

**Editorial: Finding the right words.**

**Midlands Art Papers Editor Sophie Hatchwell introduces this Special Issue on Inclusion, Disability and Access in the Arts, with help from arts practitioners and gallery and museum officers, including Kate DeRight, Mike Layward and Natalie Osbourne.**

*Sophie Hatchwell with Kate DeRight, Mike Layward and Natalie Osbourne*

**Key Words: Inclusion, disability, access, race, age, gender, sexuality, equitable museum space.**

Writing about inclusion, disability and access in the arts is a varied experience: rich in opportunities to say something meaningful, yet fraught with challenges. Terminology, the process of finding the right words, epitomises this. Inclusion and access have become buzz words in the arts over the past two decades, with changes to government policy driving publicly-funded museums to broaden their audience demographics and improve accessibility.<sup>1</sup> As concepts, inclusion and access seem to promise that art, museums and galleries will be open to all and will actively cater to all: that all groups in society will see themselves represented in the spaces of art practice and display. This ambition is embodied in the idea of the equitable museum space.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite this laudable aim, more work remains to be done, not only to continue to improve the accessibility of museums and galleries, but also to formulate a critical framework for understanding and analysing inclusion. This special issue explores inclusion and access in their broadest sense, reflecting on the many characteristics these notions touch on, from disability, to gender identity and sexuality, to age, and to race. This list is by no means exhaustive, and inevitably, it has been impossible to cover all in equal depth. The aim instead has been to demonstrate the breadth of voices that need to be heard when speaking about inclusion. Nevertheless, following discussions with our museum and gallery partners, we place a special focus in this issue on disability: something our collaborators were eager to explore, as part of a wider reflection on their respective approaches to access within the museum and gallery setting.

Writing about disability, as when writing about any protected characteristic, requires us to be sensitive to how people self-define. In creating this Special Issue, we have encountered a plethora of ideas about what ability/disability is: from those who define themselves as disabled, neuro-divergent, visually impaired (amongst other identities), to those who refuse all labels and any attempts to construct normative categories. In response to this, we make no attempt to establish an overarching narrative about what inclusion is or what disability is. Instead, reflecting on the diversity of the topic, we aim to embrace multiple viewpoints by creating a platform for a variety of voices. Much scholarship on disability embraces the Social Model of disability- briefly put, the idea that ‘people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference’.<sup>3</sup> While our publication concurs with this view, we are interested in exploring the topic of disability beyond

a focus on barriers, either societal or otherwise, instead questioning what happens to our understanding of disability, and inclusion more broadly, when we approach these subjects from alternative perspectives (including, but not limited to histories of visual culture, gender studies, museology, and education studies).

This collaborative editorial embodies our multifaceted approach. Recognising the importance of listening to different voices and offering a platform for different viewpoints when dealing with disability and inclusion, we have invited three arts practitioners working in this field to say in their own words what inclusion, access or disability means to them. Some argue a strong case for societal change and the need to transform our ideas of [dis]ability using the arts, while others celebrate the inroads already made towards inclusivity in the field. Cumulatively, they demonstrate the range of voices speaking up on this important issue, and advocate for a collaborative, pluralistic approach to inclusion in the arts.

*Kate DeRight, Artistic Director of Spectra, a performance company that devises multi-sensory, immersive theatre with an integrated cast of learning disabled (LD) and neuro-typical performing artists.*

### **An Alliance of Extraordinary Imaginations**

At Spectra, we work to cultivate a world that celebrates brains that work in different ways, through fierce and joyful performance, egalitarian collaboration, adventure, connection and loving challenge. Our immersive, multi-sensory performances are devised by a neuro-diverse cast consisting of both neuro-typical and learning-disabled artists. The diversity of thinking and experience within Spectra is our driving force, and one we celebrate - it is what sparks our creativity.

Our practice demands that we seek different methods of engagement, welcome responses in different forms, create an atmosphere in which challenge is balanced with love, curiosity is treasured, reflection is integral, and growth is shared.

Regardless of audience or cast cohort, this approach provides a rich collaborative experience: extra sensitivity to creating an environment everybody can thrive in, special attention to the widest breadth of communication methods, and an openness to the different sensory experiences of everyone in the group allows that more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts collaborative magic to bloom.

The 'voices of LD' seem to be largely unheard, so our work as a neuro-diverse company to amplify those voices naturally pushes boundaries and creates something new for performance and the wider arts sector. That the quality and originality of our work come from diversity speaks to the power and pleasure that is attainable if we allow life to reflect art developed through inclusive practice.

*Natalie Osbourne, Learning & Engagement Manager, RBSA*  
**Inclusion and Disability at the RBSA**

Part of my role at the RBSA is to help as many people as possible enjoy the artwork on display at the gallery. This means issues surrounding inclusion, access, and disability are very relevant to my job and are considered on a day-to-day basis.

Advancing our understanding of inclusion, access, and disability ensures that we can all work together to identify and remove barriers faced by different audiences. If we do not make this a fundamental part of what we do, our ignorance becomes yet another barrier and undermines our work.

In this regard, having the opportunity to share and learn about best practice is incredibly useful. The 'arts sector' encompasses a very broad range of locations, buildings, organisations, and people. Not all of those involved in the sector, including myself, enter with a detailed understanding of inclusion, access, and disability. Therefore, being able to source guidance from others is essential.

The term 'best practice', however, also needs to be considered carefully. Best practice from/ for/ with whom? There are many different arts audiences with very different experiences of inclusion, access, and disability. Therefore, only seeking guidance from professionals within the arts sector is not effective. We need to communicate with professionals from other sectors and, most importantly, directly with the audiences themselves.

*Mike Layward, Artistic Director, DASH: a disability-led visual arts organisation that creates opportunities for disabled artists to develop their creative practice.*

#### **'If you don't belong anywhere you belong everywhere'<sup>4</sup>**

This statement by the artist Ashok Mistry epitomises DASH's ethos, which is rooted in a naïve optimism that we can be a part of a fundamental societal change; that we can live in an equal, inclusive and just society, which is fully accessible.

What needs to change is the ideology ('disabilism') that underpins inequality currently. A society that excludes any group of people is a flawed society, and this will impact on all members of this society.

The social model of disability drives DASH's work, although we know that any model has its limitations.

So how can a small organisation like DASH make a big impact on the wider art world? We can only do this through working with others. There is no point DASH standing outside shouting, we need to be inside explaining and working together through practical action.

I have been really impressed how many arts organisations want to work with us to change their practices and broaden the demographic of artists that they work with<sup>5</sup>, but I know there are so many others who fear change and hold negative attitudes towards disabled artists.

I know that if we want to live in a truly inclusive Society then this future belongs to the organisations and the people who have flexible minds who embrace change and I look forward to seeing this change.

### A final word...

As stated, our aim in this Issue is not to present an exhaustive survey of inclusion, access or disability in the arts today. Nor is it to present a *fait-accompli* of what inclusion should do or mean. Instead, we seek to open up a conversation about the benefits and challenges of making our galleries and museums more welcoming places to all. Some articles in this Issue will therefore highlight examples of good inclusive practice in our galleries (Ford, Brown, Smith); others offer new critical perspectives on art works that address race, gender, or disability (Wilbur, Martin, Douglas, Hatchwell, Radcliff); many of these advocate for more research and critical discussion on the representation of this subject matter.

In the spirit of this Special Issue, this publication is accessible for those with a visual impairment through alt text, and all future editions of MAP will accessible in this manner.

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### Image

Fig 1. Works created by Sense art makers Yiannis and Marteena working with artists Annette Pugh ARBSA and Karoline Rerrie as part of the RBSA-Sense collaboration *Making Together* 2018-19.

<sup>1</sup> The 2015-2020 government policy document for museums and galleries stresses the importance of free access to public permanent collections, and highlights attempts to improve access for disabled visitors through funding from the Wolfson Foundation.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/529489/2016Updateof2010to2015governmentpolicymuseumsandgalleries-GOV.UK20160425.pdf.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/529489/2016Updateof2010to2015governmentpolicymuseumsandgalleries-GOV.UK20160425.pdf.pdf) [accessed 8/7/19] The Equalities Act 2010 laid out new notions of 'protected characteristics' that inform current notions of what inclusion means. See <https://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=1194934>. [accessed 8/7/19].

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, 'Introduction' in *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, (Routledge, 2012), 1-10, and Swarupa Anila, 'Inclusion Requires Fracturing', *Journal of Museum Education* (May 2017), 108-119.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/social-model-of-disability/> [accessed 8/7/19].

<sup>4</sup> Ashok Mistry, artist, April 2019, courtesy of Mike Layward.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the Midlands Arts Centre; MIMA Middlesbrough Institute of Modern art; Craftspace; Fierce Festival; Grand Union; Threshold Studios, to name a few amongst many more.