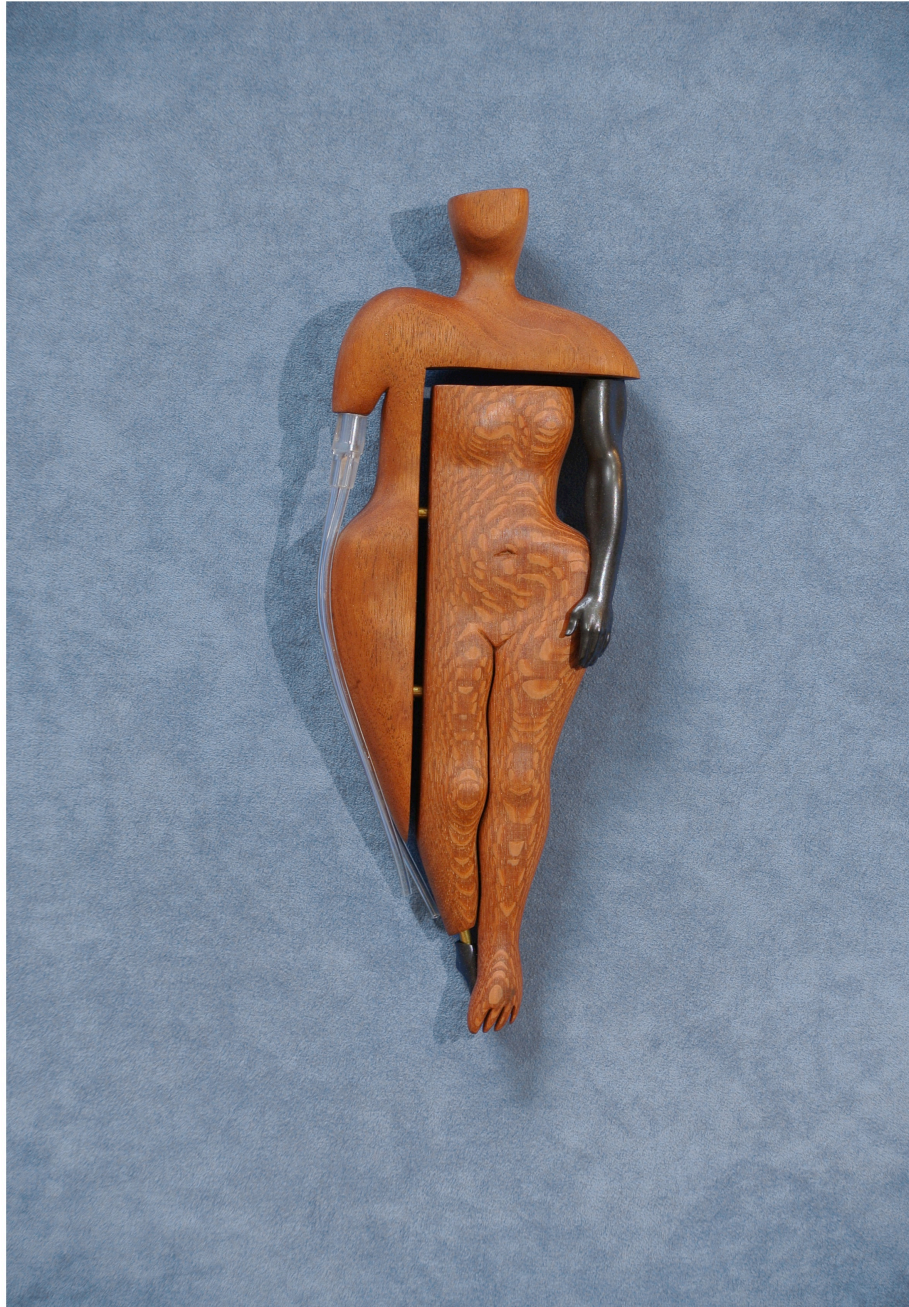




**REPORT ON DEAF AND DISABILITY ARTS IN
ONTARIO**

TANGLED ART + DISABILITY

2014



Persimmon Blackbridge, sculptor



REPORT ON DEAF AND DISABILITY ARTS IN ONTARIO 2014

Introduction

This report was prepared by **Tangled Arts + Disability** in consultation with a number practicing Deaf and disability artists from different disciplines and different regions across Ontario. This report identifies some of the key challenges, successes, barriers, and opportunities disability and Deaf artists encounter. This report is timely as it corresponds with a significant increase in attention to and funding for Deaf and disability arts from the Toronto Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the arts. Many of the issues and challenges detailed in this report could be significantly remediated by initiatives from the arts councils, like those that are emerging, that recognize and respect the specific conditions informing and constraining potential contributions of Deaf and disability artists.

Organizational Background

Tangled Art + Disability is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of artists with disabilities, and to enhancing access to arts and culture for all. Founded in 2003 as Abilities Arts Festival, **Tangled Art + Disability** has produced 11 annual multidisciplinary festivals. Incorporating curated exhibits, media screenings, live performances, artist talks, workshops, and special events for children and youth, **Tangled Festivals** have employed and presented hundreds of artists with disabilities and welcomed audiences in the thousands.

Over the last 4 years, **Tangled** has evolved from a single annual festival to a year-round arts organization providing a range of arts events, professional development opportunities. In 2012 we introduced the Sharon Wolf Artist in Residence position, now in its third year. In 2014, with the support of the Ontario Trillium Foundation, we begin a three-year pilot program, extending our programming across Ontario.

Background and Context:



Elaine Stewart, painter, sculptor

“Nearly every culture represents disability as a problem in need of solution” (Mitchell & Snyder, 1999). Disability and deafness is represented as a ‘problem’ in many ways—as a problem of medicine in need of cure, rehabilitation, or charity, a problem of sanity and civil obedience that requires social isolation, just to name a few. Such representations contribute to the social inequity and ableism experienced by disabled and D/deaf people. To create new representations of disability and deafness is a powerful challenge to this social inequity.

Since the 1980s, the disability and Deaf arts and culture movement has been an integral part of the disability rights movement across North America and in the United Kingdom. The disability rights movement, which emerged in the UK in 1970s alongside other rights-based social movements such as the women’s movement, the civil rights movement, and the queer liberation movement, moved to the US in the 1980s. Of the importance of disability arts to the disability rights movement, Jihan Abbas et al (2004) writes, “The emergence of disability culture, and the importance of art forms and representations in this culture, must be seen as a natural extension of the disability rights movement, as the disability arts movement is essentially about the growing political power of disabled people over their images and narratives.”

Although only 15 years old in Canada, disability and Deaf arts contributes to a vibrant disability and Deaf culture. The power of disability arts is twofold: disability produced by disabled and D/deaf people about the experience of disability and deafness creates new and multiplicitous representations of disability and deafness which challenge stereotypic understandings and, at the same time, the making of art by disabled and D/deaf people disrupts the cultural myth that we are passive. Disability and Deaf arts and culture demonstrates that our communities are creative and powerful agents of social change.

As longtime disability rights activist Catherine Frazee asserts of disability artists' participation in Canadian culture, "Disabled people don't seek merely to participate in Canadian culture - we want to create it, shape it, stretch it beyond its tidy edges."



Elaine Stewart, painter, sculptor



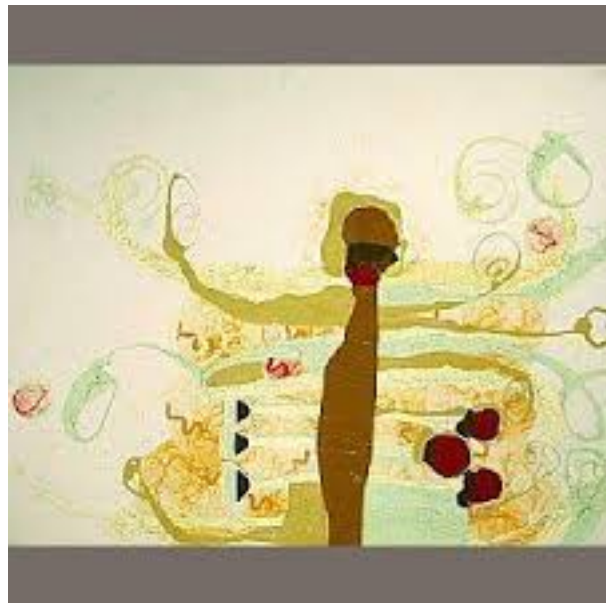
Lindsay Fisher, mix-media artist

This report draws on our experience as the only provincial multi-disciplinary disability arts organization and reflects on conversations generated at Tangled Arts' **Critical Mass: An Ontario Disability Arts Retreat**, a meeting of 12 cross-disciplinary disability artists working across the province in which we took up themes of disability aesthetics, curatorial practices, and accessibility and the arts. Through these consultations, we have distilled the barriers faced by disability and Deaf artists into three categories:

Attitudinal Barriers: Assumptions about the caliber of disability and Deaf arts and that disability and Deaf artists are not professional artists;

Accessibility Barriers: Barriers to accessing training facilities, exhibition spaces, and culture venues due to the inaccessibility of buildings and inaccessibility of public transit;

Financial Barriers: Many Deaf and disability artists cannot access arts grants because of the way this money compromises their Ontario Disability Support (ODSP) funding, which many Deaf and disability artists rely on for their livelihoods.



Katherine Sherwood, painter



Persimmon Blackbridge, sculptor



An experience of exclusion, marginalization, and significant material disadvantages in the form of attitudinal and physical barriers are important and recurrent themes. These have a pronounced impact on the training and exhibition opportunities available to disability and Deaf artists. Depending on the art form and the specifics of the disability, that exclusion might be physical - limiting access in multiple ways and at multiple levels, as well as cultural, political, and financial access.

Financial

This second challenge - financial - is a profound factor for a great majority of people with disabilities. This is certainly the case for the artists consulted in this initiative. We know, of course, that affluence is hardly a typical condition of any artist, especially an emerging artist. However, it is important to bear in mind that, according to the World Bank, people with disabilities experience rates of poverty almost twice those of the general population.

At **Tangled Art + Disability**, we have learned from our experience that a difference of \$5 or \$10 in the cost of a ticket will profoundly influence the likelihood of attracting an audience from the disability community to even the most "popular" programming hurdles cut across differences of age, education and discipline. To name a few:

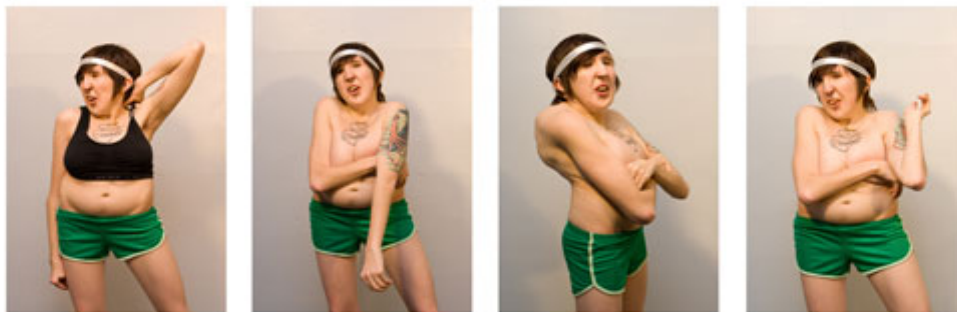
- Extremely inadequate, and unreliable public transit make arriving at a wide range of cultural events difficult to impossible for many with physical disabilities.
- Art events, performances, exhibits, readings, screenings are routinely held in inaccessible venues; with non-existent or inadequate interpretation, audio description; and limited, if any, wheelchair access or attendant services.
- Formal training programmes, as well as peer-led workshops, do not routinely include accessible equipment, tools or materials of one's art form, even when they are held in accessible venues.
- Communications systems, equipment and services for Deaf or sight-impaired artists are often considered their personal responsibility.
- Many people with disabilities routinely experience health setbacks which require time "off" work or education or projects which keep them treading water rather than moving forward in synch with an established programme or system of professional advancement.

Another significant element in the poverty cycle is the catch-22 that prevents artists who receive benefits from Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) from earning more than small token amounts. Few artists receiving ODSP can risk taking short-term employment that would disqualify them from the program that is critical to their survival.

Again, the financial implications are significant: from the lost income of missed days of employment to the setback of replacing costly health supports (not necessarily covered by OHIP). The impact of financial challenges reverberates well beyond the financial - from the diminished access to and visibility within a community of peers to loss of status and credibility in the eyes of prospective employers/curators.

All these factors collude to turn a series of individual obstacles into a **perpetual game of snakes and ladders which intersect and re-enforce each other.**

Workout.



American Able®



Jes Sachse, mixed media artist

Where do we go from here?

Disability and Deaf artists must be supported, and such support needs to consider and push back against the substantial physical, attitudinal, and financial barriers that these artists face.

As the work emerging from this initiative demonstrates, Deaf and disability artists produce fiercely creative and professional work. Such work disrupts stereotypical understanding of disability which foster and sustain such physical, attitudinal, and financial barriers.



Geoff McMurchy, sculptor

Next Steps: Deaf and Disability Arts in Ontario

Despite not having physical access to many arts training schools and venues, the caliber of disability and Deaf arts is high. Still Deaf and disability artists often confront barriers created by the assumption that they are not producing professional high quality work, but, rather all artwork produced by Deaf and disability artists are simply products of art therapy (an assumption that feeds into the cultural understanding that disabled people are ‘problems’ in need of development and rehabilitation) and therefore without intention or awareness of a broader art world. Participating in and supporting Deaf and disability arts and culture is a powerful way to resist these archaic assumptions.

There are two distinct approaches to consider in terms of next steps in promoting the conditions for Ontario's Deaf and disability artists:

- 1) **An auxiliary fund** to supplement existing streams and mitigate the significant disability-specific costs in developing and training artists with disabilities as well as in the production, exhibition, dissemination of their work;
- 2) **A separate production and creation stream** for Deaf and disability artists.

i) Accessibility needs to be integrated across the board:

A budget line for accessibility needs to be including in all arts grants applications (creation, production, and professional development) and ‘accessibility’ needs to be understood as self-defined and recognized as anything an individual articulates as something that they need.

Furthermore, accessibility needs to be understood as a responsibility of the arts community, for the benefit of society as a whole; not simply a responsibility of artists with disabilities for their sole benefit. For example, we need more **accessible art galleries across Ontario**.

ii) Not all artists with disabilities identify as disability artists, or only disability artists:

Artists with impairments who do not think of themselves as disabled for personal and/or professional reasons may not apply for disability-specific funding but they would still benefit from the considerations mentioned above (accessibility budget-line, understanding that disabled people may not have access to professional training, etc.). Other artists who do identify as disability artists also identify as queer



artists or artists of colour. They might find that their applications fit better in another stream but still want the issues described above to be considered.

We asked artists at this retreat—who were all artists with disabilities—whether or not they considered themselves a ‘disability artist’ and there was not a common answer among our group of 12. A First Nations artist from Thunder Bay, for example, did not identify as having a disability but instead saw himself as an injured worker. He said that for him, and many in his arts community, they are already battling the stereotype that they are ‘unable.’

2) A Separate Stream for Creation and Production

i.) Disability culture

First and foremost, the reports made clear that there are disability cultural considerations that need to be considered. Many of the artists Tangled supports embody disability as a prideful identity and recognize their art contributes to a vibrant disability culture. Funding disability arts through separate creation and production streams recognizes that disability is more than an individual experience, but is a social identity and a culture.

Within our own work, **Tangled Art + Disability** increasingly supports disability culture in a number of ways. This represents an evolution in the organization, reflecting the importance of programming through a disability lens.

- We produce and curate disability art by people with disabilities;
- We offer a disability artist-in-residence program and envision disability artist residency programs outside Toronto;
- We contribute to a broader community and scholarly dialogue about aesthetics, activism and society;

We believe in the importance of holding on to disability arts as separate — and separately-supported— field of work and inquiry.

ii) Challenges specific to disability and ableism:

When we asked artists whether disability arts should be funded separately or in a way that was integrated, they cited a host of difficulties faced by disability artists as the chief argument for a separate funding stream.

Until the exclusion or marginalization from professional-stream systems is remedied, it is critical that alternative training, production and presentation systems are available and professionally validated.

iii) Disability Arts is still "emerging" in Canada

By most accounts, disability arts in Canada, though vibrant, is only about 15 years old. Art made about disabled people is hundreds of years old. We are developing aesthetics and curatorial practices which resists the ways that disabled people have been included in art, but such a development takes time to be done well. For this reason, disability arts often requires more time for research, experimentation, exploration, and development. To this end, arts councils' funding structures could account for the extended timelines that disability artists may need to push against stereotypical representations and create and exhibit something new.

Finally:

A major problem that disability artists have been dealing with for years is how to receive arts funding (or receive commissions/sell their work) without it affecting their ODSP income. Until this grossly unjust situation is worked out, arts councils can fund disabled artists differently in ways that won't affect their ODSP, e.g. recognizing a collective, rather than an individual as a fundable entity.

It is possible that no other single undertaking by the arts councils would be as singularly welcomed by the Deaf and disability community as its championing of this issue at the provincial level.



Nomy Lamm, Performance artist

Conclusion

It is far outside the scope and capacity of this single initiative to make definitive recommendations of this scale and significance. We hope that what we have been able to provide is an overview of the most significant factors to be considered in moving forward.

However, from multiple discussions Tangled has had with individual artists and groups over the past year, we believe that at this stage and for the near future, **there are compelling reasons to consider a combination of both approaches: dedicated funding for a wide range of accessibility supports and professional development initiatives; and a dedicated creation and production stream for Deaf and disability artists.**



Sunara Taylor, painter



Accessibility Challenges

For Artists:

- Accessible Transit
- Physical access to training, professional development, advancement programmes;
- Physical access to venues: theatres, galleries, cinemas, seminars etc.;
- Interpretation (ASL - in both official languages - captions, surtitles, audio description etc.);
- Few adapted work spaces limiting access to employment;
- Capacity to earn money without jeopardizing ODSP;
- Communication;
- Isolation from networks of advancement: the opportunities to learn the ropes enter cohorts.

For the growing population of audiences with disabilities:

- Accessible Transit in proximity to accessible venues;
- Physically accessible venues;
 - Entry into theatres, concert halls, galleries;
 - Limited number and placement of wheelchair spaces in audiences and stages);
- Rarity of audio description, surtitles, ASL, live captioning for theatre, dance, media, exhibits;
- Inaccessible information hubs (websites etc.) by arts organizations; about arts events.

OPPORTUNITIES CONSTRUCTIVE CHANGE

Across the provincial arts culture:

- Promoting the artistic and social importance for all Ontarians of an inclusive, accessible arts culture;
- Requiring existing clients to provide accessibility plan to serve their artists and their audiences, scaled to their granting size
- Supporting smaller-budget clients to introduce core access: websites, venues etc.
- Working with provincial, municipal and federal colleagues to make accessibility a priority with a time line;
- Creating an inclusion "tool kit:" simple guidelines, suggestions, best practices;
- Enhance in-house readiness for officers to meet with clients;
E.g.: Introduction of ASL speakers within staff
- Targeted tutorials at the arts councils or in community settings about available programmes;
- Prioritizing artists with disabilities for artists in the schools programmes, artists in communities.
- Leveraging the authority and status of arts councils to make the provincial government and its other agencies more accessibility-conscious and responsive.



Carrie Perreault, performance artist



Systemic initiatives:

- Taking the lead in **building provincial awareness** of and commitment to the full participation of Deaf and disability artists in Ontario's vibrant arts culture;
- Establishing standing **advisory group of Deaf and disability artists** to contribute to advancing arts councils capacity with regards to accessibility;
- Ensuring that **accessibility elements are funded in addition** to the grant level for all existing grants;
- Creation of **pilot programmes in audio description** for performance and visual arts based on successful existing models in Vancouver and US;
- **Encouraging awareness and action among all arts council clients** with regards to engaging artists with disabilities.

New programmes and initiatives:

- Creation of a dedicated fund to support access to enhanced career development for individual artists to offset the profound shortcomings of existing training and professional systems;
- Supporting the ongoing professionalization, reach and excellence of service delivery for disability arts organizations through short to mid-term capacity-building programmes;
- Contributing to the creation of a modest, centrally located, disability-oriented arts space with dedicated exhibition space, arts educational resources, small performance; artistic residencies; meeting space venue;
- Creation of a dedicated Office of Deaf and Disability arts along the same principles as Aboriginal, francophone offices at federal and provincial levels.



Sins Invalid, performance troop



Sunara Taylor, painter
