



'Untitled' by Pierre Comarmond from the Cronulla railway line mural project. Photo: Pierre Comarmond

nothing about us without us

GARETH WREFORD

Disability, Arts and Activism

Considering the arts in isolation from the lives of people with disabilities and the general community only tells half the story, so Arts Access Australia advocates broadly for change.

ARTS

Access Australia is the national arts and disability peak body with members in every State and Territory. Our role is to advocate and lobby to increase access to, and participation in, the arts for the one in five Australians with disabilities. As an organisation that relies on government funding our core business means we need to carefully build and negotiate relationships with government to achieve our goals.

The challenge for a small organisation is to turn what often starts as reactive issue-based advocacy into something more strategic, based on our longer-term priorities. Our advocacy activities can also be an opportunity to build relationships with current and potential funders as greater resources are something Arts Access Australia needs to find if we are to be more effective.

Arts Access Australia's willingness to advocate to our one core funding body has recently been put to the test following the Australia Council's announcement of a major restructure by media release on 8 December 2004. The initial media release and documents made no mention of disability as a priority, program or policy area. Having attended the Australia Council's public forum outlining details of the restructure in Sydney on 16 May 2005 Council has since publicly renewed its commitment to arts and disability though it was a worrying few months for us in between.

Disability, art and activism

Disability has never been a more pressing policy issue in Australia. With better health care, greater pride in identifying as having a disability and an ageing population, disability prevalence will rise over the coming decade. The face of this strengthening disability sector is represented by young groups like Arts Roar in Launceston, Tasmania. Formed to address the lack of accessible arts opportunities in the area, the Arts Roar committee has developed numerous innovative ways of highlighting their concerns. Gerard Smith's *no access for me* postcard is the result of a collaboration with TAFE design students and handing the card out to inaccessible businesses and venues is a creative local example of activism.

Looking at disability, art and activism traces a path between individuals and organisations and local responses to big picture issues. For Arts Access Australia our work is about joining the dots at a national level. Arts and disability often falls into the gap between arts sector and disability sector buck passing and this is why Arts Access Australia exists. In this context we're fortunate to have Australia Council triennial support and additional project and company development funding.

Apart from enjoying the right to create art for its own sake activists with disabilities are often drawn to art. Art isn't necessarily problem focussed on disability, instead it can be an opportunity to be a creative person, an artist, to have a voice and be heard. In collaborative art projects the unique nature of the team work involved in problem solving and communication, taking abstract ideas through to a physical form, can create great art, social networks and employment related skills. Overall it's the striving for, and expectation of, excellence that creates achievement and the potential for social change.

Disability, art and careers

Having an interesting job and even running your own business are opportunities people with disabilities are less likely to have. When your mainstream job options are limited and the alternative is supported employment (the new name for sheltered workshops) then pursuing your creative career is made even more difficult by perceptions of the arts as a non-vocational, or therapeutic, activity. There are exceptions as Disability and the Arts, Disadvantage and the Arts Australia (DADAA) WA's FREIGHT Gallery in Fremantle is showing. Opened in November 2003, the DADAA WA FREIGHT Gallery works with over 30 artists with mental health issues and aims to move them from passive welfare to supported employment, vocational training and income producing and self enterprise activities using small business models based around a professional arts studio. Already the gallery is selling up to 60 per cent of work produced.

Examples like DADAA WA's FREIGHT influenced Arts Access Australia to join a disability participation and payments

alliance with the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations focussing on the Government's welfare reform and employment policy agendas. The recently announced Federal budget included changes that invested in employment assistance for people with disabilities, although we will see 54,000 people with disabilities face effective payment cuts of \$20 - \$40 a week from 2006. Arts Access Australia is already hearing anecdotally that people will leave employment in the arts to try and protect their higher paying pension and benefits.

Employment and involvement in the arts creates alternative visions and voices that in the absence of effective policy can show a way forward on relevant issues. The arts are a place for critical thinking, intervention, questioning and humour. Art strives to make people feel and this engaging of emotions contains the potential for attitudinal change. Attitudinal change in the non-disabled population is consistently identified by people with disabilities as a significant, if not the biggest, barrier to inclusion.

The low expectations for people with disabilities are sometimes internalised and when reinforced by stereotyped media views can be demoralising. SANE Australia, the national charity for people with mental illness, has an artist Simon Champ on their Board. Arts Access Australia has joined a SANE Australia initiative seeking to bring State and Territory legislation into line with Tasmania making vilification of people with disabilities unlawful. A 2004 Productivity Commission Review of the Disability Discrimination Act found that it had benefited people with physical disabilities slightly more than those with psychiatric or intellectual disabilities. Public and media attitudes towards people with a psychiatric disability and mental illness were cited as particular targets for future work. What could a local creative response, seeking

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Daniel Daw is a young artist and mentor on reins, rope and red tape. Photo: Chris Herzfeld

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control over your own representation and the way you are perceived by others, look like?

Pierre Comarmond is a NSW based sculptor, visual, multi-media, public artist and project leader on the Cronulla railway line mural project working with Simon Champ, fifteen other artists and the support of City Rail. Installation of the murals will take place in mid 2005. In an article he wrote for the Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW newsletter Pierre says;

'... the process and the results of the mural workshops will counter a lot of the bad press we hear about people with mental illness... with exposure to thousands of commuters each day!'

Challenges for arts and disability

Pierre's project is supported by the restructured Community Cultural Development Board (CCDB) of the Australia Council. The dissolution of the CCDB to the new Community Partnerships section is

significant for the disability sector. It is community cultural development practice that has supported entry points and pathways in the arts, ensuring creative control of projects by people with disabilities, and investing in long term arts development to produce some highly innovative, excellent contemporary art and arts leaders. We hope this recognition and support will continue in the new Community Partnerships section.

For Arts Access Australia we know our work is more effective when taking place in tandem with Australia Council leadership like that of the old CCDB. Our conversations with the Australia Council predate the restructure announcement as Council had a three-year disability and the arts action plan due for release in late 2003. It didn't happen. An action plan, as the name suggests, is a practical document that outlines what a whole organisation will do to ensure people with disabilities are included in all aspects of the programs and services offered. Council has a history of leadership in advocating for the rights of

people with disabilities and demonstrating the benefits of inclusion for all. This has been demonstrated through original and unique research on cultural participation rates for people with disabilities and two subsequent publications giving practical advice to arts organisations on the 1992 Disability Discrimination Act and the benefits associated with attracting people with disabilities as audiences for the arts. Arts Access Australia wrote to the Australia Council on International Day of People With a Disability, 3 December 2004, inviting Council to clarify their position. We also asked if Council was including people with disabilities in their Future Planning process. Little did we know what was about to happen.

Our subsequent response to the restructure announcement included meetings with, and letters to, the Australia Council in addition to our formal response to the Future Planning process, a media release, an article on artshub and e-bility and distribution of a pro forma advocacy letter to our sector encouraging their direct action. The decision

to make our concerns public was not taken lightly. It was driven by the lack of response to the issues we raised and tight consultation timelines. The best reply was an email on 29 April that outlined Council's renewed commitment to arts and disability.

Being part of a protest movement to improve the lives and opportunities of people with disabilities has a sense of a common and worthwhile purpose and can be exhilarating in between the moments of frustration. One highlight was the March responses of Artspeak and the National Arts and Culture Alliance (NACA) to Council's Future Planning process. Both made specific mention of Council's silence on disability. Arts Access Australia was encouraged by this level of arts peer interest in disability and know that our response alone would not have been as effective without this broader support.

A time of change can also be a time for reflection and refining of individual and organisational goals. Within the Arts Access Australia network of national, State and Territory organisations the artists employed are people with and without disabilities including Executive Officers. Leadership by, rather than for or with, people with disabilities is a recurring theme in our discussions. As someone without a disability representing Arts Access Australia in various forums it's an issue I'm aware of.

People without disabilities who have relevant experience and knowledge of disability can work in the disability sector though I would be more comfortable with this argument if people with disabilities had the same education and employment rates in mainstream areas as the non-disabled population. The equivalent experience is walking into Indigenous organisations and talking to the white people who run them. There is a need to provide a voice for those who

are silent or unable to participate in debate while also developing skills and pathways to leadership. The balance is often a question of resources and requires more than a simple organisational commitment towards empowerment. The disability sector mantra 'Nothing about us without us' neatly captures the desire of people with disabilities to be involved in decisions that affect them. Where is the handover point? Those individuals with disabilities who succeed are often the exceptions who prove the rule showing just how difficult it can be.

Leaders and activists

A crucial shift in thinking is to involve people for their abilities, what they can do, rather than build up an industry around their need for support. In looking at projects that work with disability it can be instrumental to examine the budget behind the rhetoric and identify who is getting paid. The Arts Access Australia network is also interested in identifying and promoting the work of younger leaders and directly developing younger leaders to continue the work of older disability activists.

Emma Butler formed the Arts Roar committee in April 2003 and her ongoing leadership has been recognised through a Tasmanian Young Achiever of the Year Award for Community Service in 2004. Arts Roar is based around a strong core of young people with a physical disability who are committed to making a difference for Launceston people with physical and intellectual disabilities. Committee members meet once a month to discuss projects, update everyone on developments and plan future activities.

In Adelaide, Arts In Action noted the deaths of prominent local disability activists Jeff Heath and Richard Llewellyn and, along with the disability



L'il Devil 2000. Digital print 99.5 x 149.5 cm
The L'il Devil is Caroline Bowditch taken as part of the intimate encounters series on disability and sexuality.
Photo: Belinda Mason-Lovering

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NO



ACCESS FOR ME

Gerard Smith, Arts Roar committee member, designed the 'No Access For Me' postcard for distribution to inaccessible establishments. Arts Roar is an arts program established in Launceston Tasmania to address the lack of accessible arts opportunities in the area.

community, asked where the next generation of activists were? Arts in Action's *Reins, Ropes & Red Tape* is a significant project that they hope will inspire and develop new disability rights activists. Due to start this year the project marks a long-term commitment to young leaders. Theatre designer Gaelle Mellis, film maker Quentin Kenihan and dancer Daniel Daw will work with up to ten young people with an interest in the arts and experience of disability. Having an artistic team with disabilities and in particular Dan's involvement as a young artist and mentor will drive the success of the project. In order to best explore leadership, activism, disability issues and the role of individuals in social change Carclew Youth Arts Centre and Disability Action will partner with Arts in Action.

The links between art, disability and identity is often strong for activists. Any minority identity political movement is at some stage in opposition to the mainstream. For Arts Access Australia we see great strength in the diversity of views around arts and disability, disability arts and those who just want to be artists and not identify as having a disability. Our common aim is the social model of disability that seeks to remove disabling barriers to participation and inclusion rather than focus on the perceived deficits of an individual. In breaking down the barriers activists and outsiders play a vital role in allowing the centre to shift by fulfilling the function of inventiveness rather than adhering to cultural constraints. The activist creates unique art, making visible what is invisible or hidden away: bodies, personal narratives, sexuality, broadening understanding of what is normal or possible and fulfilling the modernist cry to 'make it new'. It is then disappointing when arts organisations appear to regard disability as a compliance issue enforced by the Disability Discrimination Act rather than an integral and exciting part of their core business.

In our campaign with the Australia Council the act that drew a detailed positive response was the March pro forma letter we distributed. Individuals and organisations in our field sent to the Council, both federal arts ministers and their local member of parliament. Pierre Comarmond's letter was answered as were the forty others representing every State and Territory and other national peak bodies like the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations. It's tempting to speculate why this letter was effective. It was a cumulation of Arts Access Australia's previous efforts and showed that the issues we had been raising were based on the concerns of our field and people were willing to do something about it. This unified action demonstrated that

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Pauline and her work exhibited in the FREIGHT Gallery Fremantle run by DADAA WA.
Photo: Chris Williams

Arts Access Australia is a representative voice and we depend entirely for our effectiveness on this base of support by people with disabilities.

The Australia Council's 29 April 2005 emailed response commits Council, through the Community Partnerships section, to:

- An evaluation of the Council's 2000-03 Disability Action Plan, and proposed strategic direction.
- Triennial funding of Arts Access Australia, plus Company Development Program funds.
- Coordination and implementation of access strategies across the Council.
- Working with Arts Access Australia as Council develop the terms of reference for the Community Partnerships scoping study in 2005.

We're now cautiously optimistic and will be meeting with the Australia Council to discuss how best to progress these commitments. The timing is also right for a broader review to drive the next ten years of our sector's work as 2005 marks ten years since the previous Council supported research into arts and disability.

For the arts and disability sector we will continue to challenge ourselves to step beyond our own comfort zone. In a rights based environment it can be tempting to try for what you want and if not immediately successful then play the discrimination card. The reality may be that the person or organisation you're looking to influence sees you as one of many competing priorities and needs to be convinced of your case. Thankfully the disability sector has a piece of legislation to assist our arguments. Since the 1981 Year of the Disabled Person and the 1992 Disability Discrimination Act there is generally good will and desire expressed towards including people with disabilities. Some of this good will is genuine and can be an opportunity to build lasting relationships.

In activism it is the loudest voices that get heard. Emma Butler, Gerard Smith, Pierre Comarmond and their peers demonstrate that being both bold and creative can magnify the impact and effectiveness of your message. As people with disabilities and Arts Access Australia struggle for legitimacy and support across Government and with the general public our collective activism has never been more vital ■

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Gareth Wreford is Executive Director of Arts Access Australia. Gareth has worked in Audience and Market Development and Community Cultural Development for the Australia Council and has completed the CANSA Graduate Diploma in Community Cultural Development.
ed@artsaccessaustralia.org or visit
<http://www.artsaccessaustralia.org>

ACCESS FOR ME