

Disability Arts: From the Social Model to the Affirmative Model

by Colin Cameron

Abstract

I begin this article by developing an argument that disability arts can only be understood in the context of the wider disabled people's movement, as part of the ongoing struggle by disabled people for equality and inclusion. I suggest that disability arts is characterised by the principles of transgression, resistance and affirmation and is properly regarded as a conversation between disabled people involved in critiquing the oppression required by normalcy. In the second part of the article I explain and outline the affirmative model, a recently-developed theoretical tool rooted in perspectives developed within the disability arts movement.

Key Words

Disability Arts. Transgression. Resistance. Affirmation. Social Model. Affirmative Model

Part One

Disability Arts and Oppression

I don't think disability arts would have been possible without disability politics coming first [...] Our politics teach us that we are oppressed, not inferior [...] Our politics have given us self-esteem. They have taught us, not simply to value ourselves, but to value ourselves as disabled people.

Allan Sutherland, 'Disability Arts, Disability Politics', 1989(1)

I want to argue here that disability arts is fundamentally tied up with the wider disabled people's movement and, indeed, has no meaning apart from the wider disabled people's movement. In Jane Campbell's characterisation of the movement as a jigsaw, 'each piece vital for the true picture to emerge'(2), there are two images drawn. Just as each piece – the independent living movement, campaigning organisations, the direct action network, disability studies, disability arts – is required in order to understand the movement as a whole, so each part is given context only in relation to the whole. Disability arts involves creative and cultural production which interprets and illuminates the meaning of disability and the meaning of lived experience as people with impairments in a disabling society. Central to this enterprise is an understanding of disability as oppression – as an oppressive social relationship – that ties us to the social model.

The social model, in order to establish clearly what I mean when I use this term, identifies disability as: 'The loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers.'(3) Similarly, in the words of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, disability is 'something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we

are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society' (4). We are not people *with* disabilities, we are people with impairments who are disabled by the barriers we encounter on a daily basis, not only by the physical barriers that exclude, but also by the judgements and demeaning encounters we have to deal with in the business of going about our everyday lives.

Disability arts, as a set of practices, emerged in the 1980s in the activity of disabled people forging a new sense of personal and cultural identity illuminated by the social model: an identity rooted in perceptions of self-worth and value rather than one which could measure itself only in terms of physical deficit or departure from the norm.

Disability arts was issue-based arts, characterised and motivated by anger at the social injustice experienced by people with impairments in terms of exclusion from mainstream education, employment, housing, information, public transport and leisure opportunities. This anger, however, was not simply oppositional but productive, for it strengthened the sense of common purpose of disabled people who were coming increasingly to talk to each other. People with different impairments who had traditionally been taught by the charities, the doctors and the 'caring' professionals that their interests were separate and unrelated began to recognise in each other similar experiences of being marginalised and medicalised.

Disability arts has at its heart the principles of transgression, resistance and affirmation. It is transgressive in that it involves a refusal by disabled people to identify themselves in terms of personal tragedy, as the dominant culture represents and seeks to recognise them; it embodies resistance to hegemonic discourses of normality and abnormality; and it affirms by establishing physical difference as something to be expected and respected, valued on its own terms as part of ordinary human experience (5).

I'm in Love with my Body

All of these characteristics – transgression, resistance and affirmation – can be discovered in a line penned by the blues singer and disabled artist Johnny Crescendo: 'I'm in love with my body. It's the only one I've got.' (6) There is a self-respectful defiance in these words and a refusal of expectations that, as a disabled person, Crescendo will only be able to relate negatively to his own embodied experience. Impairment is part of everyday experience, not something to be lamented. In talking about why he wrote the song *I'm in Love with my Body* (2004), Crescendo tells of how, during his formative years, he had neither mixed with other disabled people nor felt comfortable with his impairment:

If I was sitting down and a potential girlfriend came up to me, I would dread the moment I had to stand up. I met some disabled people but they seemed to be saying 'thank you' and 'God bless you' all the time and I didn't want to do that. This continued until my early 30s, when I started to come into contact with disabled people who said 'fuck you' instead of 'bless you' and 'fuck off' instead of 'thank you'. I'd always been political and when the penny dropped it was so easy to see how I had been oppressed (7).

The song involves a dismissal of oppression and a refusal to be caught up in its bonds. Engagement with politicised disabled people – with disabled people who had taken on the social model as a framework for making sense of the contexts in which they lived their lives – enabled Crescendo to throw off the internalised oppression that had earlier meant he could only live uncomfortably with his impairment.

Through the organisation and development of cabarets, festivals, exhibitions, performances and workshops (8), the disability arts movement created spaces in which disabled people could come together to share and explore with each other insights and perspectives on situations that had previously only been experienced individually. With access at its heart, in practical terms this meant that gigs usually took place in small venues – arts centres, community centres, civic centres, sports centres, day centres, pubs, college bars, residential homes – any place, crucially, that disabled people were able to get to. Through performances of songs about patronising professionals and nose-pickers (The Fugertivs' *Bar Room Bollocks*, 1999); or which cocked a snook at the cultural icons disabled people have been taught to hold in high regard (Ian Stanton's *Douglas Bader*, 1992); through performance poetry questioning social limitations imposed on disabled people (Johnny Crescendo's *Disabled People Aren't Allowed To Say 'Fuck'*, 1988); through sign dance exploring the richness, depth and texture of signed communication (Common Ground Sign Dance Theatre); through exuberant reggae performances celebrating disabled identity and announcing that, after all, we are strong and confident about being who we are (Heart 'n' Soul), disability arts speaks to disabled people about their lives and the things happening in their lives. In terms of an analysis developed by John Fiske (9), disability arts is popular culture, for it involves the oppressed making use of the forms offered by mainstream culture and turning these to their own purposes, to communicate in accessible terms a different way of relating to disability, self and society. As Elspeth Morrison and Vic Finkelstein have argued: 'Arts events can provide another accessible route for looking at the world in relation to disabled people [...] Having someone on stage communicating ideas and feelings that an isolated disabled person never suspected were shared by others can be a turning point for many'(10).

Disability arts involves a rejection of dominant cultural narratives and assumptions which represent impairment as something to be cured, endured or overcome; as a sign of misfortune whichever way it is considered. It also involves a revelation of, and a reflection upon, the experience of disability as the experience of oppression. Oppression not in terms of having somebody with a big stick hovering above, but identified in the routine everyday practices of a society that places a high value on normality and anticipates that this is something people with impairments will aspire to; which imposes judgements about the right and proper ways of going about things and characterises other ways of achieving these same ends as abnormal and inferior. Iris Young has noted that: 'The conscious actions of many individuals daily contribute to maintaining and reproducing oppression, but these people are simply doing their jobs or living their lives, and do not understand themselves as agents of oppression'(11).

In materialising medical and personal tragedy models that can only comprehend impairment as deficit, countless workers in the disability industry or the media, for example, play their own parts in sustaining disability as a form of oppression. Disability arts offer an alternative perspective. What is involved in disability arts is a reclamation of the impaired body; a statement of the right of the impaired body to respect and to inclusion on its own terms; an affirmation of the rights of people with impairments to do things differently and to be who we are *as we are*. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have made the point that: 'The power of transgression always originates at the moment when the derided object embraces its deviance as value. Perversely championing the terms of its own stigmatisation, marginal peoples alarm the dominant culture with a canniness about their own subjugation' (12).

Disability arts throws out a challenge to the ontological security of those who find comfort in their own normality. Building on an insight generated by the social model, disability arts unsettles dominant cultural ideas about the self and the autonomy of the self. It develops a discourse that regards impairment as presenting an opportunity to gaze critically and differently at what passes for reality: a reality which mediates the interests of the dominant non-disabled. It draws the unpredictability and frailty of the human body from the dark recesses of consciousness to which it has been confined and brings it to the forefront of attention.

In the Ghetto?

Disability Arts are art forms, art works and arts productions created by disabled people to be shared with and to inform other disabled people, by focusing on the truth of disability experience (13).

If we accept this characterisation by Paddy Masefield, which identifies disability arts as a conversation being held by disabled people between themselves, is it not legitimate to ask where the challenge described above is made? How can it be argued that disability arts unsettles dominant cultural ideas if it is only seen and talked about by disabled people themselves and regarded as being of marginal interest by the rest of society? If disability arts are to be taken seriously is it not important that the end results are regarded as good art rather than tainted by association with amateur or community arts?

These are legitimate questions, but they are also questions that pose a dilemma. Given its rootedness in the wider disabled people's movement, disability arts has, in many ways, been characterised by a levelling that is perhaps inherent in any process that aims to be democratic. While cabaret acts developed as community arts projects may have evolved many profound and darkly humorous observations about disabling social relations, it has also been observed that, in terms of performance quality, sometimes they are just not sufficiently polished to aspire to anything more than performing to other disabled people at the local arts centre. For disabled artists who aim to be considered critically for the quality and professionalism of their work, this association is sometimes regarded as limiting. How, then, is disability arts to be taken seriously?

An illustration of this dilemma can be seen if we consider the transformation of the magazine of the London Disability Arts Forum, *Disability Arts in London (DAIL)*, into *Arts Disability Culture (ADC)*. My observations here are based on comments made by Brian, one of the participants in my PhD research on disability identity, during an interview that took place in March 2008, shortly before the closure of the London Disability Arts Forum, in which he declared:

DAIL was very pro-disability arts, was very political in the sense that it supported disabled people's actions for getting civil rights, and it actively highlighted areas of experience which were blatantly discriminatory. Its strength was that it had a very strong community and was a strong community arts publication. Its weakness was that at that time it was not really the sort of publication where you would see any criticism from an artistic viewpoint, which meant that disability arts was really very much seen as a movement of amateurs (14).

As a free community arts publication promoting a social model agenda, *DAIL* built up a monthly circulation of 5,000, reaching a wide audience of disabled people. Along with *Coalition*, the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People's magazine, *DAIL* was regarded nationally as one of the key publications of the disabled people's movement. But, as Brian remarks, it was considered to be uncritical and therefore a poor indicator of what differentiated 'quality' disability arts from any old disability arts. While *ADC*, which emerged in 2007, was, in Brian's words, 'full of very high quality critical analysis of disability arts', as a 'quality' publication requiring a subscription it had problems marketing itself, and established a circulation of only 300 before its demise in 2008 with the closure of the London Disability Arts Forum. The attempt to put distance between disability arts and its grassroots led not to its greater glory but to its loss.

It is possible to make sense of the aspirations of 'serious' disability artists to gain critical recognition for the quality of their work (as opposed to having it recognised and celebrated *only* as part of disability culture) by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of cultural production as a class issue. 'Culture is', writes Bourdieu, 'not what one is but what one has, or rather, what one has become'(15). Understanding what constitutes quality, and having the capability to produce with a knowledge of what constitutes quality, is acquired only at the expense of long training at art college or university. Artists as individuals look for recognition for what they have produced. The fact that what they have produced is an expression of their identity as a disabled person is, in their own eyes, secondary to its merit as art. In the eyes of others, however, this is exactly what makes it of marginal interest, or to be regarded with patronising condescension. There is a contradiction here, also, in so much as the aspiration to achieve distinction as an individual reflects bourgeois concerns while the desire to challenge discrimination and oppression as a member of a relatively powerless group addresses the class-based structures and unequal distribution of life opportunities in modern society. To enable culture to fulfil its primary function of class co-optation, Bourdieu suggests, it is necessary 'that the link between culture and education, which is simultaneously obvious and hidden, be forgotten, disguised and denied'(16). While the overtly political practice

of disability arts explicitly and unashamedly makes clear the link between culture and education, quality is not always reckoned as the most important thing: rough and ready accessibility is what counts.

I would argue against the idea that there is a need for critical acceptance of disability arts in order that disabled artists and performers achieve greater representation in the cultural mainstream. While disabled people have long argued, for example, for increased representation on television as part of a cultural shift towards inclusion and equality, the outcome of this has been to other purposes. The structural function of television is to provide amusement that distracts from the violence performed by capitalism, to normalise rather than offer a critique of capitalism. Jean Baudrillard observes that transgression never gets on the air without being transformed into something else. There is no better way to reduce the impact of transgression, he suggests, 'than to administer a mortal dose of publicity'(17).

While there is evidence of a recent increase in the range of disability-focused television programming, as well as of the increased incidental appearance of disabled people in programmes not specifically disability-related(18), contemporary representations of disabled people on television still deal principally in narratives of personal tragedy. Where disabled people are appearing more regularly on our television screens, rather than signifying an increasing respect for difference and diversity, what is being sold is the value of conformity. In Gareth Palmer's terms, programmes directing the public gaze at people with impairments are part of myriad new formats depicting 'the irregularities and incivilities of everyday life to enable us to pass judgement on fellow citizens'(19). They need to be considered alongside programmes about dodgy builders, recalcitrant drivers and unpleasant airline travellers; or about the interpersonal conflicts between residents ensconced together in a house or celebrities stuck in a jungle for several weeks. As Richard Hoggart has explained, the individualising discourses presented by television discourage serious critical analysis of the structural causes of human unhappiness. In Hoggart's words, the media occupies a role as a gatekeeper on behalf of its audiences: 'keeping out not so much obviously undesirable elements such as rank obscenity or malicious slander but worrying elements, elements which the anonymous audience simply "might not like" – intellectual criticisms of some popular attitudes, anything remotely judgemental of those attitudes'(20).

My point is that the pursuit of 'quality' as a measure of disability arts leads us nowhere useful. If we accept Masfield's description, good disability arts will be regarded as such because of the insights they reveal about the disability experience rather than in terms of how far they meet irrelevant aesthetic criteria. The validation of disability arts by the mainstream is unnecessary, as it is not the purpose of disability arts (as part of the wider disabled people's movement), to look to the integration of people with impairments in society as it currently exists, but to inclusion in a transformed society. In the meantime, there is a requirement for disabled artists to continue to expose and critique the oppression required by normalcy.

Part Two

Towards an Affirmative Model

Within the emerging academic discipline of disability studies there has been ongoing critical debate about the adequacy of the social model as a theoretical tool sufficient to address and explain disability in all its aspects. Disabled feminists have stated that the social model over-emphasises socio-structural barriers and ignores personal and experiential aspects of disability. Jenny Morris, for example, has suggested that ‘there is a tendency within the social model to deny the experiences of our own bodies’(21). It has been argued that the collective identification of the disabled people’s movement, and the recognition of disability as primarily a political issue, has left little room for the acknowledgement of often painful and emotionally draining impairment effects(22).

The response to these criticisms made by social modellers has been that: ‘The social model of disability is about nothing more complicated than a clear focus on the economic, environmental and cultural barriers experienced by people who are viewed by others as having some form of impairment’(23). The social model is not an all-encapsulating theory of disability (24) but a framework through which disability can be recognised as a social process. Without impairment there is no social model of disability. While disability is not the only collective social response that could be made to impairment (the major thrust of the disabled people’s movement has been to demonstrate this), without impairment as a departure from and challenge to valued norms of physical embodiment in bourgeois society, disability as a specific form of social oppression would not exist. The fact that much of the movement’s campaigning activity has focused on structural and environmental barriers reflects (perhaps controversial) positioning decisions rather than a weakness of the social model.

One intervention in the structural/individual, barriers/experience debate was made by John Swain and Sally French in a *Disability and Society* article from 2000 entitled *Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability*. Here they proposed an affirmative model: ‘essentially a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle of being impaired and disabled’(25). Rooted in perspectives emerging from the disability arts movement, and aiming to build upon ‘the liberatory imperative of the social model’(26), the affirmative model is identified as a critique of the dominant personal tragedy model corresponding to the social model as a critique of the medical model. In proposing an affirmative model, Swain and French set out a position from which it can be asserted that, far from being necessarily tragic, living with impairment can be experienced as valuable, exciting, interesting and satisfying. This is not to deny that there can be negative experiences resulting from impairment, but to note that this is not all that impairment is about.

The original article has been developed and elaborated upon in Swain and French’s book *Disability on Equal Terms* (2008). Outlined here is a statement of what the affirmative model *is* and *is not* about. The affirmative model *is* about:

- Being different and thinking differently about being different, both individually and collectively

- The affirmation of unique ways of being situated in society
- Disabled people challenging presumptions about themselves and their lives, not only in terms of how they differ from what is average or normal, but also about the assertion, on their own terms, of human embodiment, lifestyles, quality of life and identity
- Ways of being that embrace difference

The affirmative model is *not* about:

- All people with impairments celebrating difference
- Disabled people ‘coming to terms’ with disability and impairment
- Disabled people being ‘can do’ or ‘lovely’ people
- The benefits of living and being marginalised and oppressed in a disabling society(27)

In my PhD research I wanted to ask, among other questions, whether the affirmative model is really necessary when we already have the social model, and whether, as a new theoretical tool, the affirmative model is able to fulfil a task the social model has not been designed for. Among the insights I gained was one drawn from the following comment made by a research participant called Charles:

When I was talking in the pub with Erin and yourself tonight [...] with every sentence I wasn't thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to say this sentence with a speech impairment ... blah blah blah ... now I'm going to say this with a speech impairment ... blah blah blah ... I'm going to move back, but I'm moving back in my wheelchair ...' You don't think about it, but when you catch somebody looking at you – and looking at the effects of your impairment, concentrating on your impairment – then you're suddenly aware that you're speaking differently ... (28)

Impairment is not necessarily a problem for people with impairments, but is often made a problem by those around them. Disability is more than about just what people with impairments are prevented from doing and being, it is about what they are required to do and be instead. The disabling gaze requires people with impairments to experience their own embodiment negatively, to take upon themselves a role which acquiesces with the expectation that impairment can only be endured or struggled against, but never lived with in acceptance and enjoyment of self. There is a purpose involved in the imposition of this role, which has to do with the social requirement for conformity. I have, therefore, tentatively suggested the following affirmative model definitions:

Impairment: physical, sensory, emotional and cognitive difference to be expected and respected on its own terms in a diverse society

Disability: a personal and social role which simultaneously invalidates the subject position of people with impairments and validates the subject position of those identified as normal (29)

As a development emerging from the social model, the affirmative model has its roots in the insights and perspectives developed in and by the disability arts movement. Whereas the social model allows us to understand the bigger picture, and to recognise the

structural barriers which oppress and exclude, the affirmative model is intended to allow us to make sense of what happens at the level of the countless everyday interactions in which people with impairments are required to experience themselves as deficient. If this model can be used as a tool for resilience in the face of oppressive social relations, its usefulness is established.

Footnotes

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