



EMERGENCY
EXIT ARTS

The Secret's OUT!

How Deaf and disabled artists working outdoors can build on the successes of 2012

Danny Braverman FRSA, Lecturer Applied Theatre Goldsmiths University



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Background

On November 20th 2012, Emergency Exit Arts and Shape put together *The Secret's OUT!* at Stratford Circus, an action day looking at Deaf and disabled artists' contribution to outdoor arts. The day was the culmination of *Diversifying Outdoor Arts*, a strategic project supported by the Arts Council. This report captures the main discussions and themes of the day: it serves not just as an account, but also as a signpost for the future. There was a unique flowering of disability arts in 2012, largely boosted by the additional resources and aspirations of the London Paralympic Games and Cultural Olympiad. The extraordinary global impact of the UK's disability arts scene in 2012 (over 1 billion people saw the Opening Ceremony of the Paralympics) did not emerge from a standing start, but resulted from years of development by grass roots arts organisations, significant investment and strategic support from Arts Council England and the passion and vision of individual artists.

The Secret's OUT! attracted seventy people from across the sector in the UK. As well as many Deaf and disabled artists; producers, administrators, Arts Council officers and non-disabled artists contributed. The conference attendees brought strength in breadth and depth. The huge variety of practice was present: from intimate one-person pieces to large-scale ceremonies; from visual art to dance to circus to carnival to participatory work, with many artists breaking the confines of art form definition. Practitioners of all ages and backgrounds, facing many and varied disabling barriers, gathered with the common interests and passions of disability and engaging with audiences in public outdoor spaces.

The whole day was captured live through visual minuting by Creative Connections. The result is the series of pictures depicting the presentations and discussions from the day embedded in this report. The use of visual minuting, a highlight of the day for many participants, served not just as an interesting documenting device, but also as a way to make a conference more accessible to people with visual learning styles. This particularly benefited participants with learning difficulties; often marginalised from professional development events through unimaginative formats. The use of Creative Connections, and other structured interactive techniques through the day, played to the strengths of a creative community and enabled a greater variety of experiences and perspectives to be present than more traditional conference formats.

The day fell into three parts:

1. *How has working in outdoor arts inspired Deaf and disabled artists?*

This was a mapping session where Deb Mullins, Artistic Director of Emergency Exit Arts facilitated an interactive session with all present to look at the major milestones and influences on this field of work.

2. *What have we learned from the recent past to inform the future?*

Tony Heaton Chief Executive of Shape, chaired this session about the impact of 2012. The session consisted of short blast presentations by artists and organisations that had been at the heart of 2012's success, exploring both organisational and artistic responses.

3. *How does the current climate impact on our ability to sustain the work?*

In this session small groups worked on chosen themes and fed back key ideas for action.



How Did We Get Here?

A washing line is tied across the stage. Dates are pinned to the line, pens are flying across post-it notes and soon the washing line is delightfully cluttered with the outdoor arts experiences of the room.

Before 2000, no one had noted any Deaf or disabled artists working outdoors. Was that because it didn't happen or because none of those present knew about the work? The variety of influences on Deaf and disabled artists and their allies in terms of outdoor work pre-2000, though, is fascinating.

There is a significant strand of influence from performance artists such as Chris Burden, Karen Finlay, Stefan Gec, Alistair McLennan and Mona Hatoum – artists whose work in a public space is often disturbing and provocative. It's plain to see how these influences are resonant for disabled artists concerned with making a statement about historic invisibility, where blending in just isn't possible. If your starting point as an artist is of your presence itself making you an object of gaze and subject to a range of prejudicial assumptions, then the artistic impulse to establish control and incorporate audience discomfort is a natural response.

By contrast, large-scale celebratory work, particularly the work of Welfare State International, is another important influence on contemporary Deaf and disabled artists. Here the key factor is scale and ambition. From its grass roots beginnings in the 1980s, Disability Arts has been constrained by a mixture of poor resourcing and marginalisation. With the greater resources made available as a result of the Cultural Olympiad and the maturing and increased confidence of the sector, Deaf and disabled artists understandably drew encouragement from radical non-disabled artists who had created large-scale statements for mass audiences. The use of large-scale objects, puppets and pyrotechnics offered another response to invisibility – a sense of wonder

and spectacle not possible in the confines of a studio theatre or gallery. The symbolism, mythology and multi-sensory experiences offered by companies like Welfare State lent themselves to a growing disability aesthetic; providing a powerful, if not consciously disability-friendly, experience for audience members with sensory impairments and learning difficulties.

There was also a noticeable strand of influence from the growth of festivals, particularly Glastonbury. Perhaps it is significant that the festival scene grew out of alternative culture and has now become mainstream; and with the mainstreaming has come more attention, albeit inadequate, to access needs. A WOMAD or Glastonbury festival, as has been noted elsewhere, creates a sizeable community, the size of a large town or small city, focused mainly on culture. For many, it represents an idealised community, where common cultural interests create harmonious and memorable experiences. Despite the seeming homogeneity of the people attending these events, the cultural offer of many festivals has become more diverse the more they have grown. Several stages and fringe events offer a menu to attract diverse cultural interests. Within this context as the 2000s progressed, Deaf and disabled people who had been excluded from many cultural events, lobbied successfully for better physical access and may often feel a greater affinity with festivals now than they do with conventional galleries, theatres and concert halls. The work of the company Attitude is Everything has been particularly important in this regard. So, the attachment of Deaf and disabled artists to the festival circuit is understandable; it can represent an opportunity for cultural inclusion missing from the rest of the cultural offer and we can see in the work of Kazzum, for example, how once the door has been opened to participate as a festival-goer, pioneering Deaf and disabled artists will stake their claim as featured artists as well.

Between 2000 and 2005, we start to see the emergence of Deaf and disabled artists as outdoors artists. Street Arts itself, historically denigrated by the arts establishment, achieved greater recognition from The Arts Council, including a first time commitment to the development of street arts and outdoor performance in its Theatre Policy and a strategy for street arts in 2000. Following lobbying and pressure from Shape, and other organisations, the Greater London Authority (GLA) started the Liberty Festival, in 2002. Produced by the Greenwich and Docklands International Festival (GDIF), Liberty has provided a consistent and growing platform for Deaf and disabled artists. At grass roots level, individual artists and smaller companies such as Theatre Resource (now Zinc), Mind the Gap and Heart n Soul started to work outdoors and at festivals.

From these beginnings - with strategic drive from Liberty/GDIF, the Arts Council and local authorities - the period from 2006 to 2011 saw a significant escalation of Deaf and disabled artists working outdoors. Graeae, under the leadership of Artistic Director Jenny Sealey, started to explore new strands of a disability aesthetic in public spaces, starting an important partnership with producer Bradley Hemmings at GDIF. The incorporation of sign language, for example, sometimes a challenge in terms of translation to larger spaces, was developed through *The Alexandras* at Liberty in 2006 and is now a mainstay of many productions, amplified through video or by mounting performers on sway poles or other elevated settings.

Inspired by London winning the bid to host the Olympics and Paralympics in 2012, Graeae then set about training performers in outdoor performance skills, particularly Circus, in collaboration with Circus Space and the Australian company Strange Fruit, and combining this new learning with their philosophy of artistic access. The resulting

2012 will be seen as a pivotal year for Deaf and disability arts in the UK, particularly as it found its expression in working outdoors. The additional resources and profile afforded by London 2012 was not only welcome, but also very timely. The moment chimed with the maturing of individual artists and organisations as they rose to the challenges of working on a larger scale and with greater public scrutiny.

There was clearly an immediate impact on public perceptions of disabled people. Assumptions of low quality were shattered by the range, innovation, professionalism and overwhelmingly positive audience responses to the work. The work also contributed substantially to placing disabled people within a new national narrative that confidently placed a celebration of diversity at its heart.



Artistic Responses

Jenny Sealey and Bradley Hemmings, the Co-Artistic Directors of the Opening Ceremony of the Paralympics, performance artist Noemi Lakmaier, sound/visual artist Damien Robinson and Jez Colbourne and Tim Wheeler from Mind the Gap presented short-blast presentations at *The Secret's OUT!* about the artistic response to 2012.

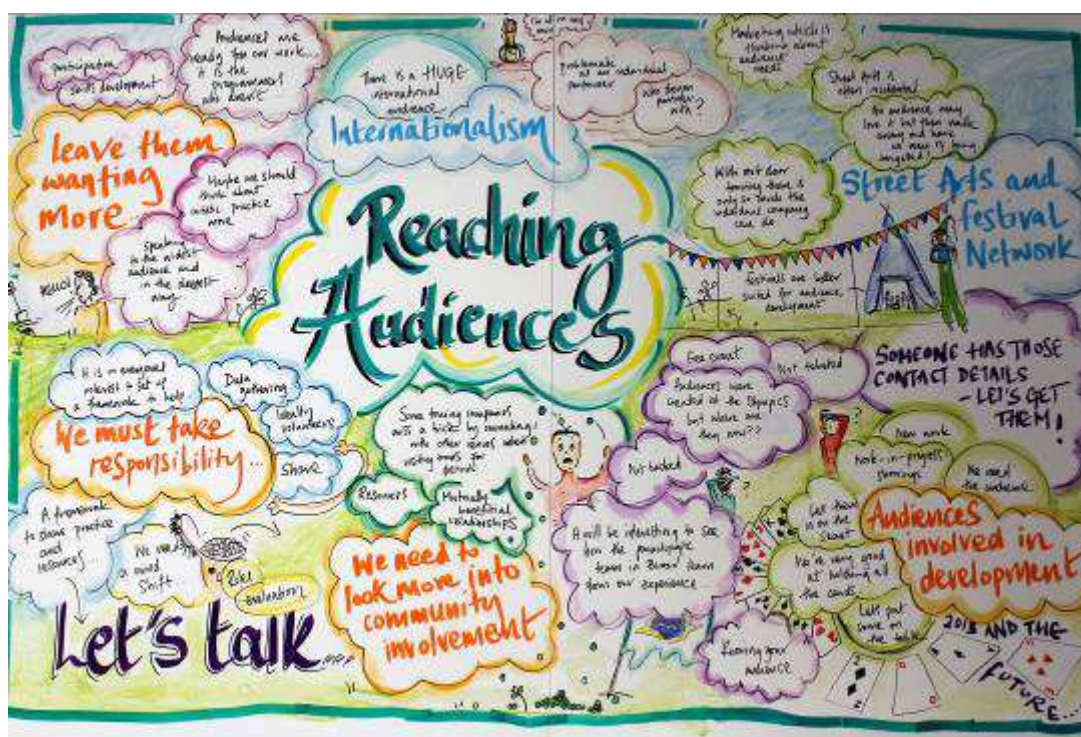
Despite the great variety in practice, some common threads emerged. All the work had the central purpose of challenging perceptions, but also different qualities of playfulness that invited audiences to be complicit with the disabled artist who, for a change, was in control.

Jenny Sealey spoke for many Deaf and disabled artists when she said: “we don’t do fluffy”. A comment that summed up a confluence of artists whose starting points are their own artistic impulses informed by their experience as Deaf and disabled people. For Damien Robinson, for example, her choice to work with sound was surprisingly informed by her deafness. As a deaf person, she creates sound sculptures such as *Vibe Cube* that play with the relationship between sound and touch. For Mind the Gap’s Jez Colbourne, his compositions using sirens have been informed by his experience as a person with Williams Syndrome who was terrified of sirens as a child and grew to love

their music. It is interesting to note that non-disabled artists could not have made any of the pieces featured and yet none of them would fit snugly into a genre of “Disability Art”.

Perhaps the power of these pieces results from the stimulus of their unusual environments. For Noemi Lakmaier, who in her piece *One Morning in May* tried to crawl from Toynbee Studios in Whitechapel to The Gherkin in the city, the resonances of the City of London was juxtaposed against one of the poorest parts of London. For a disabled artist, leaving her wheelchair to crawl, one can’t help but be provoked into considering the impact of the economic climate on all disabled people. For Jenny Sealey and Bradley Hemmings, the brief was to make a spectacle in response to the Olympic Stadium, not only for the 80,000 in the arena, but for 1 billion people worldwide on television. Their achievement was to not only create the surprise and spectacle of moments such as the emergence of a giant version of Mark Quinn’s Alison Lapper statue, but also to create space for an intimacy that would read on television through, for example, David Toole’s solo dance to Birdy’s rendition of Anthony Hegarty’s song *Bird Ghurl*.

Working outdoors for all these artists presents limitations that they embrace as a positive artistic challenge. They find a symbolism that resonates with specific environments and are consistently smuggling in radical political provocations about the representation of disabled people in very public forums.



Organisational Responses

In order for Deaf and disabled artists and their allies to respond as effectively as they did to this unique historical moment, arts organisations needed to respond strategically as well as artistically.

Five “short-blast” presentations as part of *The Secret’s OUT!* from Circus Space (Jane Rice-Bowen and Kate White), StopGAP Dance (Sho Shibata), Kazzum (Daryl Beeton),

Diverse City (Clare Hodgson CEO, with participants Hugo Lucas-Rowe, Nina Smith) and Blue Touch Paper Carnival (Richard West, Sarah Pickthall) went some way to exemplifying the variety of these organisational responses. Despite their particularity to context, these organisations' responses all search for new ways to engage with "the mainstream" and the historical marginalisation of disabled artists. The objective was not only to maximise the opportunities of 2012, but also to create lasting change. As one delegate put it: "Once they opened the box, they couldn't stuff us all back in it again."

Daryl Beeton, Artistic Director of Kazzum, described how embedding his company's "playful theatre in unusual places" in the festival circuit was an act of "low-level infiltration", never foregrounding the fact of disabled artists' involvement with any project.

The theme of steadily building Deaf and disabled artists' contributions into the heart of the arts ecology was echoed by Jane Rice-Bowen and Kate White from Circus Space. Circus Space provide a model of how non-disabled allies can work effectively as leaders with Deaf and disabled peers. For Circus Space, the partnership with Graeae over several years has been key and culminated in the training of forty-four performers for the Opening Ceremony of the Paralympics.

By contrast, Diverse City's work with young disabled people interacts with the mainstream through a bold equalities approach, creating a parallel inclusive world to juxtapose with the exclusion many of their participants' experience.

Diverse City's vision statement is worth quoting in full:

We particularly focus on young people from working class backgrounds, people with disabilities and ex offenders/youth at risk. We want the industry and arts training to resemble the real world. We don't want to keep training actors that look exactly like the ones we already have. It is vital that all people in society see themselves in the performing arts. The world of theatre, dance television and film should speak about all our lives and experience.

Diverse City's epic *Breathe*, an Unlimited commission for the Cultural Olympiad, demonstrated how inclusive participatory work with young people can be scaled-up, presenting a high quality spectacle for large audiences, while still retaining a strong learning ethos for disabled and non-disabled young people alike. Strategically, Diverse City depends on organisations beyond them for their impact to be fully realised. The biggest question remains: how can the further and higher education sectors respond adequately to meet the training needs of the next generation of Deaf and disabled artists?

By contrast, StopGAP dance have focused their outdoor performance strategy on an internal organisational need: audience development. StopGAP's core professional company of disabled and non-disabled dancers have traditionally focused on studio-based work. For StopGAP's marketing strategy, it is not only increased numbers that are important, but also that they reach as wide a demographic as possible, trying to bring "non-theatre" audiences into the fold. As a result, their aesthetic has changed for outdoor work; broader, funnier and more playful. The outdoor work, therefore, has to

clear, but a low priority for government. Funding and resources will inevitably be drastically reduced in the short- to medium-term. However, the headline benefit of the work, as far as government is concerned, is that 2012 saw Britain as a world leader in the work of Deaf and disabled artists. The September 2012 International Convening of Disability Theatre at the Kennedy Centre Washington, where British artists were to the fore, demonstrated that peers across the world look to Britain as a source of innovation and inspiration. The outdoor work has been crucial in producing this impact, creating the biggest platform the work has every received.

One of the inevitable responses to the challenge of the future is to build a network. This is fraught with organisational difficulties. The daily experience of the sector is of a bewildering array of networks and stretched resources demand that engagement in networks has to be selective and strategic. There is a strong feeling in the sector that *existing* organisations would be best placed to sustain a network. Organisations such as Shape and Disability Arts Online provide long-standing and effective ways of communicating with Deaf and disabled artists, and in different ways have a history of engagement with non-disabled allies. ISAN, as the development organisation for outdoor arts in the UK, clearly has a role to play as well; their *Access Toolkit* has already played an important part in raising awareness in the sector.

With the understanding that say ISAN, Shape or Disability Arts Online might be well placed and willing to take on running such a network, this report recommends consideration of the following role for a future network:

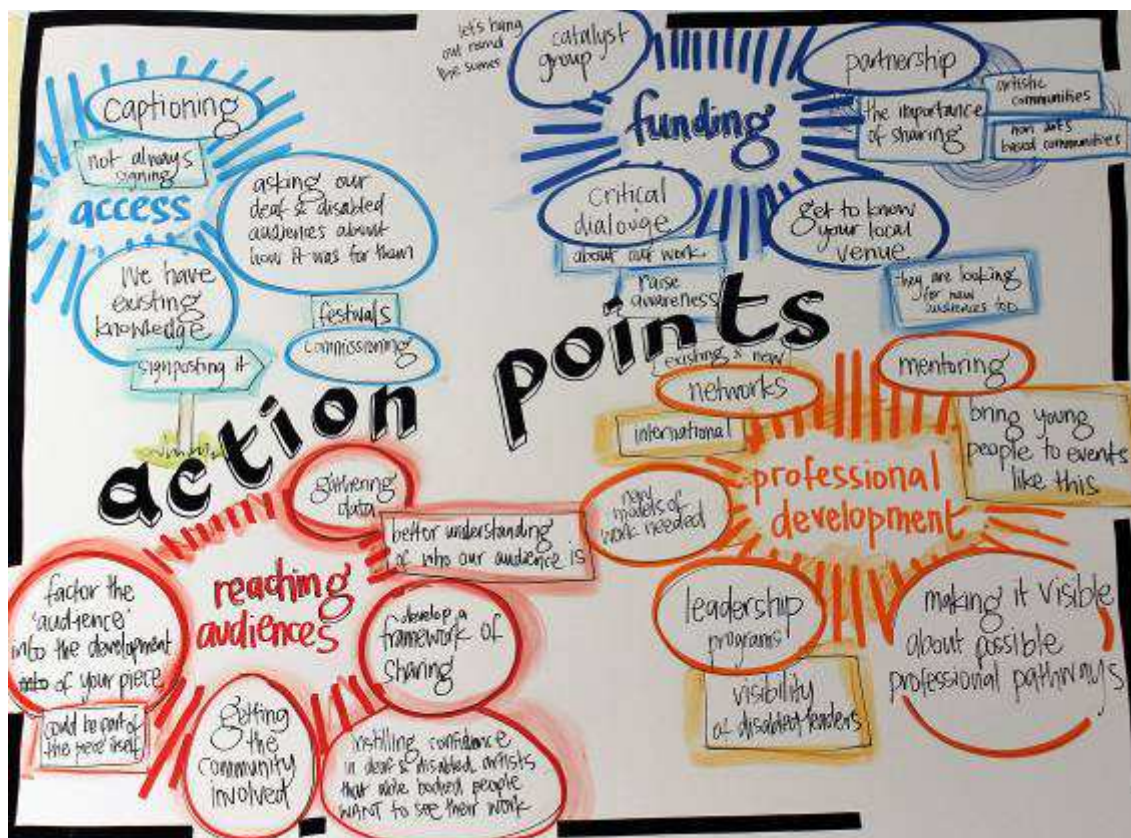
1. A leadership development programme.
The new visibility of Deaf and disabled leaders in the outdoor arts sector has been a major feature of 2012. This needs to be built on so that the next generation of leaders, both artists and producers, can be supported.
2. To create stronger links with Further and Higher Education.
At present, the sector does not benefit from the credibility and innovation that results from a strong academic research focus. In addition, there are pitifully few emerging Deaf and disabled artists accessing colleges and universities as pathways from participatory projects into professional work.
3. Professional development events for the sector
The Secret's OUT! was positively evaluated by attendees, who have a hunger for more events to share their practice and to support future partnerships and collaborations. As is often the case with these events, some key organisations (e.g. The National Theatre) were absent and further events could build momentum and encourage new allies.
4. Sector-wide information gathering
Although individual organisations collect data on the impact of their work, there is no sector-wide data available: for example, data on audience numbers and demographics. This lack of information makes it significantly harder to produce an effective case for support. A common, industry-standard monitoring and evaluation framework should be considered as a way of evaluating the impact of the sector as a whole.

It is also clear that individual artists and organisations can contribute meaningfully to sustaining the work in the future. Some of the ideas put forward were:

1. To continue to explore ways to improve Deaf access: for example, by greater use of captioning as well as signing.
2. To improve dialogue with audiences. Every artist and organisation will have a bespoke way of generating audience dialogue: through social media, integrated into the show itself or through traditional monitoring strategies.
3. To approach venues to commission outdoor work from Deaf and disabled artists. It was understood that many venues are becoming increasingly aware of external spaces whose animation would complement both their audience development and diversity strategies.
4. To continue to build partnerships, advocating the benefits of working with Deaf and disabled artists, with potential allies yet to engage fully with the sector.
5. To develop mentoring schemes for emerging artists and producers interested in outdoor arts.

It should be noted that there is no big national event that can galvanise the sector in the same way as the Olympics and Paralympics 2012. However, there are international opportunities, notably Rio in 2016, where British Deaf and disabled artists should be positioned to make a major contribution. The British Council clearly has a significant strategic role in this regard, and they will be invited to respond to this report and to engage as fully as possible with the sector.

Similarly, Arts Council England, who have been a crucial contributor, both in terms of funding and strategic leadership, will be invited to respond to this report. Although it is clear that this is a very challenging time for the Arts Council both financially and organisationally, the achievements of Deaf and disabled artists working outdoors still very much meet the central aims and objectives of Arts Council England and deserve to be supported with as many resources as possible in the current climate.





Danny Braverman FRSA

Lecturer Applied Theatre, Goldsmiths University

January 2013.