# Ten Years After a *Strategy for Equality* report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities

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Artists are not always comfortable in naming their politics. Why should they be? Sometimes it is distracting, but at other times it can be important and useful. Ultimately it’s a choice - provided you have the opportunity to make or access art in the first place. Having the choice to make art that relates to an identity might depend on your living circumstances and having the opportunity to choose such fundamental things as when and how you eat. It may also depend on other basic human rights, including how you define yourself.

Historically in Ireland such choices and opportunities have not been within easy reach of many disabled or marginalised people. Our experiences have been subject to indifference or hostile rejection, as witnessed by the systematic institutionalisation of disabled people, children and young women.

It is important for us as disabled people to articulate these and other realities of our shared history, and to express our identity through artistic and other cultural means. It has significance both to how society treats and recognises our rights, but also how we come to value our realities and experiences. We need to find ways that affirm and empower us, rather than conform to the hero or victim roles which society has traditional spun us.

A decade after the Irish Government published *A Strategy for* *Equality Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities* which contained specific recommendations in relation to Arts and Culture, there is little evidence of the existence or valuing of disability arts and culture within Ireland. All explanation for such invisibility cannot lie with the state and its arts institutions alone.

What makes the marginal position of disability arts of interest are other shifts in Irish society, which correspond to more global perspectives on disability and identity, lending support to the articulation of disabled people’s realities.

Since the Commission’s report in 1996, there has been an increase in the political visibility of disability as a rights issue and a rise in disabled people and their parents accessing the Supreme Court to argue points of law. Disability Campaigns have focused on seeking the enactment of rights-based legislation, as advocated in the Commission’s report. The enactment of anti-discriminatory legislation in the work place and in accessing goods and services is a hugely important tool if used to enhance opportunities for disabled people as working artists.

A similar process of campaigning in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with the development of the social model of disability and the emergence of the critique that has informed what is understood as a disability arts culture. However, this took place in a context where groups had been articulating their identity as disabled people for decades, whereas this has not been a reality in Ireland until recently. Whilst Ireland may be a Republic, our engagement with rights have been skewed and dominated for decades by the issues of territory, religion and sexual autonomy. Those who did not meet the majority culture’s defined ‘norms’ were forced to immigrate or be institutionalised.

In the decade since the Commission’s report, there has been unprecedented economic growth in Ireland, which in turn has contributed to a huge increase in the State’s funding of the Arts, as well as increased commercial and philanthropic sources of funding.

This has led to the establishment of an Arts fund to specifically support disabled artists (The Arts and Disability Awards, run jointly with the Arts Council in Northern Ireland), and the recognition of the barriers – both economic and structural – that are specific to disability. There is some discussion of disability arts in various cultural centres, but outside a handful of committed artists, the visibility of a disability arts aesthetic or grouping is still not widely evident. Disabled people are amongst a number of groups likely to experience disproportionate levels of poverty, so access to arts opportunities are limited. In addition, the State’s Arts institutions are less inclined to commit to notions of diversity around particular groups unless their work also meets other criteria around ideas of excellence.

Has the relevance of disability arts gained or waned in the decade since the Commission’s report sought to shift debate away from charitable and medicalised concepts? This is in itself a moot point. Does it really matter, so long as people have opportunities to create or enjoy different art forms, regardless of how it is defined?

The rights model as reflected in the Commission’s report may have produced considerable rhetoric and some legislative change, but it would be naive to think that the medical or charitable model has lost any of its strength in the past decade. The labels used nowadays might be more user-friendly. However, the Not-For Profit misrepresentation of these services cannot hide the vast resources these groups control, or the corresponding control they still hold over disabled peoples’ lives. A recent audit of funding to disability services estimated that the amount invested in disability services through health or a medical strand in Ireland was in the region of one billion euro per annum. Significantly, the figures for non-medical areas were either unavailable or not calculated. Meanwhile, the recommendation in the Commission’s report for basic minimum standards that recognise people’s human rights and autonomy within such services are still not implemented. So what hope for disability arts?

We may have talked a lot about rights over the past decade, but the services specific to disabled people still exist at a discretionary level. This has an immense impact on the psyche of any grouping; particularly those denied other economic resources, educational opportunities, or who have been institutionalised within services or families.

The introduction of *Equality Status Act 2000* and *Equality Act 2004* should wield positive gains for those confident enough to access these tools. This in turn may lead to more disabled people choosing to access or make art. It might also enable them to choose to identify with their experience of disability.

However, the polemic that presents disability arts as the one true idea does little to entice people to engage. Political rhetoric too clearly visible in an art form - as has been the case in much of the disability art I have experienced - does not good art make. It doesn’t always make for good activism, either. We might well benefit from revisiting the manner in which much of the disability rights debate has informed a disability arts culture. Those who promote the concept of a common experience might reflect on how common and shared that actually is. It would be wrong to presume positive developments in laws or opportunities necessarily support the advancement of a disability critique. In fact, as people gain greater educational or economic opportunities, the mantra of ‘mainstreaming’ may also apply.

In regard to ‘mainstreaming’, as we are encouraged and supported to access education and employment in ‘inclusive or integrated ‘ environments, does it not follow that rather than embrace our identity as disabled people, we may in fact increasingly seek to reject that which society demonises?

In affluent societies (as Ireland has rapidly become), mainstream opportunities are valued. Those unable to compete in such an economic rat race – children, groups of older and disabled people - are less valued and so are often directed towards the new generation of privatised ‘warehousing’, away from the community. Those disabled people who can ‘function’sufficiently to ‘have the mortgage’, or ‘the very busy good life’ don’t necessarily have the time or inclination to identify their ‘Art or Culture’ zone with an aspect of their identity which society - with the best of intentions -encourages them to ignore.

This stems from a desire to be rid of the stigma of disability by pretending it doesn’t exist. There is an increased discussion within affluent societies around body enhancement and a debate, at both ends of the ethical medical spectrum, involving the search for endless cures to maintain life. Simultaneously, there is a rise in the promotion of that kind and caring option of assisted suicide.

It would be wrong to suggest that the medical model or the capitalist project alone accounts for how disabled people access opportunities, or express our identity. As economic and other opportunities develop for some disabled people, it follows that a rationalised distancing from activism and disability culture may well take place.

The Pan Disability movement in the 1980s which brought people with different experiences of impairment or disability together under a rights and culture banner may have been informed by the struggle and politics of other social movements. Perhaps the multiplicity of institutional, public and private experiences that disabled people have encountered may now require us to evolve more nuanced movements that more readily reflect our broad diversity.

Perhaps the increasing multiculturalism of Ireland, plus legislation that references multiple identities may not just encourage the State and its Arts institutions to support this diversity, but will also encourage more disabled artists to make bolder statements. The opportunities for disabled people to make art are increasing, but it would be wrong to presume we can hold on to our ‘victim’ badge and the ‘rights’ badge whilst simultaneously rationalising why we cannot make or enjoy art.

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