
Being a subversive 'Artist-Crip' on a fixed contract

Introduction

There is a perception that disabled people are 'looked after' and that our impairments need us to be rehabilitated, cured or stabilised by 'special' organisations and paid 'expert'. This paper is going to argue that, as a disabled artist, there is a profound responsibility to act in a revolutionary manner. This poses questions in terms of surviving as a self-employed artist in a commodity-driven Ireland. While money has to be earned, there is also the problem of being part of a transforming and changing act of art as an artist.

For disabled people, engaging in meaningful relationships with their local communities can be an uncomfortable conversation for disability day services and mainstream local bodies. This can be due to a historical lack of enthusiasm for enabling disabled people to feel confident about leaving long-term day services to join in activities accessed by most 'normal' people. The very 'normal' people also may be the very ones that need to assist the disabled individual with basic living functions of shelter, food and security.

It is important to recognise that Irish disabled people - us 'crips'- are not just labelled by our perceived impairment category - I'm much more than 'cerebral-palsy Peter'. We come from all sections of society – all age ranges, all ethnic groups (including Travellers, Hindu, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, atheist, etc), all genders, all sexual orientations and are married or single or just people with children. This diversity, or academically termed '**Intersectionality**', will have practical implications for any strategy to identify effective rights-based approaches to attract and accommodate disabled people in their chosen communities.

Exploring Intersectionality

While Irish disability activists and artists have long recognised the role of class, gender, ethnicity, etc in addressing inequalities for and with disabled people, Irish academia and State bodies have only relatively recently sought to uncover the ways multiple identities can create and extenuate oppression of disabled people in Ireland. History has shown that it is not enough to say that intolerance or 'special care' of disabled people can be explained by a simple reference to the economic factors of access to mainstream jobs or mainstream education. Disabled activist and academic Colin Barnes (1991) suggests that

There is sufficient historical and anthropological evidence to show that there is no universal approach to disability, either in the way disabled people are perceived or in the way societies respond to them. Consequently explanations which rely solely on the economy, are untenable, cultural factors must also be considered.

As well as being a means to skills and contemplation or 'thinking-as-action', Intersectionality-informed processes are inevitably political: They show the means of carrying out rights-based expressions with social and cultural transformation. But, Intersectionality can also be a handicap and another medical model barrier.

Influence of the medical v social model of disability in relation to Intersectionality

As a disabled artist and activist, I can confidently say that most, if not all, Irish disability charity and rehabilitative organisations dabbling with art exist within the medical model of disability. The medical model views a person's (physical, sensory, mental and learning) impairment as their main barrier to taking part in mainstream society, i.e. the disabled person **can't** write, speak, dance, sculpt or hold a paintbrush, they even need art therapy.

A medical model led approach to Intersectionality sees a combination of two or more impairments as identifying the disabled person being a bigger problem than the single impairment 'One-Problem'. The medical model and intersectionality would view a double impairment as a double problem, for example, a spina-bifida and learning disability impairment led 'case-study' would ignore the bigger impact of a 'poor' local authority housing estate class background. I can confidently wave that working-class torch, because I had a great childhood growing up in a Northside Dublin Corporation housing estate, where we didn't know that poverty could be a bigger handicap than having an impairment. Medical model led Intersectionality thinking is impairment led and does not recognise a role for class, gender, ethnicity, etc. Social model led practice for and with disabled people calls for cultural and social transformation led Intersectionality, where class, gender, ethnicity, etc. outweigh impairment led narratives.

Disabled people often ask me how can they use a creative or arts approach to support them to be more independent? So, what is the role of creativity and artist in the independent living movement?

Disability sector charity and community/voluntary groups who employ artists - disabled or non-disabled – to work with disabled 'clients' are working towards the delivery of medical model aims and objectives via a 'nice' process. Art in an institutional or residential setting can be seen as a tool serving the work of an organisation's non-disabled administrators, managers and technocrats. This exemplifies the disciplinary nature of a society's rehabilitative institutions (Foucault, 1996). Does the artist see their work as facilitating contracted art skills exchange? Or is the role of the artist to facilitate emancipatory art processes, to educate, inform, organise, influence and incite disabled people into action and artistic expression. As most disability sector organisations derive from a medical model history, they judge according to what is available. Art therapy can also reflect a medical model approach of seeing the disabled persona and their impairment as the problem in need of another therapy. This can compromise the process and product, **'as it sees the new with the same tired eyes it saw the old'** (Boal, 1998).

But social model-led intersectionality-informed work facilitates the participating disabled person to discover that which they carry within them both individually, and more importantly as a collective.

Will Disability Artists be Pigeonholed or Ghettoised?

Disabled artists, like me, are constantly being taunted by the Irish non-disabled arts community not to get ourselves pigeonholed or ghettoised by wishing to see our artwork as Disability Arts. Yet, non-disabled artists can be quite keen to take up well paid contracts with disability service providers, who are themselves mainly run by non-disabled professional staff. And non-disabled artists and the disability sector still continue with a fallacy that because they are 'artists' they are somehow better enlightened to facilitate creative processes with disabled people in residential or 'special needs' or New-Directions day centres.

There is no reason to believe that just because artists are supposed to have some ethereal insights, that they are

also enlightened about disability. After working with non-disabled artists in cultural institutions such as The Abbey, our National Theatre, and other art venues throughout Ireland, UK and USA, I would confidently say non-disabled artists can hold onto clichés and stereotypes around disability more so than your average enlightened Dublin taxi-driver. Remember, there are quite a number of art works that can only stand up on the shaky ground of negative images and medical model narratives of disabled people. Medical model arts narratives exist where the portrayal and value of impairment exists to communicate the negative and 'abnormal', the 'other'. The Druid Theatre Company's recent production of Shakespeare's Richard III, relied heavily on a non-disabled actor hamming-up a conglomerate of impairments to show evil and be a device for Machiavellian narrative.

Artists who make a living from their artwork, be it making or doing art, have to be first and foremost good business people. The self-employed artist has to be as creative with their accountants as they dare with their projects. I have managed to survive from disparate income from eclectic art projects for over 30 years, so I know it is no woolly or laissez-faire existence, it's hard graft. I can understand non-disabled artists self-assuredly taking contracts from disability organisations whose histories and practices continue to reflect the mores of charity, cure, integration and segregation and rehabilitation.

Art as a medium of emancipation and expression

Disability Arts practitioners see a need for the arts to be considered to be always presenting a vision of the disabling world in transformation. As such, art processes are not only a way to painting or drama skills; it is inevitably political, insofar as it shows the means of carrying out arts expression with social and cultural transformation of disabling barriers. Art should be a medium of emancipation and expression and not just passive 'isn't she great' activity. Artists must appreciate that disabled people become silent when they do not possess the necessary means to decide what is or can be their art experiences.

The artist, and their act of emancipatory art, should facilitate thinking and expression as a form of action, in the doing and making of art. It facilitates the participating disabled person to discover, by himself or herself, that which they carry within them, as individuals and more importantly as a collective of disabled artists. The process should be about coming to know through dialogue with disabled people the artistic expression of both their objective medical model situation and **their awareness of that situation** (Freire, 1990).

Artist and disabled participant are learning together, establishing a dialogue, just as all human and all art relationships should be a dialogue. If such dialogues are not carefully nurtured or energetically demanded, they can rapidly turn into monologues, in which the non-disabled artist and the contracting disability sector organisation only have the right to speak.

Most disability service providers who fund or hire disabled artists working from a social model-led practice within a medical model culture, find it a **frictional** experience, where they ultimately have the power to pull the plug. Emancipatory led Intersectionality and disability arts 'thinking-in-action' for and with disabled people calls for cultural and social processes that present a vision of the world in transformation and not just a world of therapeutic or medical model-led outcomes.

Disability equality approaches to Intersectionality also encourage us to cherish intuition, uncertainty, and creativity and to search constantly for new ideas; to break rules and find unorthodox ways of approaching contemporary

disabling issues. Engaging disability equality led Intersectionality with access or community projects takes us beyond an impairment rule-of-law mentality to a broader idea of what constitutes **effective** human rights. This is one way that art can engage Intersectionality with the world of law-makers to transform the stories of disabled people within the realms of mainstream communities.

As a tax paying self-employed art worker since the early 1990s, it is crystal clear that this work is as much about business as it is creative. And yet, Affirmative Disability Arts projects with disabled people do facilitate the revelation of the new, in other words, that which the person has not fully communicated before. The artist, in essence, should seek to be subversive on a fixed contract.

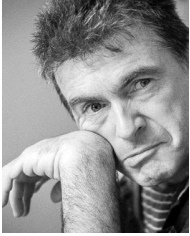
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Peter Kearns

Peter has received favourable mainstream art reviews for a large number of disability arts productions and exhibitions. These included an Irish Arts Council citation for directing the conversion of Dublin's City Arts Centre building into a week's interactive room-by-room exploration of 'disability', and producing the first on-line interactive disability arts website www.PLAYFORUM.ie This is an interactive drama/sound/visual-art website artwork, looking at narrative and disability and funded by the Arts Council and Fire Station Artists Studio. He continues to facilitate disability arts projects and has just completed a series of social-media video portraits of Irish disabled activists for the Independent Living Movement.

Peter's Noughties residency at The Abbey Theatre facilitated the development of a disability policy and promoted a vision for the National Cultural Institutes' access to and with disabled people as audience, creators and producers. Since leaving the National Theatre, he has produced and directed a series of touring adult cabaret shows with disabled performers. Critically recognised drama work has included Cork Year of Culture, establishment of Forum Theatre groups at Cork Cheshire Homes, Dundalk Disability Forum Theatre, Dublin, Sligo and Galway Disability Drama groups.

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