

# REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR PRESENTING AND CRITIQUING DISABILITY ART

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Disability art tends to be difficult to understand, critique and display. Not because it includes disabled people or themes of disability, but because frequently, disabled people are not in control of the very projects, exhibitions and performances that they are involved in and/or that are based on their experiences. These strategies and questions have been developed to help think critically about disability art and curatorial practice. They are in no way exhaustive, or absolute. They are however, a collection of considerations that have been researched and integrated in other situations. As such they provide an ideal starting point in which to explore disability representations, presentation and displays.

*Note: For the sake of brevity the term **artistic director** – refers to the person taking artistic leadership in a production, in any artistic disciplines ex. curator, producer, director, choreographer etc... **Presentation** refers to exhibitions, films, theatrical productions, performances etc....*

## 1. Leadership: Who is in control and who benefits?

### Reflective Questions

- Will disabled people benefit from being involved in this presentation **and** by viewing it? Was it accessible to disabled people?
- Does the artistic director have an appropriate level of understanding about disability art, disability rights and display?
- Have assumptions about disability and/or disabled people been made, from a non-disabled person about the artistic direction
- Is there a process in place to ensure accountability?
- Is there a reflective or evaluative process to assess how the artistic direction and the final presentation, affected the lives of disabled people?
- Are there opportunities for disabled arts professionals to be involved in the artistic leadership and curatorial process?

### Strategies

- I. The artistic director(s) has expertise and knowledge of disability rights and disability art, particularly when disability art is the main theme of a performance or exhibition. For partial or minimal inclusion there is constant consultation with disability arts experts.
- II. Direction comes from a collaborative curatorial team comprised of disabled arts professionals and knowledgeable allies. This allows for diverse experiences, expertise and understandings of disability and art to be

- incorporated. This may also mitigate community or public backlash by ensuring a reputable process.
- III. Provide increased opportunities for disabled artists and arts professionals to participate in curatorial and research internships and residencies.

*2. Content: What is presented?*

Reflective Questions

- Is disability already being represented in current programming? Are there ways that disability has been hidden or left out of the current framing of the work?
- What is the power relationship between the subject, the artist and the audience? Are disabled people empowered?
- What is the contribution of the disabled subject in the work? Is it passive or active? Do they have control of the project and how they are being displayed?
- Does this work fall into themes associated with the disability art movement either nationally or internationally?
- Are other disability artists working in this theme or material, to compare this work to?
- Does this work challenge current assumptions and stereotypes about disability or does it reinforce them?
- Do the works displayed explore a diversity of experiences and identities which overlap with disability, including but not limited to race, sexuality, location, language etc...?
- Does this work advance current contemporary disability art discourse or is a repetition of what has already been explored by other artists?
- Who benefits from this exhibition? Consider reputation, financially, advanced careers, media attention etc...)
- Am I confident that there is no intentional or unintentional cultural appropriation of disability culture or identity in the work on display?
- What conclusions do audiences draw from the absence of disability and disability art in artistic programming?

Strategies

- I. Present artwork that is both created by and selected by disabled artists
- II. Create both opportunities for focused disability art themed programming as well as opportunities to include disability art and disabled artists in other thematic group exhibitions/performances/festivals.
- III. Consider the physical and sensory access of diverse audiences including those with disabilities, in your selection of artworks. Select pieces that provide opportunities for interaction, tactility, audio and non-auditory experiences.

### *3. Display: How is disability presented?*

#### Reflective Questions

- Is the presentation based on the medical or social model of disability? Is the display personalized or depersonalized?<sup>1</sup>
- Is programming accessible? Have I consulted with visitors with disabilities to ensure that?
- How can we address the public's medical curiosity without framing the subject within the medical model?
- If applicable: Are disabled people treated as artists or subjects? Are they named and recognized as individuals?

#### Strategies

- I. When incorporating works that create opportunities for staring or medicalized curiosity consider ways to directly address these through didactics, or though juxtaposing the work with other pieces which highlight the relationships between the viewer and the subject. Working closely with arts professionals with disabilities will in most cases be the best way to facilitate this.
- II. Ensure that disability art is given equal consideration, presentation and space as other works. Historically disability art is given smaller or less predominant sites of display / smaller stages/ shorter runs etc...
- III. Ensure that the presentation is physically accessible. If your institution is not physically accessible, then explore ways to create access in multiple spaces such as online and off-site presentations. This may also highlight to the administration for the need for greater physical access in your organization. Many standards have been developed to assist with universal design principals in galleries, and piloting these standards is critical to establishing their full integration.
- IV. Consider the impact of presenting disability art in locations such as in the gallery/theatre, online and alternative public spaces, and how these will impact the audiences viewing of the work.

### *4. Programming and Didactics: What messages do audiences receive?*

#### Reflective Questions

- Is there medical information about the artist's impairments? If so is it relevant to the reading of the work, endorsed by the artist and using language they indorse?
- Are public programs accessible? And in answering this question it may be also helpful to explore your own motivations for accessibility – is it greater

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<sup>1</sup> Sandell et al, "Buried in the Footnotes", 20-21

audience ticket sales or are you making an attempt to address discrimination and exclusion?

- Do gallery staff and volunteers know how to talk about the work appropriately?
- Are there ways to challenge audiences to question ‘absences’ both within a particular artwork and also within collections and programming. Are there disability artists who are already exploring this?

### Strategies

- I. Due to the history of exclusion of disabled people to cultural and arts spaces, targeted outreach may be needed to message that this segregation is being addressed within your institution and presentations. Directly invite disability communities (including audiences, artists, arts professionals etc...) to your programming.
- II. Unless indorsed by the artists and relevant to the work, it is typically not advised to include detailed medical information about a person’s diagnosis, impairment or medical history. Speak with the disabled people involved in the project and ascertain how they talk about their identity and what language they use to describe themselves.
- III. If the work creates opportunities for staring at disabled people, consider providing didactic information about the experience of being stared at as well as posing questions back at visitors to reflect on what it feels like to be stared at.
- IV. Train staff, particularly those who will be interpreting the work for the public, including guards (even if it is not their job, they often taken on this role), volunteers and educators. Provide information about how the work should be contextualized as well as appropriate and inappropriate language endorsed by the artist.
- V. Integrate and promote the perspectives and presence of disability artists into current gallery programming, including in artist talks, as art educators, lecturers, tour guides, guest curators etc...
- VI. Whenever presenting text either in labels, panels, or in catalogues, consider the level of language and the format. Successful alternatives include the integration of captioned, signed and audio video messages, or significantly reducing the amount of text in the display.
- VII. Consider multiple and alternative methods for audiences to provide their reflections or feedback on the exhibit, including online discussion forums or video booths.

## The (quick and dirty) pocket guide to analyzing disability-themed art

1. Who benefits? (career, media attention, ego, reputation, financially etc...)
2. Who is in control of the message/art form?
3. Will disabled people benefit (directly or indirectly) from being involved in this work **and** by viewing it? (Or is this really about enlightening non-disabled people? )
4. What is the power relationship between the subject, the artist and the audience?
5. What is the contribution of the disabled artists in the work? Is it passive or active? Do they have control of the project and how they are being presented?
6. Does this work challenge current assumptions and stereotypes about disability or does it reinforce them?
  - a. If it is the latter, reconsider the question “Who benefits?”
7. Have assumptions about disability and/or disabled people been made, from a non-disabled person about the direction of this piece?
8. Are disabled people treated as artists or subjects? Are they named and recognized as individual contributors?
  - a. If they are not, reconsider questions 1, 3, and 4.