledgment**

This paper was written on unceded Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung Country in the south east corner of so-called Australia. I pay my respect to this Country, and to the Custodians and Elders past and present who provide deep care for their lands, waterways and culture. This paper was written at a time of great shame for this country, following a failed referendum calling for recognition of our First Nations people in the constitution. Sovereignty has never been ceded. Now is the time for



justice and action, for truth-telling and treaty for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

In writing this paper as a non-disabled person I also wish to acknowledge and pay respect to the d/Deaf and disabled community in Australia, from whom I have been privileged to work and learn alongside as an ally, through their generous, tireless, and staunch advocacy and disability pride. Thank you.

A note on language: Throughout this paper I use both person-first (people with disability) and identity-first (d/Deaf and disabled people) language. I respect the importance of self-determined language, and the complexity, political and personal decisions people make about how they identify. I acknowledge the constantly changing landscape on language preferences in Australia and internationally.

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