

DISABILITY ARTS AND CULTURE PAPERS

TRANSCRIPTS OF A DISABILITY ARTS AND CULTURE SEMINAR: November 20th 1991

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## PREFACE

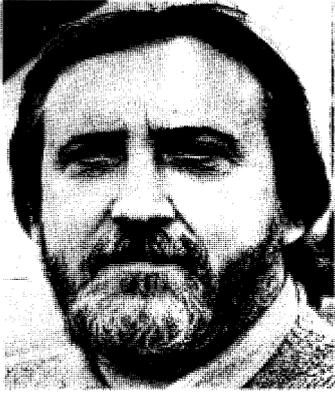
The Disability Arts and Culture Papers represent the proceedings of a one day seminar held on November 20th 1991 at Willesden Green Library Centre. The seminar was co-ordinated by Shape London in liaison with the Open University and Disability Arts in London magazine and involved over 30 invited disabled arts practitioners and political activists from different parts of the country.

The Disability Arts Movement is a current reality of the arts scene for many disabled people, whether as artist or consumer. The concept of disability culture is increasingly discussed, but its significance and implications for wider cultural debates and developments have been less than clear. Similarly there has been no accessible documentation which provides definitions of Disability Arts and Culture, although there has been much in the way of journalistic comment.

The Disability Arts and Culture Seminar aimed to address questions about the defining characteristics of Disability Culture and sketch an agenda for future development

This publication includes key presentations and discussions edited from tape transcripts of the day. In Shape London, we view this publication as representing the most definitive statements on Disability Arts and Culture that have been made to date, and hope that in publishing the papers for wider circulation, there will be greater understanding and active support for not only Disability Arts but the emancipation of Disabled People.

Maggie Wooley  
Director of Shape London April 1992



## INTRODUCTION TO THE SEMINAR

RICHARD WOOD

*Chair of BCODP*

Good morning everyone and welcome to what I think is probably a unique occasion, where disabled people have come together to discuss art and culture, our art and culture, a very important and historic occasion for us all. Somebody said earlier on: "I don't know where today is going to go." That is probably going to be the shape of today, we don't know how it is all going to turn out. What I hope will come from today is useful, thought provoking discussion and some papers which will emerge for further discussion. I think we only see this as the start of a process, which will need to be carried on. The other people who are here on the platform are obviously going to say more about why this event is taking place and how it has evolved.

It strikes me not only as a disabled person, but also as a lay person in the area of arts and media, that all the arts and media representation of disabled people has so far been totally negative. I think we only have to read books such as the new BCODP publication, Colin Barnes' book, Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination. This book outlines the history of disabled people and disabled people's culture. Many of us know that disabled people have in fact been part of the art and media scene for as long as such a scene has existed. Unfortunately for us, the images that have been portrayed have almost always been negative and they have had a fundamental effect in shaping the view that society has of disabled people and also to a large extent the view that we have of ourselves, which is if anything more important. BCODP and other organisations are already starting to try to address these issues, not only through Colin's book but also through the media image's work which BCODP has now taken on board. But there are other concerns as well and that is one of the reasons why we are all here today.

The early concerns which existed in the movement which led to the formation of organisations like BCODP, were about and around: who should represent us, what issues should we be representing, and what should we be saying to portray a true image of disabled people and the issues which we face in society today. One of the reasons why we set up our organisations was so that we could speak as an informed group of people, informed by our own direct experience, of the issues which faced us, and also to speak with some consensus to the people who were part of the movement. What lies largely behind today's event is the feeling that art, culture and imagery are so important that they can no longer be left with just a few individuals or with people outside the movement. We need to be clear about what statement it is that we are trying to make about our own culture. I hope that this seminar will serve as a first stepping stone to that clarity.

KEYNOTE SPEECHES  
DISABILITY ARTS AND CULTURE:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO KEY ISSUES AND QUESTIONS  
SIAN VASEY



*Sian Vasey works with the Link television programme and, until its closure in September 1991, was editor of the monthly Link Magazine for Disabled People. She is chair of the National Disability Arts Forum and vice chair of the London Disability Arts Forum.*

I thought I would start by looking back to the beginning of disabled people organising around the arts and the formation of Disability Arts Forums. The London Disability Arts Forum was founded in 1986. The catalyst for this as I see it had nothing to do directly with the arts, or with disability conflicts. It was actually the demise of the GLC. Seona Reid from Shape instigated a meeting to discuss ways of getting disabled people onto the committees of the various funding bodies to create stronger representation from the disability area to combat the expected funding crisis.

For the record, the people who came to this meeting were Seona, Geof Armstrong from Shape London, myself from Artsline, Anne Rae, Vic Finkelstein, Ashley Grey from Graeae, Joan Greening and Pius Hickey from Strathcona. The input from Anne and Vic along with input from disabled workers in the organisations, influenced that meeting away from its original aim and moved it forward into agreeing to do something more interesting and more ambitious. Rather than try and place people tokenistically onto committees, there was an agreement in principle that some form of representative organisation should be set up which would mean much more involvement from disabled people than there currently was in the arts.

This really was a turning point, as prior to this the two organisations that had the arts in the general sense as their remit, rather than any particular art form, i.e. Artsline and Shape, had no history of being controlled by disabled people, no sense of disability culture and were both basically born from an able-bodied agenda. Artsline was all about access to mainstream art and Shape originated from the therapy tradition, where arts have the role of modifying the disabled individual in some way. Graeae, the theatre company of disabled people took a more radical tack early on, as disabled people within it moved the company away from the limited vision of its able bodied founder towards a firm policy that the company would put on plays that in some way reflected the disability experience. This was actually quite radical back in 1984 or there abouts, and the company met with quite a lot of opposition to it both from disabled people and able bodied people.

To get a feel for the significance of the decision that was to lead to the formation of the London Disability Arts Forum and to appreciate that it was not something that just inevitably happened, it is worth looking at the direction taken in other areas of the country. Shape Up North, now Equal Arts, for example, has spent the last two years working on a detailed paper and labour intensive access audit of local arts venues and organisations -which looks to me like a pretty sterile activity with a handful of disabled people involved in really what could be termed as quite tedious tasks. Only now are disabled people in that area beginning to think about people forming a forum Of course it is not Shape Up North's fault that disabled people in their region haven't been clamouring for something different and a key issue here is how far can we expect agencies such as the Shapes to make the running with disability arts. Put simply, we can't -rather like a CIL, a OAF has to have a genesis in disabled people who have a firm grasp of the idea of self determination. The people who form a OAF also need a firm conviction that disabled people have a role

to play in the broad cultural spectrum, and that our exclusion from mainstream culture is the basis of all our segregation. The London experience shows that "Disability Arts" needs input from people involved in disability politics, as much as vice versa. This is shown again in the North West which has a forum very much steered by politically developed disabled people. It is also shown when short lived DAFs emerge such as the ones in Buckingham, which don't have a political origin or a particular commitment to being a representative organisation and which perhaps come more from a view of life that says if we all do macrame together once in a while everything will all be alright.

So if the Shapes can't make the running, what is their role? This must be a key question. We have to acknowledge that both LOAF, and the North West Disability Arts Forum, which was originally part of the Shape network when it was known as AIM, Arts Integration Merseyside, was started up as a reaction to Shape initiatives, and perhaps that might give us some sort of insight into the nature of their role. They do however have a lot of resources. How far can they nudge disabled people into taking action -how far can they facilitate the action? Or we go for a total takeover bid and if so how? Judging by the experience of setting up the National Disability Arts Forum, which we did in conjunction with some of the Shapes, it seems that they do vary a lot from region to region and some of them do seem quite reactionary, not I hasten to add, Shape London, which is the last word in progressiveness. They seem woefully out of touch with disabled people and very distrustful of the disability arts movement, ie. the self advocating movement, and really quite unwilling to support it. It is also clear from the NOAF experience that disabled people are finding it very hard to get things going, often as isolated individuals, and we need some solid support and money to work with. It is hard not to begrudge the money that some of the Shapes have, but I suppose really I'd like to know more about what they are doing in much more detail before coming up with aggressive policy suggestions.

To get local activity going, there also needs to be some close networking between the political people and the people who have come on the scene through the arts. A problem is that broadly the political movement doesn't see the full value of the arts movement and doesn't quite trust it either. Another problem with organising in the regions is that the way people often want to make a start on it, is by holding a festival or a cabaret to get people interested. This probably means importing some performers or 'The Tragic but Brave Show' a jolly time is had by all, the performers go home and people are left to get on with it -really without the wherewithal so to do.

So LDAF came to be, and through it we have a voice and a powerbase. We have a mechanism for ensuring that some portion of the resources that the government gives to the arts in general goes to disabled people. We do have to be constantly vigilant though that a large and growing number of disabled people are genuinely involved in it. Their involvement at the moment is probably on a more informal basis. People read Disability Arts In London and they go to Workhouses and perform at Workhouses, but the membership list is probably nowhere near as big as the number of people who would profess to having quite a close allegiance to the organisation. This I hope is a problem that can be sorted out by some diligent admin work, but it is also a signifier that LDAF must be looking at how it involves people. It could quite easily become nothing more than the administrative mechanism by which cabarets by and for disabled people are regularly held, thus reducing the majority to our traditional role of passive recipients. It would be nice to have a situation where every member took turns at doing some of the organising and some of the performing. This would be difficult to achieve in an organisation of any size however. As far as the performing is concerned, we would also have to deal even more than we do already, with the problem of, to put it crudely, acts which are never likely to be any good -which slow the show down and put the audience off. Generally this issue of judgement is something that we have got to consider quite what to do with it. I think it might be true to say that in LDAF, we are getting ourselves into a bit of a limiting corner, by spending so much time and energy on providing performance opportunities -we must find new ways for people to participate.

LDAF needs to be constantly reaffirming its commitment to the idea of being a representative organisation of disabled people -and again how do you involve your members? This is a problem that is not specific to the arts movement -mainstream disability organisations also find that people cannot find a role within them, perhaps training for new people is the answer.

Having sounded that gloomy note, DAFs and disability arts do have a lot to offer the mainstream movement in terms of getting a wide range of disabled people involved. This works on the useful but relatively superficial level of offering a way in which we can make contacts, for instance with people with learning difficulties. Disability arts also provides a context in which disabled people can get together, enjoy themselves and think in some way about issues of common concern. But it goes deeper than that, as disability culture really does offer people a key to the

basic process of identifying as a disabled person, because culture and identity are closely linked concepts. Simply naming the idea I think has encouraged a lot of disabled people to happily call themselves so and to be more upfront and confident about themselves and that is also giving more confidence to the movement as a whole.

There still are a lot of people who have doubts and questions about the idea of disability culture. A while ago I heard it referred to as a dangerous thing, because it could be interpreted as a celebration of our oppression. I and others have tried to define disability culture as our lifestyle ie. the way we live our lives. Of course the way we live our lives includes things like travelling in guards vans, being confined to our homes for lack of appropriate transport or access to buildings we may want to use, being denied communication by lack of readily available sign language, taping and braille etc. etc. and all the aspects that are evidence of our oppression. For me these things do in a way feel like part of our culture, I have to be honest. They are obviously things we fight against but at the same time they are part of our lifestyle -perhaps we should be acknowledging that culture is a changing thing and there are aspects of ours that will gradually wither away.

What I was getting at at the time, was really the idea of more fundamental things, things which would never alter however completely discrimination against us and oppression are ultimately eradicated. Things like the normality of using a wheelchair -of rolling along being as usual as walking along, like looking different -how people look is very much part of their culture, like the normality of using sign language or braille, perhaps just the normality of not being able to do certain things. Incidentally when I use the word 'normality' I'm not talking normal in statistical terms, but in terms of normal to the individual. There is also the whole culture of getting together, which as I've already mentioned is something very much facilitated by disability arts. The everydayness of disability culture is one of the reasons why I think all disabled people must be involved in stating what it is and exploring it. It is not just the province the artists.

Clearly disability arts is gradually communicating this cultural message to disabled people and others, as indeed is other high profile activity of disabled people. The idea needs to be absorbed by all sorts of mainstream institutions. Schools are a very obvious example of where integration needs to be achieved in a very profound and absolute way -so children shouldn't be learning to read only with sentences such as "I can run" and "I see Janet", but also with disability related sentences.

Arts as practised by Allan Sutherland, Barbara Lisiki, Johnny Crescendo, No Excuses and many more is also communicating our view of our political situation and protesting against it -this is what is now know generally as "Disability Arts". A question arts forums need to be addressing is what to say to disabled artists who are worried that they are not of interest unless they are being very clearly political, and saying something about disability in their art. For what it is worth I think we should be adopting some sort of policy with artists who initially don't address the subject at all. We should be running some sort of education programme and then watching to see how they develop and if they don't perhaps we should be dropping them from the employment circuit. As a political organisation can a DAF really mess about with art for art's sake, or do we have to keep part of our constituency happy with the aim of embracing as many disabled people as possible? Perhaps that is something we could be thinking about today.

Andre Brink, the South African writer, in a recent Guardian article, was concerned about the concept of culture as struggle in relation to South Africa. He says, "What is not expedient, what cannot be sloganised or digested immediately, what doesn't present itself as praxis or as a "weapon for liberation" is all too easily discounted as luxury .The problem of this view of culture and of the writer's place within it, doesn't lie in the fact that it summons culture to fulfil a political function, (culture has a political resonance), but that it conceives of culture solely and exclusively in function of its political usefulness." What he means by political usefulness here is I think something very straight forward -attacking apartheid. He goes on to say that now artists are all being encouraged to create a vision of the new liberated future for South Africa and to ignore the dangers and the fragility of the present and the fact that apartheid isn't yet dead. What I think he is getting at is the importance of truth and detail in art which is in any way dealing with the reality of people's lives under oppression, and insisting on this will also fulfil a political function, though he doesn't call it that. His worry for South Africa is that apartheid will always be thought of simply as a system that didn't work, unless writers don't allow the collective memory to fail. We are a long way, disabled people, we are a long way from emancipation, but to help us to get there I think committed disabled artists have the job of producing work of real clarity which truly describes our situation, so there can be no misunderstanding by anyone of the fact that we are oppressed and no recreation of that oppression in millennia to come.

# CULTURE AS STRUGGLE: ACCESS TO POWER

## ELSPETH MORRISON AND VIC FINKELSTEIN



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*Vic Finkelstein is Senior Lecturer in Disability Studies at the Open University, where he has been contributing to the development of the Disability Studies courses over the past 12 years. He has been actively involved with the disability movement for many years, and was a founder member of Disability Arts in London as well as being the first Chair of BCODP.*

### 1. Introduction

There seems to be a reluctance on the part of the broader Disability Movement to view Disability Arts as anything other than a dollop of icing on the cake of struggle. Something to provide a bit of colour to the sometimes rather grey political world. Something which whilst being a sweetener is not an essential ingredient for change. In this paper we will argue that the presence or indeed absence of disability culture and a greater involvement in the arts reflects the general state of play in the Disability Movement. We aim to show why disability arts and culture is an essential component of the struggle towards total emancipation.

### 2. The social model of culture

In every society human beings come together in groups to form a social and physical environment that can improve their quality of life (in food, shelter and leisure ). How these different groups carry out their activities, the artifacts and mannerisms used and the different perspectives of daily life form the sum total of a society's cultural life. In all societies, then, the arts can reflect the experiences and aspirations of different social sub-groups.

However, from time to time different sub-groups become dominant within the larger social structure, and the culture of the sub-group then becomes the dominant culture in the greater society. When any dominant group asserts its power by imposing its culture on others, or diverts wealth to its approved forms of cultural expression, then the arts and culture of other groups are suppressed. Their own output may fail to develop, or they may disintegrate or disappear. As culture and artistic development are integral aspects of the human social condition, a lack of arts development within a sub-group is a reflection of the dehumanisation and suppression of that group.

It is in this situation, as an oppressed sub-group that we, as disabled people, currently struggle through our lives. Opportunities to take part in all forms of the arts as spectators, creators or participants, as we know, are very limited. From an early age the idea is planted that you are steered towards the 'arts' if you are not thought to be academically bright. 'Science' and 'maths' are for the clever ones, 'arts' and 'vocational training' are for others. All this before even getting a look-in at arts from a disability angle! This negative view of the arts, as something only the not very clever and/or people afraid of a 'proper job' do, is very real for a large proportion of the British public.

### 3. Cultural dependency

In our society cultural custody has, for the most part, passed into the hands of a small elite who acquire fame and fortune through support and funding from the most powerful sections of the community. Through its support the white upper middle and upper classes have come to dominate all arts and culture.

With a long history of able-bodied people determining all forms of 'cure or care' interventions, disabled people are systematically treated as a group not quite capable of independently making its own contribution to improving its quality of life by changing society. Passivity and dependence are ascribed to us, and our only collective identity is as 'the disabled' -you know, as in the lost tribe of ... We are viewed as tragic individuals who, to a varying degree, are 'socially dead' - ie. we exist to have things done to us, not to actively do things, and certainly not to be creative beings in ways other than carefully controlled 2 hours a week at the day centre for 'rehabilitation' purposes.

Unsurprisingly then, in this climate, disabled artists may aspire to fame and fortune in the non-disabled dominated arts and media. After all, when the little information that does exist is so dreadful, what do you do ? If disabled artists or musicians are recognised, living or dead, all they might have written about them is heaps on their medical condition and their fantastic ability to 'overcome' their personal tragedy. Very little interpretation exists to say how (and if) the person's impairment informs their work. We know Stevie Wonder is blind, but how might this connect to his music? Might it have some particular relevance to other disabled musicians? Genius, exception (being 'special') or invisibility are the normal expectations presented for us to aspire towards. Lack of information about other disabled artists can make an individual's struggle no more than a personal campaign for assimilation into the dominant culture and access to the arts. Isolated disabled individuals can easily become culturally dependent on these dominant sections of society and fail to recognise the potential liberating effect of seeing themselves as members of a distinctive social sub-group struggling for a unique but equal identity amongst other groups.

Often disabled people vehemently deny that there could be any such thing as a 'disability culture'. It seems to excite purple-faced rage even in the most laid-back of individuals; something akin to the reaction when Germaine Greer suggested in 'The Female Eunuch' that all women might not be happily married after all. Even among more politicised disabled people the fact that our shared experiences and perspectives might somehow constitute a culture, cause a great deal of grief. On asking about the cause of their hostility towards the idea of a culture, two general reasons seem to come to the fore:

(i) As the result of the British school system (segregated or mainstream) many people hold onto the notion that 'culture' equals 'opera and art galleries' where the upper middle class visit instead of watching football. That is, culture is seen as a possession of the elite, a pursuit of the rich. 'To be cultured' is to be rather like a pearl, understated, refined and in the best possible taste. It is seen as having nothing to do with the real world -ie. a reflection of one's experiences and perceptions quite independently of the dominant group. Recognition of the importance of everyone participating in the arts and culture of one's own group, as part of human development, is not cultivated in the British character.

(ii) Many disabled people believe that encouraging the development of a culture can only consolidate 'disability' - i.e. reinforce the view that as a result of oppression and the social and physical barriers imposed on us our lives are a tragedy. They ask the question, 'why should I give credence to a life that has imposed barriers on me? What is there to celebrate and explore when my life is so grim?'

Both these reactions miss the point. Discrimination against people on the grounds of their different bodies or intellectual capacity will place them outside of the mainstream of social life. In order to participate at any meaningful level within the community members of this group must actively engage in the issues that confront them and in doing this they provide the material for their own cultural infrastructure that is self-determining and self-governing. This activity is an affirmation of our existence despite the illustrations all around us of what we will never be! A deaf person goes to the theatre and sees the experience of a hearing writer translated to them. A wheelchair user finds paintings endlessly painted from the point of view of the shoe user artist. However, we should not forget that our struggle against disabling barriers is no different to the struggles of all social groups to remove barriers and improve the quality of their lives. From this point of view you could say that struggle to remove barriers is indeed the seed bed for human arts. For us, the only difference is that the barriers which we have to address are dissimilar to those faced by able-bodied people.

#### 4. Pressure for emancipation

Of course not all disabled people accept that they are incapable of functioning independently and equally with others in society. The discussion amongst organised and informed disabled people has always focused on finding new ways to integrate into their communities on their own terms. Thus the day to day experiences of disabled people can be characterised as involving a unique tension which at one level is experienced as being prevented from controlling one's own life (being 'socially dead') while at the other level struggling to overturn this condition (struggling for emancipation). Both the absence, and recent emergence, of a disability culture and artistic expression can be understood as an indication of the 'national state of play' in this tension between passive and active roles.

If, from antiquated media imagery etc. disabled people are viewed as tragic individuals, with no collective voice and with little access to each other, the situation allows the struggle to go no further than personal complaint. The inevitable professional reaction is that the 'individual is failing to adjust'. Thus when disabled individuals do come together in this situation, their first joint struggle is almost always to make a combined plea to those in power for greater access to resources. If action formalises, these associations settle into the familiar pattern of 'pressure group' politics -ie. appealing to existing power structures to be relieved of their debilitating situation.

Arising out of the struggles of individuals pressure group politics encourages the development of an elite leadership who act as the negotiators with those who hold power. In pressure group politics the struggle for civil rights is controlled by the active few, while the mass of disabled people remain in their traditional passive relationship to others. Only now the 'others' are not able-bodied benefactors but other disabled people. For this elite, negotiating for an improved quality of life, there is no obvious role for disability arts. This is because they are concerned with clarifying and presenting their perspective of the issues whereas a disability culture and the arts will bring the actions, perspectives and mannerisms of the disabled population as a whole to the fore.

## 5. Emancipating pressure

Pressure group politics can be the natural first line of action when disabled people come together, however, organising a collective voice may perversely end up by only transferring the microphone to the voice of the elite. The presence of a disability culture and the size of disability arts can provide important insights into the progress of disabled people becoming actively involved in the movement for emancipation.

If disabled political activists and disabled artists see little point in supporting each other we can be sure that the campaign for equal rights has not yet moved beyond the efforts of individuals to escape their own personal restrictions. The disabled political activist is likely to be locked into pressure group politics, escaping a passive disabled lifestyle by becoming the active spokesperson for others, who continue in their passive and dependent lives. Similarly, the disabled artist could be locked into expressing personal life events in the hope that fame will allow escape from the dependency role that society expects of its disabled citizens.

On the other side the growth of a disability culture, in the absence of support from the disability political movement, can be regarded as a symptom of the need to move from pressure group politics to emancipatory politics. Unlike pressure group politics, emancipatory politics places particular importance on the active involvement of all disabled people in working out and implementing solutions to improve their quality of life. The development of a disability culture and the involvement of disabled people in disability arts can not only increase insight into the progress of disabled people becoming active in the area of civil rights, but can provide important opportunities for individuals to gain confidence by forming a new and independent social identity. From this point of view the formation of a distinctive and vibrant disability culture is a vital component in the construction of an accessible route to empowerment

## 6. Accountability

Many people have difficulty in questioning the accountability of the disabled artist (the word 'artist', here, includes arts activities in all its forms). Art, whatever shape it may take, is not created by committees. It is a personal creation reflecting on life events concerning many people's aspirations and experiences. In a movement which prides itself so much on consultation and accountability, some people have difficulty in seeing the disabled artist as anything other than perhaps some uncontrollable renegade and view with suspicion her or his outpourings. They may dismiss the disabled artist with 'Well, that is only their view', or confuse personal dislike of an art form with the observation that the person is generally 'no good'. It is, of course, up to the group to react to a work of art and to support material which does reflect their lifestyles, hopes and fears. Choral speaking aside, we do not yet have mechanisms to put over thoughts and ideas simultaneously. Be it in the arts setting, an academic lecture or a local

government meeting, people speak and write on their own (hopefully from a shared perspective ). Disabled artists should be viewed with no more or less suspicion, than any disabled person putting forward any point-of-view in any given situation.

While there is evidently broad agreement across the Disability Movement in the UK that the portrayal of the disability experience is generally both damaging and inaccurate, it is participants in the arts who create alternative images. People do have different skills and contributions to make to the emancipation of disabled people. This should mean that while we share a common understanding of disability we may express this in many different forms and in different arenas. This is to emphasise that knowledge is not only the province of the few. It is vital that we find many ways to educate and inform each other and to share ideas about the possibilities for change. Arts practice should also be viewed as much as a tool for change as attending meetings about orange badge provision.

## 7. What effect do the arts have?

As we are all too well aware, removing the yoke of institutionalisation, gaining access to ideas and to each other can be hard work. It can be difficult discovering new ideas which challenge the oppressive ones that surround disability. Charity imagery, tales of terrible tragedy or monstrous courage in the media, fairy tales and other children's books loaded with disabled baddies, our well-meaning but misguided families, a non-academic education and a controlling medical system all combine to undermine a view of ourselves as valid human beings. If one of the main activities of art is to hold up a mirror to society, what we generally see is a distorted reflection created on the whole by people unfamiliar with our life experience. Arts as practiced by us, creating sculpture to be touched as well as to be seen and writing lyrics for songs which talk about us, for example, can engage a lot of people who assume that their exclusion from society is a fact of life.

The arts can have a stunning effect on encouraging people to change from being passive and dependent to being creative and active. We may not all want to be 'artists', producing and performing work, but arts events can provide another access route for beginning to look at the world and the way it operates in relation to disabled people. One of the main difficulties in organising for disabled people is the isolation we experience not only from the world in general, but also from each other. Having space where we can meet informally and throw about ideas are crucial. Meeting together at a Disability Arts event provides just such a space. Here, disabled people can come together of their own accord, rather than being herded to a day centre, hospital or the yearly panto. Having someone on stage communicating ideas and feelings that an isolated disabled person never suspected anyone else had and being surrounded by other disabled people has been, and will continue to be, a turning point for many.

However, it is not only the present that should concern us. Unless artistic creativity is generated by our culture new artists will not develop who will pursue our right to exist and who will have the understanding to inform future generation of disabled people. One of the ways of interpreting long gone societies is to look at their 'cultural artifacts'. If historians only uncover fistfulls of charity advertising and stories of helplessness or courage, with no alternatives, what will that mean for an existing population of disabled people ? We must produce artistic work which reflects our experiences and our struggles to overcome the barriers that disable us. Pride in ourselves is also determined by the legacy we leave behind. Our cultural development will provide not only a record of an active journey, a view of ourselves as we are, rather than as flawed beings, but also a perspective on the world for future generations to build and develop.

## 8. Finding our way

Arts should be used first and foremost to confirm for ourselves what we are about. If as a by-product, as a result of our efforts we can inform, educate and draw in the non-disabled world, well and good. For too long the emphasis has been on educating non- disabled people on how to understand us rather than communicating with each other. Grant-giving bodies particularly in the arts world take great comfort from the thought that we are not so much pleasing ourselves as helping them to become better and more understanding human beings. And as it tends to be non- disabled people working in those organisations, money has historically been easier to come by for so-called 'integrated' projects where there may be one disabled person uneasily slotted in to an inhospitable situation. What we have to ensure is that on the Disability Arts scene (and indeed within the Disability Movement) we don't end up mirroring existing structures. Any culture is made up of many different strands and under the headings of Disability Arts and Disability Culture we must be careful not to simply imitate the view of the world that pleases white, middle class males. Our experiences are expressed through many voices and not a single dominant one. The arts, and our newly found cultural development, can provide the space to have work reflecting the disability experience

from the point of view of all of our varied backgrounds. Only by ensuring an integrated role for disability arts and culture in the struggle can we develop the vision to challenge narrow thinking, elitism and dependency on others for our emancipation. To encourage the growth of a disability culture is no less than to begin the radical task of transforming ourselves from passive and dependent beings into active and creative agents for social change. Without this infusion of strident self-confidence the movement for emancipation will not move beyond current pressure group politics reliant on a few active disabled leaders.

## FROM SELF - LOVE TO THE PICKET LINE: STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE IN DISABILITY REPRESENTATION

DAVID HEVEY



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In the history of disability representation or 'arts and disability', we find a history of representation that was not done by us but done to us. The beginning of a strategy for the future of disability arts and culture, then, is to start to examine some key cultural norms within that history of mis-representation which still surround us today and which have to be challenged and destroyed.

To begin with, these key norms would include the historical fact that disabled people have not had an input, let alone a controlling interest, in culture and representation done in our name. In addition, we could say that the general history of disability representation is one of oppressive or 'negative' forms. And this has happened precisely because disabled people are excluded from the production of **impairment-based** disability culture and excluded from the dominant 'disability' discourses (I). We are excluded from most history but particularly and perversely, from the history of 'disability representation'.

To say this, then, leaves us with the position that historical representation has been either absent or negative, and disabled people want something positive. That last sentence seems to me to be the current position of much disabled-led (but including non-disabled people and organisations) thinking on disability representation. This is a Walls of Jericho situation whereby it is believed that the oppressive representation will fall if we only repeat and repeat the word 'positive' in place of 'negative'. Where once disabled people would be represented in a state of sub-conscious (that is, portrayed as unaware of themselves and their situation), we are now witnessing a small current of 'positive' images coming into circulation of the grinning -disabled. This is an extremely superficial gain but it is nonetheless currently considered 'positive'. Debates, indeed strategies, have thus hung on this negative/positive divide, with little or no definition of the terms or of the nature of the struggle over political representation. The current 'strategy for the future' in disability cultural production, then, is to produce something 'positive'. To say the least, this is a weak position for the disability movement to find itself in, let alone except, so let me outline an analysis of a different route or strategy.

First, we have to go back into the belly of the beast and look at just what is being represented in general disability representation. What is it that unites practically the entire discourse, from Greek Theatre to James Bond villains to Charity Advertising to all the Richard 111's, Ravens (2), and so on? In a word, it is that disablement means impairment and impairment means flaw. The basic rule of oppressive disability representation is that it is predicated on the social non-worth of an impairment or the person with an impairment. This social construction is naturalised

within representation by characters who carry this 'flaw' but who hide societies and history's contempt for the disabled person by vocalising a self-loathing or a self-destructive pattern. That is, they are made to internalise the 'problem' and they consequently act out societies wish or rule by destroying themselves. They hold a cracked mirror up to nature and behold their/our imperfect and flawed reflection. This is the **Tragedy Principle**.

The aesthetic construction of a part or parts of the body as the site of all that is socially unacceptable, a flaw, began life within classical Greek theatre (3) and has continued today. The villain of the piece may begin a hero and even contain some hope (Lenny, from 'Of Mice & Men' by John Steinbeck) then a flaw becomes apparent, and they then disembowel or impair themselves (or have it done to them) as an act of retribution. This, for example, is the Oedipus story. The price of his transgressions, the utmost flaw, in this story (and in most tragic theatre), is positioned on and within the impairment. Oedipus blinds himself to make physical that which was fate. Oedipus, in effect, carried out onto his body the order - that is, the rules of social organisation - and the orders - their enforcement -of the Greek State. He paid for his transgressions (in this case, love of the mother, or matriarchy) by becoming disabled. The impairment of blindness in this fable is the site of tragic flaw of Oedipus and this flaw is the site and price of that which is socially unacceptable.

The Oedipus fable in particular sets up the basic rule of the tragedy principle within representation, which is that fate must be made physical on the body. For the character to know and demonstrate their doom, their body must physically manifest the flaw through an impairment. The testimony, the words and actions, of this doomed character will then reveal to the audience the 'natural' and inevitable decline of the disabled character. By their social destruction, the message is conveyed that the impairment represents the greatest fall for a person this side of death. The purpose for this device in art is that the audience may cathart their projected anxieties surrounding disablement and 'able-bodiedness'.

The tragedy principle, then, positions a flaw on the body related to the deepest possible social fall. Where impairment enters, the character is proven to be socially dead (4). Whether in television, theatre, cinema, fine art or charity advertising, the tragedy principle uses the impairment as a metaphor and a symbol for a socially unacceptable person and it is this tragedy principle which is the bone-cage surrounding historical and current disability representation. It is this impairment-as-flaw that we mean when we say 'negative' representation and it is this that we have to end. This will be difficult because such readings have become 'natural' within representation.

These forms of disability representation naturalise the exclusion of disabled people from societies organised on labour power as a key commodity in economic production and these representations become the target for the ridding of fears by non-disabled people for their own bodies' decline or loss of power. It is important, however, in terms of creating radical and new forms of disability representation, to acknowledge that it is both the organisation of economic production as well as the projection of (non-disabled) negative desire, which contains disabled people within oppressive cultural representation.

The fall of the tragic character into either a real (that is, narrated) death or a (again, narrated) living death will aid the disavowal, the catharsis, of the non-disabled audiences' ever-present fear for the loss of their own 'able-bodiedness'. 'The Disabled' is a non-disabled construction, a representational framework no more real than a hologram but which has to contain two properties if it is to have any cathartic meaning for society. To repeat, these two 'able-bodied' cathartic needs are, 1) the ridding or disavowal of health, fitness and other physical/functional issues pertaining to the ability to work and, 2) the disavowal of the presence of death and mortality. This is how 'negative' representation serves 'able-bodied' people. Its positive active purpose is in supporting the 'able-bodied' management of these two fears.

So, what is to be done? If we are to move beyond this state of affairs, the cultural task for disabled artists and culture workers is threefold. Firstly, how to 'reclaim' impairment away from a flaw. Secondly, how to shift disability representation off from the body and into the interface between people with impairments and socially disabling conditions and, thirdly, how to create aesthetic forms which are seen to deal with this successfully (ie which can be internalised by disabled people in struggle ).

So far so good. However, an analysis of the mechanics of historical and oppressive tragedy/impairment/disability representation is not in itself sufficient to change those forms of representation. What is necessary in the first instant is a shift in the surrounding social relations and economic conditions.

Finkelstein has written (5) on the shift from 'phase two' to 'phase three' within the shaping of social disablement. As an extremely broad overview, the shift from heavy manufacturing (Phase 2) through the electronics and cybernetics revolution (phase 3) is creating the conditions for a different position for disabled people in society and this theoretical position is being borne out. We have had 3 Tory governments that have been and still are committed to the rolling back of the 'Nanny' State. One aspect of this has been an increase in the rhetoric of the Care In The Community programmes which has seen the closure of many long-stay large institutions and which have resulted in large numbers of disabled people re-entering the social arena, but still having to struggle for basic rights to access. Within this, the UK disability movement has grown. A particular, and in representational terms crucial, development of this new activism (and which links it to other movements based on class, women, colour, etc.) is the de-biologisation of the disability. That is to say, the issue of disability, like other issues pertaining to women and blacks and gays and lesbians and so on, is shifting its focus away from the body and onto society. Although the disability movement has taken the initiative in articulating this shift, it is a shift which is affecting all sides of the disability issue. For example, and again as Finkelstein has pointed out, the dominant form of oppression of disabled people is shifting from the medical 'cure or care' model to an administrative model. While this may mean that disabled people are shifting from institutions to ghettos, it nevertheless heralds an age when disabled people are not to be cured as such. Despite liberal panic over this new agenda, it presents greater possibilities for the emancipation of disabled people.

Since this shift is happening within the social disability movement, it clearly creates conditions for its emulation within disability representation and the disability arts movement. Indeed, the shift from 'arts and disability' to 'disability arts' is proof of this movement. The disability arts movement is the first sign of a post-tragedy disability culture. To state this clearly, the disability movement is the articulation that a) impairment and disability are no longer focused as one, and b) they are no longer exclusively focused on the body. The disability arts movement is the only area which is dealing with the cultural vacuum which now exists given this shift.

However, as much as we have gained the initiative, there are still problems which face the disability arts movement and which need to be unravelled. One in particular is that we currently lack a theory or theories of an alternative process. The final part of this paper, I hope, begins one.

**Part One. Gazing Where? Moving Off The Body.** We need to define what we mean by 'disability representation'. Do we mean the representation of impairment, or do we mean the representation of social constrictions, or do we mean the recording the interface between the two? Artistic and cultural disabled-led practice which positions it gaze towards this interface begins to reflect the struggle.

**Part Two. Changing the Meaning of Impairment.** We need to 'reclaim', in light of the shifts of disability-definition (from medical model to administrative model, from institution to care -in the community, from arts and disability to disability arts), the cultural meaning of impairment. We need to undo the tragedy principle and to undo the notion of impairment as flaw. This is clearly linked to Part One, since what is being projected onto the person with an impairment by 'able-bodied' culture is in itself changing. However, the point of radical art and culture is to create a political poetic of the self and the group. We will be able to redefine our impairments away from flaws by making culture and art which shows the process of our transformations. The left has traditionally made a mistake within representation by positioning 'positive' images against 'negative' ones, picket lines against victims. However worthy this has been (and necessary in places), our purpose should be to create work which records the process of change, not just two 'negative' or 'positive' poles.

**Part Three. The Control of Meaning.** Our artworks and cultural works must tell both of the issue and of themselves. This is critical. Again, learning from the mistakes of other oppressed peoples struggle, particularly the class movements, we must not assume that any reading of any artwork is in itself permanent or natural. The best new image in the world can have its meaning altered by adding a different text in or around it (6). In the final analysis, negativity or positivity within any given cultural form only exists within the positioning of the piece. It is not implicit in the surface of the work. Its meaning can be altered by its altered context. The success of our counter culture is in our ability to position meaning.

**Part Four. The Act of Showing Must Also Be Shown.** Brecht in particular dealt with the relationship between real struggle and the metaphorical or symbolical illumination of struggle in art. In the Brechtian aesthetic, the real struggles of life and oppressed peoples cannot be shown, as it were, naturally. Naturalism as an aesthetic may work as a tool of catharsis -we may suffer with those we see suffer -but it does not illuminate methods for action after the catharsis. Therefore, what is needed is a critical relationship within the story-telling or story-showing within and

between the form and the issue. In our case, we can position meaning by engaging and reinterpreting forms as well as reinterpreting contents. This is to acknowledge that the representational forms themselves are conveyers of messages but are not innocent of the struggle. The point of new methods with new messages is that they convey the sense of a new order ( or at least the decline of the old one ). This links itself to the three previous parts because it displays a process which metaphorically or symbolically represents change.

**Part Five. The Success or Failure of A New Form.** Again, radical drama theory, particularly that of the 70s involving class politics and gay and lesbian politics (and, of course, both at once), dealt with the extremely critical issue of the relationship between producer and consumer. The success of new forms of disability representation can be judged in my estimation by their consumption by disabled people and their ability to mobilise disabled people into action. One of the main characteristics that has distinguished all radical art, from that of the Soviet revolution to the art of South Africa, from the art of our movement to the work of the AIDS practitioners in the United States, is its proximity to an active audience. However, there are disabled artists who have taken on the romantic's notion of pure art devoid of social responsibility. They have tried to affect the taste of non- disabled audiences and supporters, rather than engage in a **political** creativity within and about the disability struggle. Picasso said that taste was the enemy of creativity and, eventually, those disabled artists who pursue that path of affecting taste will find their work stagnate, since they are facilitating an outsiders vision of themselves. This is a mistake, though understandable because we have profound lack of role-models in this area. If disabled artists align their aesthetics to a field which operates between their sense of self and their relationship to the movement, the changes to both will create the base of their continued aesthetic change and growth.

To end. The strategies for change lay in an analysis of what has gone before **and** a cultural intervention in what is socially happening to disabled people. This dialectic is our terrain. Within this dynamic, we can affect and create cultural forms and agenda which bring the non-disabled world to us, not we to it.

## QUESTIONS TO SPEAKERS

### QUESTION

I am interested in discussing the issues around reclaiming concepts, in particular the concept of impairment, and hearing some more about the justification for that. I have spent a long time thinking about how we can usefully use the term impairment and I have actually started to use it. However, I think there is some confusion about it. I cannot talk about impaired people, although I suppose I could say people who had impairment. How do we get around that confusion, how can we constructively click into the concept of impairment. David, you have gone back to the Greek civilisations, to where the term came from and how it started to be used, but I am still uncertain about whether you can take such an inherently negative term and turn it around.

### ANSWER: DAVID HEVEY

Firstly, we are in a disabled only situation here which has governed the kind of language which I have brought to the surface. I am taking it as implicit that there is dialectic or a struggle between people with impairments and disabling conditions so that is the first step. I wouldn't go into an environment where I didn't assume people understood that. From my point of view when you talk about cultural representation you have to remember that the biggest single form in art is the human body. How do you portray impaired people or people with impairments or whatever you want to call it so that they are not seen to be victim positioned? For me the central issue is how to show oppression without making victims. I would argue that you have to show people in the creative or expansive life of their relationship wllth their impairment. This doesn't solve disability but brings it into a position to take action.

### QUESTION

On the same theme. We are not just dealing with how others define a certain group of people, we also have to work from the opposite side, i.e. who do we mean by people who have an impairment or impaired people? I fear it is very easy to sink back into the type of argument which says: "Oh some people are OK but they are not really part of us." Then you get involved in a time wasting debate about the conflict between two social conceptions 'able-bodiedness' and 'impairment'. We want to get away from that, we have got to look at how we as an oppressed self ruling group define ourselves. This means recognising that a struggle is going on out there between two opposing identities. One

which is imposed on us via these concepts of impairment and another which we ourselves are trying to define and work out. We have got a long way to go on that one.

## QUESTION

I would like to define who this debate is for. Some of the things I hear today seem to pose problems if we are defining concepts both for ourselves and for society. As disabled people, physically impaired people, we would welcome some of the points raised by David. However, we couldn't take that level of definition out into society yet without being quite ravished by our apparent desire to be seen as equal with people who will never see us as equal for years and years. What we are running into is a conflict between what we hope for and what we are beginning to believe is real out there, and what we hope for is nowhere near the reality. I think that society is girding its loins for a further onslaught of repression against disabled people. This debate about definition is fraught with problems. Changing the terminology to that of the Greek community has not lessened the oppression, it has only disguised it to the general public. I think we have to be very careful that we don't go into that kind of entrapment area.

## ANSWER: ELSPETH MORRISON

One of the things which we all brought up in our papers was about the isolation we had from each other. This forum provides an opportunity to get people together from a load of different backgrounds and actually work towards seeing if there is any kind of cohesive thought around how disabled people operate within our struggle. One of my hopes for today is that we will be able to see if we can reach some kind of baseline agreements. Vic and I drew attention to the fact that we deal with this split in British culture. Before we even get to discussing disability issues you have to deal with our educational system which tells us that arts and culture are for an elite and that politics are for an elite and that the two don't actually mix. We have to work towards beginning to find a name for ourselves and to work towards the day when there will no longer be disabled people although there will be people whose bodies place them outside the mainstream, outside the dominant. We have to work on what word or words we find or what terms we find. Today is an opportunity for us to get something together, it is not about educating non-disabled people. I am fed up with being in an educative role, I want to talk to other disabled people and find out if we can come to some sort of agreement about how we are.

## QUESTION

Art is very much an individual thing and every thing I say and do is informed by my own experience as a person, which for me is disability. You can go too far if you try and contrive an aesthetic which fits in with a lot of disabilities. I am worried that what we are doing may become highly self conscious. David was talking about going back to Greek tragedy -it seems to me that you need to have an aesthetic which is actually separate from an emotional response. The whole idea behind great tragedy is to get some kind of emotional response to a dramatic work of art. Both these things that need to be looked at: the aesthetic and the emotional response of the viewer .

## ANSWER: DAVID HEVEY

I was tracing it back to Greek tragic theatre because for me the tragedy principle is the key oppressive form. All art is about emotional catharsis, but what emotion is being catharted? What is happening is that non-disabled people are getting rid of their fear about their mortality, their fear about the loss of labour power and other elements in narcissism. The point I am making is that disabled people are the dustbin for that disavowal. I work as a propagandist artist and I think that art doesn't mobilise unless it makes people work on the emotional level as well as the intellectual level. Otherwise it is mono dimensional rhetoric. The issue is, what emotions are being utilised.

On the issue of impairment. I am not arguing that we go back to impairment definitions. However I am arguing that we shift off the body in terms of disability art. But where do we go? We can't just photograph steps, which is what well meaning liberals are doing when they create the image of the wheelchair below the set of steps. The dynamic in that image still pacifies the disabled person. I am talking about how can we create images for art which show a radical, vital and energised portrait of a person with an impairment and a struggle against disabling conditions. One element is to show people with self-worth so that the human being becomes more important than the impairment. The impairment is named as the site of oppression, whereas classic representation makes the impairment completely dominant of the person. I am arguing that it is the dynamic between the disabled person and his or her environment which should be recorded.

## QUESTION

I am also sick of educating non-disabled people so I want to think about ways in which we can address the issues we are concerned with to other disabled people and to get them more involved. We talk about art being traditionally very elitist within our society and we talk about access. I wonder how accessible some of the thoughts we have been having today would be to a wider group of people, and how inaccessible some of our language has been for people here today. This is something we need to think about if we're going to broaden this discussion and bring in other disabled people. For many disabled people access to education is not something that is readily available. We must beware that we do not become too academic in the way that we express our language.

## QUESTION

I feel that we need to go right back into the depth of what it is that actually fires all of this. To me this concerns the basic indivisible quality of being a human being which is a person with a self. In a sense the body then is a vehicle - it doesn't define you, you define it. We grow up being culturally trapped, within a definition whereby our bodies are the metaphorical self. We need to escape that, but we also have to recognise the equality of self, and we have to look towards the pluralists. I get worried when I hear about people talking about definitions because there are no definitions in our total. We must expand the possibilities, but we must recognise that it must be done with a respect for other people's sense of self.

## QUESTION

On the subject of festivals, I would like to draw attention to the mobility factor, which I believe the disability arts movement needs to look into. We haven't had a festival near where I live, and we cannot get away from the feeling that everything is happening down in London. Could the movement become more mobile?

## QUESTION

I live in the North, in Newcastle, and as a non Londoner I believe that we have to be careful that we don't blame London because everything is happening in the capital. It's not London's fault - it's our fault for not making it happen in our part of the country. It's our responsibility to make things happen where we live - in the North or in the Midlands or wherever.

## QUESTION

Sian, could you tell me on what criteria you would decide whether an artist was being very clearly politic about disability. Are you saying that for an artists's work to have political value it has to deal with a certain body of subject matter?

## ANSWER: SIAN VASEY

I think what I'm saying is that within the Arts Forum context we should be fostering some expression of the disabled self. If people choose not to embrace that topic in any way then that's fine, but perhaps it's not valid within the Arts Forum context. I suppose you could say that the fact of a disabled person doing anything at all in some way a political statement. That was said a lot around the early days of Graeae, that just going on the stage is a political statement. My feeling is that that isn't quite enough, and that the artist concerned needs to be addressing something about disability, however wide, however tangential it might seem. If they are not saying something around that area then disability arts movement.

## QUESTION

I'm fed up with educating non-disabled people as well. However, there is a role, unfortunately, that non-disabled people play in our lives, and it is a big one, and that is that they control them. We still don't control our own lives, nor do we control the resources. We still have to go to non-disabled people at the Arts Council, or at the local Arts Boards and ask them for money so that we can do what we want to do. That is what I'm really concerned about - how do we, as we strive to establish our own culture and work amongst ourselves, how do we go to non-disabled people and say "Give us the money." We need the resources, which they have control of. How, as disabled people, do we take that control back. We should have it with no questions asked, but, with all the resources in the control of

non-disabled people, we don't have it. So non-disabled people have to be worked with, have to be educated, even if its just to get the resources out of them so that we can do our stuff, which is educate each other about what we're about.

## QUESTION

Vic, please would you explain your definition of emancipation. Historically there is a perception that emancipation means being freed from a situation. It doesn't necessarily seem to me that that is what we want as disabled people, what we want is a recognition of our position. Is there a risk that our use of the word emancipation may be picked up on, like integration has been, as something that can be done to us, so that we can be emancipated by able-bodied people?

## ANSWER: VIC FINKELSTEIN

Whatever terms people choose and whatever definitions they apply, they are open to interpretation and re-definition, and part of the struggle is to get clarity and to gain agreement about terms and conditions and interpretations. This is a process achieved over a period of time - one doesn't achieve definitions or unified perspectives over night. One of the things that concerns me is that we don't separate the idea of the struggle for definitions from the struggle itself, as though the struggle for definitions is a separate thing from the actual struggle. There are those that want to sit down round tables and make definitions in a very purist kind of way -I would oppose that. Having said that, what that means effectively is that in the course of the struggle there are lots of definitions around all the time, because that is the nature of a struggle. They are constantly contending and competing and it is a constant ongoing battle to gain one viewpoint over another. That is part of the dynamic and what makes it alive, because if you don't have that dynamic, the issue of disability is a dead one. It is precisely because it is a battle and a struggle that it is alive.

This is where the arts come into the picture because there are certain key things. First of all we need to struggle to reach agreement that disabled people are oppressed. A lot of disabled people don't think that disabled people are oppressed, they simply think that disabled people can't do certain things or participate in society because they have an impairment. This interpretation has a certain legitimacy in our society in as much as a lot of people actually interpret things that way, a lot of our legislation is based on it, and a lot of the treatment and interventions are based on it. If you then build up art forms around that you're effectively reflecting one cultural aspect of disabled people's lives because it is pretty true that that is the way that it is. It seems to me that what we are talking about is confronting that particular view and struggling against it. This is not a question of simply imposing one interpretation over the other, but actually revealing the struggles and the tensions. These are the dimensions: on the one side there is this passivity, the acceptance of impairment and this interpretation of impairment, and on the other side there is a different interpretation. They are constantly in battle, they go up and down, and individuals experience them in an up and down way. That is the richness of culture -the over riding, interactive, ins and outs of the struggle.

Where it goes wrong and where it has been wrong, is that the impairment position has been the only side on view and that that side has been so dominant that the other side has not been visible. We are struggling to introduce the notion that we can view disability much more as a social construction, not simply to replace impairment but to get the balance more right, to get the richness of it. The key element is to do with this struggle and this tension between different interpretations. This is one of the most potent aspects of developing a culture and that is where it links up with a political disability movement, because that is precisely what it is about -this tension about who should control what, who should define what, who has a right to say what. In the arts we can really reflect upon that, both at the personal and the group and the social level. The political interpretation is related to the collective struggles and that is where emancipation comes into it, emancipation as a collective element. The real dynamic is the interactive struggle and the debates and presentation of these views. Let the battle go forward, that is what will make a disability culture come alive. Let us fight our own battle and create our own arts instead of struggling to get access to everybody's arts -that's not a battle, not in any sense of cultural battle.

## GROUP DISCUSSIONS

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUPS

1: Given the development of Disability Arts Forums, how should they function in relation to the broader disability movement?

2: How do we ensure what is produced through disability arts doesn't promote elitist practice?

3: How do we enable all disabled people to gain access to what's going on in the disability arts movement.

#### FEEDBACK: GROUP 1

1: The disability arts movement and DAFs in particular should be viewed by the disability movement as a way of galvanising disabled people and pro-actively involving those disabled people who may not necessarily get involved with, for instance, campaigns for active successful transport or campaigns for orange badge schemes. Access to the arts should be seen as another channel through which disabled people can become politicised, with the arts allowing disabled people the space to get together. In this way the arts can be seen as a starting point for a politicisation process for disabled people.

2: In order to ensure that disability arts does not promote elitist practice, we need to get as many people involved as possible. Also the disability movement needs to develop a method of a critical analysis to enable people to understand the processes which have gone into the product, so that more people would be able to understand disability art. This would result in more disabled people producing more art in response to that which is already prominent, thereby widening the net.

3: We have to be responsive to the people who are not yet involved in that movement but have expressed an interest in it, so we have to work flexibly. We need to provide guidelines for people working but they should not necessarily be written in tablets of stone -it needs to be an interactive process. We also obviously have to remember such issues as access to information about what is going on - both performance and participation - and transport. Disability arts must reflect the differences within the disability movement in a positive rather than destructive way, so that there is room for black disabled people, disabled women, gay and lesbian disabled people to express themselves within the broader disability arts movement.

#### FEEDBACK: GROUP 2

Our starting point was disability arts as a perceived threat to the disability movement, and how disability arts is sometimes seen less than favourably within political circles. We remembered the youth of the movement as a whole -a lot of energy has gone into building powerblocks against the outside world, creating structures so that we're not blown away by what's going on out there. The strength of the movement lies in understanding different parts of the movement, we need to be able to find ways of including every disabled person into the overall framework, whatever their perspective or background. All our different experiences and expertise play an integral part in what's going on. We should guard against being prescriptive towards disabled artists or going down the road of only endorsing art created by committee. We should look to ensuring that the artists themselves are responsible for the kind of work that they're producing and that we're not putting political parameters on people's work. Disability art should be looked on as a field of exploration -a place where we can explore issues which our social model of disability doesn't address. Disability arts can be a way of filling in the emotional gap, of exploring the feelings and emotions attached to disability - this is one of its most important roles. There is no harm in having a multiplicity of views expressed by disabled people, we must have the leeway to allow people to come in there and express themselves how they want to.

#### FEEDBACK: GROUP 3

Our starting point was the split in the disability movement so that the arts have been perceived as being separated from the political movement. We wanted to draw attention to the crossover -the shared issues: an arts movement can't happen without drawing on change brought about through overt political action.

We also looked at the issue of membership in the arts and how to involve more members, to open arts structures and widen the net in such a way as to give opportunity for the evolution of new art forms -art forms which reflect the particular cultural identity we have as disabled people. We saw creativity as a key issue -you can't have a movement which brings about change unless people are active and creative within it, otherwise you'll only get passive pressure groups which won't really bring about change. We discussed festivals and the need to focus them politically so that

the political and the arts movements merge together in their campaign for emancipation or liberation. We acknowledged that participation in the arts is a distinctly political act and that the arts are fundamental to bringing about political change.

We discussed the need to create structures within which we see ourselves as being replaceable and encourage new people to get involved. We looked at the difference between a leadership, which we saw as inevitable and necessary, and an elite, where a group of spokespeople within that leadership do not speak in such a way as to empower the rest of the membership, with the result that you lose sight of who you're negotiating for and become more interested in who you're negotiating with and the power base that they've got access and you want access to. So we acknowledged the need always to push the leadership back into its membership.

## FINAL STATEMENTS

### DAVIDHEVEY

I would like to talk about what we can take away from this day. I believe that if we can carry on articulating these issues about what is disability arts, what is the disability arts movement, what is its relationship to the access and social movement, and what is its relation to wider cultural and political issues, then this will be seen as an historic day. I hope that now we can start to articulate these issues into articles -maybe do a series in DAIL or DAM and start to put things down on paper and disseminate them. I hope that this will be the beginning of a tight, well thought out and well mobilised reinvigorated political arts movement.

### VIC FINKELSTEIN

One of the things which strikes me as really important is the concern amongst disabled people to progress the movement - whatever we understand by that. I think there is growing awareness that there is a problem in the movement, which we've always known. At one level, it's grown very rapidly, at the other level it's very vulnerable. That's a typical development amongst oppressed groups, what we need to ensure is that we intervene to strengthen the movement when it's the right time to do so. It seems to me that the movement is reaching a crisis where we need to rethink some of the relationships, such as the one we've been talking about today -the arts and the political movements. We need to rethink, we need to reformulate and we need to remix. What is really good is that everyone is aware of that need and is supporting that need and is aware that there has been a gap and it ought to be bridged. That's very positive movement forward and it will strengthen the whole development of the disability movement in Britain.

### RICHARD WOOD

To sum up concerns which have been expressed today, I think one of the problems the movement faces is its own rigidity. There is a danger of seeing the formal blocks which we have built for very good reasons, as self protection from the power blocks which exist outside, preventing new ideas from within the disabled community being taken on board. As more people become empowered so they will want to express their voice, be it on the way that ethnic and black issues are represented in the movement or the way that sexuality is portrayed -there are a whole range of issues that have not yet been properly addressed, or have only been superficially addressed, and those are bound to emerge over the next four or five years. We should welcome them. We shouldn't look at new ideas and thoughts as being threats, we should look at them as bringing in new dimensions and discoveries about ourselves and find a way of tying them all in together .

Part of the reason why there is the perceived threat between factions of the arts movement, or of the direct action movement, is that we are still a very young movement, we are still very inexperienced, we are still very insecure. We need to go forward from today with the confidence of knowing, as we've always known, that disabled people do have the answers, not only for the solutions but the way those solutions are portrayed. The arts, the media, direct action -all different ways of projecting the same views that the political movements have been addressing for years. Let's not be threatened by that let's draw from it together. It's going to be difficult, it always is. I think we are a group with the courage to do that. I look forward to, not the possibility of this day being followed up but the certainty that it will be. It's power for an evolution -we can stop the evolution now, and leave with the dinosaur, or we can move forward and that's the way we are going.

## APPENDIX 1

NOTES to Keynote Speech 3: From Self-Love to the Picket Line: Strategies for Change in Disabled Representation by David Hevey

1. By the word 'discourse', I mean an exchange or flow of information within a given social form or context.
2. Graham Greene's anti-hero in A Gun For Sale.
3. Theatre Of The Oppressed Augusto Boal. Pluto Press, London. 1989.
4. Disability: An Administrative Challenge? (The Health & Welfare Heritage) by Vic Finkelstein. From Social Work: Disabled People & Disabling Environments Edited by Mike Oliver.
5. Attitudes and Disabled People Vic Finkelstein. World Rehabilitation Fund. 1980.
6. See, in particular, the representational theory of Victor Burgin, who has worked extensively on 'scripto-visual' reading and meaning of representation. Thinking Photograph, The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1982, Edited by Victor Burgin. The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity, Macmillan Education Ltd, 1986. Collection of essays by Victor Burgin.

## APPENDIX 2

### LIST OF DELEGATES

#### Chair

Richard Wood

#### Speakers

Sian Vasey  
Elspeth Morrison  
Vic Finkelstein  
David Hevey

#### Delegates

Geof Armstrong  
Colin Barnes  
Jane Campbell  
Mandy Colleran  
Genie Cosmas  
Johnny Crescendo  
Jayne Earnscliffe  
Elaine Evans  
Bob Findlay  
Raina Haig  
Tony Heaton  
Barbara Lisiki  
Natalie Markham  
Ewan Marshall  
Mike Oliver  
Pat Place  
Ann Pointon  
Anne Rae  
Vicki Raymond  
Adam Reynolds  
Kirin Saeed  
Sarah Scott

Allan Sutherland  
Katherine Walsh  
Josephine Wilson  
Maggie Wooley



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