

**SLIDE 1** I too would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we stand and pay our respects to their Elders, past, present, and future.

I will start by thanking Anthony White, Panida and Maria from the Talk the Talk team, as well as the University of Melbourne for the invitation to participate on this panel today. I understand this is the beginning of a series of conversations that will take place over coming months that will feed into Anthony's research project being undertaken with Grace McQuilten and Charles Green and I'm really looking forward to our discussion here.

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For those who aren't familiar with my organisation. Arts Project Australia advocates, supports and promotes artists with an intellectual disability in the broader national and international contemporary arts sector. Today, I will reflect on **Issues in Contemporary Practice** within the context of supported studios, focusing on Arts Project as a national and international model of excellence. My discussion will include real and perceived barriers encountered in broader contemporary practice. Now I could talk for hours on our topic, as I am sure Anthony could too, so I will try and keep this brief and in the time limit.

I will present a few provocations that we can flesh in our discussion later. My aim is to get you thinking about challenges and considerations we face when our organisation and artists participate in the arts. I don't claim to know the answers, or to be so presumptuous as to assert one-way forward. Instead, I'll share experiences and thoughts as our supported studio and gallery navigates the national and international art world.

What I am personally interested in is the role Arts Project Australia, and organisations like ours, play in re-shaping perceptions of who can participate in contemporary art practice: how we significantly contribute to elevating the profiles of marginalised people through our art and disability advocacy and, ultimately, how we transform critical engagement.

**2** Arts Project does this by taking calculated risks. We lead by example and set new industry standards in the way we work with our artists and connect them with the broader sector. This includes professionally supporting artists in their studio practice, as

well as our approach when we contextualise, present, promote, write and talk about their work within public platforms such as this.

I've thought a lot about how our role as a leader in the disability and arts sector *has* lead to greater awareness and respect of our artists and their work. Our advocacy empowers people, and we've helped shift long-held perceptions and out-dated paradigms regarding the capacity of people with an intellectual disability to work and be counted as legitimate participants in the arts.

Now, there are several qualifications I will make:

- 1) Firstly, know that what we do as a supported studio is underlined by the fact that the artists work in our studio because they want to be there, they (or their legal guardians) are informed of our aims, and artists best interests are at the centre of everything we do,
- 2) Organisations like us around the world support vulnerable people who would find it difficult to navigate the complex unregulated and biased art sector on their own,
- 3) Thirdly, power imbalances exist. We are acutely aware of this at Arts Project and there are processes and policies that help *us* mitigate the negative impact of this imbalance when working with people with intellectual disability. It's our role to work with other professionals in the arts to ensure they understand and abide by these standards too,
- 4) We are highly trained and rigorously held accountable for our actions by government bodies through annual state and federal disability audits, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) reporting, disability regulations, financial audits, as well as by our Board of Management, and less formally by the artists, their families and legal guardians,
- 5) And finally, the artists have a voice: they own their work and they are people with choice and self-agency regarding their professional life and the decisions they make.

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**3** *Ok, so let's step back; look at the bigger picture in terms of the climate we're working in:*

In Australia and overseas, significant steps have been taken to improve arts participation rates for people with a disability. At the same time, there has been increasing recognition globally of the value of the arts in strengthening communities. In fact, "The right for everyone to participate in, and enjoy the arts, has been enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights since 1948 and there is global recognition of the intrinsic and instrumental value of arts in enhancing wellbeing and strengthening communities.

Despite this, it is only recently that much of the public, government agencies, and others have sought to enable people with an intellectual disability to enjoy the arts as both practitioners and consumers." The 'Picture This' Literature review and analysis published in 2008 aimed to "Increase the cultural participation of people with a disability in Victoria", yet at that time found that "no comprehensive Australian data was available on people with a disability who work, or aspire to work, as professional artists." And that was only a decade ago.

While the literature review cited a number of successful Victorian disability arts companies, including Arts Project Australia, it uncovered a range of barriers to attendance at arts events, venues and cultural activity by people with a disability that included: financial, physical, low levels of arts awareness, inadequate training of arts professionals (in disability), as well as negative attitudinal views held by arts personnel and society in general about people with a disability.

While some of these areas have since improved, we've still a long way to go. We need to move beyond issues of inclusion by tokenism and be genuinely and meaningfully inclusive. This requires a significant cultural shift where fostering an open, all-encompassing and diverse community is something we come to value and demand.

## SUPPORTED STUDIOS

4 One of the great community movements was the founding of various supported studios, which formed across the world in the early to mid 1970s. This coincided with broader global political and social change, including the deinstitutionalisation of people with intellectual disabilities and diagnosed mental health issues. Accessible Arts NSW describes supported studios as “a sustained creative environment for individuals with specific health or social needs that fosters and supports the individual practice of visual artists.” Some studios are independent, like we are at Arts Project, and others are part of much bigger organisations run by councils or government agencies.

The top supported studios are non-directive, have good governance, sound policies and procedures safeguarding the artists, and are staffed by professional artists and arts administrators; essentially, they manage the interactions between the artist and art world.

Studios simultaneously formed worldwide - they originated in Europe, America, Asia, and Australia with Arts Project Australia. At that particular point in history, they each recognised that there were individuals within their community who needed a safe place to work and be creative, and that they needed skilled help to successfully connect with the art sector. These studios developed remarkably similar philosophies, subscribing to the belief in establishing long-term support for the professional development of artists with intellectual or learning disability. I've visited a number of these studios in America and Europe, and walking into each studio and gallery feels like coming home: the philosophical, structural and aesthetic commonalities are remarkable.

5 The artworks created are often characterised as “direct, unfiltered and raw”, and for want of a better term, are generically grouped under the, originally marketing term, “Outsider Art”, as problematic as that term can be. I'll mention here that *we* tend not to use this term at Arts Project to describe the work of our artists. Nor do we use terms like “disabled art” or “art by people with disability”. We actively promote our artists as contemporary artists first and foremost, notwithstanding the fact that they have a disability and that we do occasionally present work within ‘outsider art’ and disability frameworks within particular contexts.

## **ARTS PROJECT AUSTRALIA MODEL**

So I've worked as Gallery Manager and Curator at Arts Project Australia for 10 years. Myra Hilgendorf OAM who had a daughter Joanna with a profound intellectual disability established Arts Project in 1974. Myra experienced first-hand the disparity in professional opportunities for people with intellectual disability, whose artworks – made in institutions in those days – were overlooked or discarded. She gathered work from organisations around Victoria and mounted shows in mainstream galleries, touring them regionally. This work is currently held in our Sidney Myer Fund Permanent Collection in Northcote. Her vision was for artists with an intellectual disability to have their work presented professionally and be accorded the same dignity and respect as their non-disabled peers. In 1982 we established a studio staffed by professional artists where people could come and develop their individual talents in a safe and supported environment. We are a not-for-profit registered charity, and essentially, I like to describe us as a hybrid organisation that operates more like a professional art studio and commercial gallery. Today, we support over 130 individuals at all stages of their career and our mission is clear.

6 The approach Arts Project initiated 44 years ago is becoming more commonplace. Supported studios are popping up in Australia and overseas and they are increasingly more ethical, non-directive and professionalised. However, I would argue that one of their main challenges, apart from funding, is in attracting and hiring arts professionals who have the experience and arts industry acumen to help their artists achieve professional status. There are “rules” you have to abide by in the commercial sector, networks take a long time to establish, visibility around what you do takes time, and trust needs to be built for galleries, curators and collectors to have confidence in an artist and their work.

What's key when supporting anyone, is doing so within ethical frameworks. Vulnerable people, especially people with an intellectual disability, can be easily manipulated and taken advantage of, and often their families and support networks are reasonably unversed in the ways of the arts sector, so they also need support and guidance.

In this way, we take our knowledge and invite arts professionals, students, curators, artists and writers to come to Arts Project and partner with us. Partly it's a strategy to

widen our networks and increase awareness of our artists and their work, yet it's also an opportunity for advocacy and to instigate attitudinal and behavioural change.

7 We stage an annual program of exhibitions both within our gallery as well as at other commercial and non-commercial venues in Australia and overseas. Our artists own their work, including the copyright, and we fiercely protect this on their behalf. Artists receive 60% of every sale through our gallery and 50% elsewhere, and they also earn royalties from image licensing and merchandise sales. So we are constantly operating within the contemporary art world and we demand payment for artist's work.

Our philosophy and way of working is why we adamantly present the work by "artists" rather than "outsider artists". Without getting into a debate about semantics, classifying art in a particular way, especially to use a term like "outsider" opens up a lot of issues and questions. Generally, I don't think it's especially useful to stereotype artists in this way – it pigeonholes a person from the outset and doesn't allow for more critical engagement of the work.

I've seen this lead audiences, collectors, curators and writers to be dismissive of the artwork without really looking at it, or to question the legitimacy of the artwork, or to question the legitimacy of the person as an artist. There can still be a tendency to pathologise the person. Also what seems to inevitably happen is that the well worn, and quite frankly boring question is asked, "Is it art?"

To be perfectly honest, these terms and questions when directed at an individual could be hurtful. When a staff member asked our professional development artists recently, "do you identify as an artist or an artist with a disability?", only one person in the group of nine said they wanted to be recognised as an artist with a disability.

Individual choice here is key.

## ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE - PROVOCATIONS

8 Now, let me put some more provocations out there. I'll start by listing a brainstorm of problems in contemporary practice that Anthony and I started with while preparing for this talk, which I've since added to, including issues of:

*Marginalisation, awareness (or lack thereof), representation Vs ethical representation, power imbalances, power dynamics, true collaboration, common experiences Vs celebrating difference, inside Vs outside, exhibition strategies, partnership strategies, policy frameworks, the artists voice, authentic Vs non-authentic, copyright permission, fair artwork commission and payment, contractual agreements, advocacy, support, directive Vs non-directive, professional Vs non-professional, funding, access, mobility, authorship, protectionism, trust, reciprocity, communication, invisibility, technology, non-disabled artist Vs artist with a disability, outsider, outlier, tokenism, stereotyping and fetishisation.*

This is not a comprehensive list however these are implicit considerations that need to be acknowledged and questioned when working with vulnerable people. And these are not exclusive to this demographic. Arguably, many can be applied to considerations of ethical representation of any artist. It's just that for many artists with intellectual disability, you often find yourself having to make informed decisions and to speak on their behalf.

9 Now I want you to think about 'dignity of risk', so the idea that self-determination and the right to take reasonable risks is essential for dignity and self-esteem. So, in other words, a person should not be impeded by excessively cautious caregivers – or by extension, by overly cautious collaborators, peers and staff – concerned about their duty of care.

Then, on top of that, add the intricacies of the contemporary arts sector; the cowboy nature, practices, deals, biases, the hierarchies, egos, the market and traditional modes of operation, the written and unwritten histories, the rules, the gatekeepers – the gallerists, the funding bodies collectors, curators – I could go on and on. It sometimes exhausts me navigating these dualities: between the complexities of the disability sector and our duty

of care, in relation to the complexities of the contemporary art world including an art market that is largely non-inclusive and prejudiced.

I used to think Arts Project's aim could be to reach a point in time where we would be made redundant. Where we wouldn't need a gallery space, because the art sector would one day be inclusive and would represent any artist, disability or no disability, and our work will have educated everyone to work ethically with artists like ours and we will have achieved some kind of art utopia. However, now I think organisations like Arts Project, and there is room for many other models, are essential in providing support for artists so they can successfully and meaningfully engage with the art world.

## **INVISIBILITY**

**10** In a recent paper I gave at the University of Melbourne symposium, *FORAGING FOR FEMINISM & THE POWER OF DOING* lead by academic Anne Marsh, I raised issues of invisibility and the underrepresentation of female artists. For the context of our discussion today, I'll go one step further and ask you to consider the underrepresentation of artists with disability by commercial galleries, in our institutions, in collections and online. Now, multiply that at least tenfold for artists with intellectual disability.

In saying this, I acknowledge attitudes are starting to shift; yet more needs to be done. Reinforcing Myra's call to action 44 years ago, artists with an intellectual disability deserve the recognition and respect bestowed on their non-disable peers, yet they are still largely ignored and they are virtually absent from recorded histories of art. There is undoubtedly an historic invisibility that cannot be disputed, and there continues to be a current invisibility.

Arts Project tries to tackle this by talking to students (our future leaders and decision makers), by engaging high profile curators and artists to collaborate and spend time with us and our artists and their work, we upload artist profiles to Wikipedia so our artists appear in online searches and are counted as an important part of the art community, we engage national institutions, commercial galleries, peak organisations to present, sell, collect and promote our artist's work, we engage writers, academics and publishers to critically engage with us and our artists.



We shift the invisibility to visibility, one person at a time and one project at a time.

## **ETHICS & POWER**

11 In the lead up to the same conference, I was talking with Dr Catherine Bell about a set of ethics commonly associated with feminist principles that include: interdependence, reciprocity, trust, friendship and embodiment. These terms seem a perfectly reasonable base from which everyone should work, particularly with regard to relationships that begin with an obvious power imbalance.

Without a framework of ethical support, the likelihood of success for anyone is greatly diminished. Without a conduit like a supported studio such as Arts Project, artists will struggle to effectively explore what they are interested in through art and, as I've already mentioned, they will struggle to survive and to thrive the arts.

All artists require a framework of supporters and professionals to mentor and push them; it's just easier for someone without an intellectual disability to make clearer choices and articulate what they need and what that support looks like.

## **OUTSIDER**

12 Before I finish, I just want to go back to that term "outsider". If you jump on our website we state our mission, which includes "intellectual disability". However, we don't exhibit or present our artists work under that banner. We rarely talk about our artists and work that way. And yet, it's how our work is often written about. Our Executive Director Sue Roff and I were recently in Sydney for the National Public Galleries Summit, and the point was raised with regard to the way Indigenous art is written about: that the same terms, frameworks and themes are repeated. That the way the work is written about hasn't evolved and we need to find new ways to write about and critically engage with it. I would say the same with regard to the way work and exhibitions featuring artists with a disability is written about. There is a severe lack of critical engagement that doesn't start with "Is it art (with a capital A)?" This undermines the artist and what they are saying, and it is, quite frankly lazy writing. It's a cop out and, moving forward, this approach needs to change.

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13 In closing, we all know that art has the ability to tell us who we are and reveal something about the society we live in. When there is an absence of particular voices within that community, what does that say about us? When we constantly frame those voices as something “other” (outsider, folk, disabled art) what does that say about us? When we perpetuate the myth of marginalisation to maintain an “outsider” status for the purpose of promotion and novelty in the art market, what does that say about us?

Thank you.