Rights and Pathways of Support for Disabled Artists on the Island of Ireland

DATE: April 2019

Context:
This statement on Rights and Pathways of Support for Disabled Artists is the result of an all island gathering hosted by Cultural Policy Observatory Ireland, which took place on 1st March 2019 at Queen's University Belfast. The event was organised by Dr Franziska Schroeder, Sonic Arts Research Centre; Dr. Victoria Durrer, Cultural Policy Observatory Ireland and Paula Larkin, University of Atypical.

The event gathered together practitioners, policymakers and researchers to discuss disability within the arts in an informal, conversational setting. 25 people attended, including researchers, artists and individuals from district councils, arts support networks and organisations, arts organisations, Arts Council Northern Ireland and Department for Communities.

Collectively, we explored:

- The experiences and developmental needs of disabled artists on the island of Ireland
- The needs of arts programmers in supporting those artists
- The challenges to career sustainability for artists

We focused our discussion on the **'professional arts'**. Based on the 2003 Arts Act in the Republic of Ireland, we defined this as

> any creative or interpretative expression (whether traditional or contemporary) in whatever form, and includes, in particular, visual arts, theatre, literature, music, dance, opera, film, circus and architecture, and includes any medium when used for those purposes.

With respect to 'professional', we follow the definition outlined in the 2010 research report *The Living and Working Conditions of Artists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland* which states: 'professional artists'

> refer to people who are active in pursuing a career as artists and who view arts work as their main profession or career, even if not their main source of income and regardless of their current employment status. (p. 6)

We also subscribed to the **Social Model of Disability**, which is taken as the key model by most disability groups throughout the island of Ireland. It considers the ways in which the organisation of society may be presenting barriers to the "full participation of people with disabilities" (Arts Council Ireland and Northern Ireland 1999, p. 6) and challenges society to address these barriers.

While we recognise that the use of the terms 'disabled artists' and artists with disabilities' differ across the island, we employ **'disabled artist'** here.[1]

<u>Who and What is this Statement for?</u>
This statement can be used in whole or part by arts and cultural organisations, artists, and arts managers and researchers, and those interested in the cultural rights of citizens across the island of Ireland. It is particularly focused on the rights and needs of individuals who define, or wish to define themselves, as individuals who make their living on a full- or part-time basis as artists.

The document summarises key discussions held on 1st March as well as actions agreed as a result.

The statement aims to:

- Build enthusiasm for activities that raise the profile, and support the development of, disabled artists on the island of Ireland.
- Help establish common ground for joined up working across higher education, district councils / local authorities, civil service and arts and cultural organisations and with artists.
- Assist in making representation of the rights and needs of disabled artists to executive and local-level elected officials, statutory funders, policy-makers and stakeholders.

In producing this statement, those of us who attended the event:
- Recognise that people with disabilities are active makers and artists.
- Highlight the need for more joined-up working across higher education, arts and cultural organisations, public and civil service, and involving elected officials in order to raise the profile, and support the development of, disabled artists.
- Recognise that, while there are different political and financial contexts existing in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland that impact the professional arts sectors, there is interest in continuing to support the sharing of work and knowledge.
- Recognise that though the needs, recommendations and actions proposed here are applicable to all artists, there is a need to support disabled artists, who are highly marginalised.
- Appreciate that while some of what we discussed may not be new, it is indicative of a renewed effort to keep the needs of disabled artists on the agenda of the arts and cultural sector.

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[1] Disabled Person/Artist employs the use of identity-first language which is based on the Social Model of Disability. While person-first language, e.g., Person/Artist with a Disability, aims to view the person as more than just their disability, it has the effect of separating the person from their disability, an intrinsic part of who they are. Person-first language is argued to place a negative connotation on the word disability, framing it as something one should want to have separated from oneself, rather than something that is a part of the person and to be embraced. As this is the terminology that the University of Atypical, an organising partner of the event on which this statement is based, employs, we have employed it here.

What are some of the key issues?

ACCESS

- Artists do not always feel 'entitled' to apply for grants. There may be a perception that the quality of their work is not of merit. This perception may be held by artists themselves but may also be a result of specialised funding streams and artistic programming that may (even if untentionally) marginalise the work of disabled artists.

- Issues of physical access do not stop at the 'front of house' but are also necessary to consider in terms of 'backstage' access.

- Access to training and development opportunities for disabled artists is still limited. This access is in relation to physical accessibility of spaces and cost, but also provision of support services, promotion of opportunities to as many people as possible, and attitudinal barriers.

- Supporting artists with disabilities requires a holistic and cross-sector approach. For instance, access to making and showcasing work are not only about ensuring that physical access to buildings is possible. It is also about transport links and support for care and support staff and family or friends. This means that addressing the needs of disabled artists requires discussions across public policy areas. Some work towards this end has taken place in local authorities (e.g. Derry and Strabane Council) and through support agencies (Arts & Disability Ireland).

- Local level arts and cultural plans and strategies must consider the needs of artists, but also disabled artists. There are local level examples through work by Belfast City Council as well as Mayo County Council, South Tipperary County Council and through the work of Arts and Disability Ireland.

- While specialised events, programming and funding streams are important for profile raising, it is equally important to embed the work of disabled artists within artistic programming as a whole (e.g Belfast International Arts Festival) as well as broader discussions on equity and equality

PROGRAMMING AND PROFILE OF ARTISTS

- Disparity of support for the programming of disabled artists is perceived between urban and suburban / rural / town / village areas. Individual artists and collectives feel there is a lack of touring opportunities as well as opportunities to exchange ideas and share work with groups working in other localities.

- Attitudinal change around what disabled artists can achieve, make and do is viewed as a barrier. Arts managers and programmers are important gatekeepers who influence how artists are represented and developed, as

well as how their work is presented and disseminated. While terminology, like 'disability', 'disabled', 'art' and 'artist' may be operational to some extent, it is felt and experienced personally. When commissioning and working with artists, it is important for arts managers to have a dialogue with individual artists about their own views, needs and interests and thus how their work might be framed and represented.

- The work of disabled artists is felt to be presented in a siloed way—as part of 'participation' activity or excluded from wider touring schemes. There is a myth that the work of disabled artists meets lesser standards of excellence. Similarly, there is a tendency to view the work of disabled artists as being only 'for' disabled audiences, rather than mainstream audiences.

- The low profile of disabled artists has resulted in a lack of role models for aspiring artists. The endorsement of other professional artists, arts managers and programmers, and Arts Councils are important in establishing status and raising profile.

- The lack of disabled arts managers and board members of arts organisations inevitably impacts on the support and programming of disabled artists.

- Arts managers / programmers may lack confidence in terminology around disability, arts and disability and disabled artists.

- Networking opportunities for artists (with artists and arts managers / programmers) create connections that build towards potential projects.

FUNDING

- Funding of ambitious work, risk-taking and experimental initiatives is needed.

- Greater support around navigating funding application 'speak' or terminology is needed.

- The funding of project activity must consider the support needs of disabled artists.

- Additional funds need to be made available outside of funding actual activity, in order to make opportunities more accessible for artists.

Key Recommendations

ACCESS

- Develop training and development support for artists to take up larger scale commissions.

- Bring the experiences of disabled artists onto the agenda of artform support agencies and unions.

- Higher education and agencies that provide training and development should provide bursaries for tuition and / or support.

- Arts managers and programmers need to allocate time and space to take part in discussions exploring the needs of disabled artists. While there is recognition that the capacity to do so is resource-dependent, it is also a value-based choice. Allocating time to these issues is a statement of value regarding the development of disabled artists.

- Art form development agencies and unions need to be, and showcase themselves, as relevant to disabled artists.

PROGRAMMING AND PROFILE OF ARTISTS

- Higher education needs to take on a greater role in the training and development of arts managers with regards to disabled artists

- Arts managers and programmers as well as artform development agencies should facilitate networking for artists within and across art forms and across the Island. Sharing this responsibility will help with sharing of resources.

- Programmers need to work (together) to raise the profile and visibility of the work of disabled artists. Partnership working amongst programmers, support agencies and artists can build learning and capacity for supporting disabled artists. Partnership should be within and cross-jurisdiction on the Island.

- Make larger scale commissions (of higher ambition and monetary value) available.

- Endorse work.

- Involve artists in designing opportunities and in decision making processes.

FUNDING

- Assign mentors to assist artists with funding applications. Work with artists on what it means to be a mentor and what it means to be mentored. The implications of 'expert' or 'non-expert' status, need to be carefully considered here as well as the process by which mentoring might take place.

- Applications need a universal design approach to language (e.g. plain English).

- Funding streams for individual artists as well as artist collectives are required.

- Budgets for access / supports required need to be separate from project budgets.

- Increase opportunities for showcase / performance of work.

Actions

The following actions were agreed by members present on 1st March. These actions are indicative of a recognition of the importance of organisations and individuals at public sector and arts and cultural organisation level taking initiative to make change. These actions are only initial steps.

- Theatre NI will present the findings of our discussion to the Local Government Arts Managers Group in NI
- The work of disabled artists and the production of arts and disability work will become more embedded within reading lists, guest speakers, and course content on the MA in Arts Management programme Queen's University Belfast. The programme will seek to build greater links with arts and cultural institutions supporting the work of disabled artists across the Island.
- The MA in Arts Management programme Queen's University Belfast will explore the possibility of a bursary to increase opportunities for people with disabilities to explore further training and education in arts management.
- The MA in Arts Management programme Queen's University Belfast will work with similar programmes in the Republic of Ireland to develop industry-engaged learning opportunities for students.
- University of Atypical will work with the Belfast International Arts Festival to advocate for larger scale commissions of work by disabled artists as well as the touring of work.
- University of Atypical will facilitate discussions with arts managers in Northern Ireland to clarify issues and tensions around appropriate language and terminology in relation to arts and disability and working with disabled artists.
- All in attendance agreed to strive toward addressing the issues raised in this statement.