

Disability Arts: A National Perspective

We reprint Sian Vasey's keynote speech at the June 1990 launch of the North West Disability Arts Forum, part of a national network.

Disability arts - some people might think that is a little fantasy of mine and nothing to do with reality.

One often hears non-disabled people flatly refusing to acknowledge that there is such a thing as disability arts, or at least they question the concept in a worried sort of way. They seem to like the 'art' half of the equation, but they can't get on with the nasty old disability element at all. Well, I am here to tell you that disability arts certainly does exist - it's alive and kicking and days like today just go to prove that point.

So what is it? Well, it's art - any kind of art you like - done (if that's the right word - executed might be a better one) by disabled people - further to that it's also art that says something, however obliquely, or however crudely about the experience of being a disabled person, art which is the expression of disability culture. And by culture I mean life-style, not talking posh and knowing which bit of cutlery to use, or anything esoteric. And without going into great detail here, believe me we do have distinct lifestyles - able bodied people wouldn't believe the half of it. And, as we all know, those lifestyles are not all negative.

But make the mistake of thinking that disability art is about accepting our lot and making the best of things and celebrating our oppression - far from it. As with all the best civil rights movements, the art that emanates from the disability movement is challenging and inspires the people within it to keep going. It reflects what the movement is all about and (this is important for disabled people) it gives us the confidence we need to be effective and make the changes that we need. And for disabled people that is probably more important than anything. If you remember that disabled people are closeted away in special schools, are subject to charity publicity campaigns convincing the world that our various diseases and our lives in general are the most terrifying and negative experiences you could possibly undergo,

that we are often denied any social life because we have no access to transport or buildings, that we are treated like children because we may have Downs Syndrome or be totally ignored because we are deaf - you can begin to understand why confidence does not come naturally to most disabled people.

So a disability arts forum can give confidence in two ways. We can encourage disabled performers and give them their first breaks as well as giving work to more experienced performers and secondly, we can provide an entertainment environment where disabled people can feel they belong/where we are not being patted on the head and asked if we are enjoying ourselves performing. Not something that we see on the television every night - let's face it.

In London the Disability Arts Forum has been running a cabaret club called 'The Workhouse' on a regular basis and it is proving very successful - a lot of disabled people are coming out of the woodwork to perform in it, so we are building up a good solid list of jobbing performers.

These cabarets are aimed primarily at an audience of disabled people and some people find this a problem. They seem to think that we should be educating the non-disabled public with our work. In LDAF we do not see this as our function or our responsibility, neither do we see the idea of disabled people being together as a way of increasing our segregation as is sometimes suggested. Because when we come together in our own cultural environment we are *choosing* to be together as disabled people, and we believe that we need to be able to make that choice. It is only through being together that we can identify our problems, decide how to tackle them and develop a sense of strength as a group.

The LDAF was born out of the political consciousness of disabled people controlling the resources available to us, the administration of the activity, and the decisions taken about what events should happen.

LDAF also produces a monthly magazine, Disability Arts in London, every copy of which is read by an estimated 6,000 disabled people. We have held a London-wide festival of disability arts in action called

'Moving On', and we presented an exhibition of painting and sculpture entitled 'Out of Ourselves', all of which were in some way informed by the experience of disability.

Other DAFs are springing up all over the country and in July 1990 we launched the National Disability Arts Forum, whose committee will include a representative from each Regional Arts Association area. The idea is that areas which do not currently have a DAF should develop one and elect their representative from it, to ensure that each representative will be more accountable to the disabled people in the region. One representative from the NDAF will be elected to EUCREA (European Committee on Creativity by and with Disabled People of the European Community) as the UK Representative.

So it only remains for me to congratulate everyone involved in getting NWDAF off to a rousing start with disabled people at the helm.

Sian Vasey is chair of the National Disability Arts Forum, UK representative for EUCREA and editor of LINK, a magazine by and for disabled people covering a full range of disability issues, including the arts. For more information write to LINK magazine, MICP, Greater London House, Hampstead Road, London NW1 7QQ. For information on the National Disability Arts Forum contact Katherine Walsh, Secretary, c/o the West Midlands Council of Disabled People, Moseley Hall Hospital, Birmingham, B13 8Liz Finkelstein.

In 1989, the Arts Council adopted an Arts and Disability Action Plan in order to implement effectively the recommendations of the Arts Council's Code of Practice on Arts and Disability without imposing the financial burdens on clients or limiting their opportunities to develop in other ways. For more information contact Jenny Bernard, Arts Access unit.