



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des arts
du Canada

Expanding the Arts II:

Deaf and Disability Expression
and Engagement Strategy



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Cover: *flicker doll* from Persimmon Blackbridge. *Constructed Identities* exhibition.
Curator: Tangled Art + Disability. Presented at the Âjagemô space at the beginning of 2018.
Persimmon Blackbridge's sculptures redefine the way disability is presented and perceived in our society. Photo: Della McCreary

Expanding the Arts II: Deaf and Disability Expression and Engagement Strategy (ETA II) is based on the following vision:

Deaf and disability arts is a vibrant field that is recognized and supported as bringing distinct perspectives and ways of being into the common cultural experience, shifting perceptions and understandings of the human condition and artistic expression.

This strategy is a follow up to the Council's original *Expanding the Arts: Deaf and Disability Arts, Access and Equality Strategy*, which ran from 2012 to 2016. ETA II outlines objectives and corresponding actions within the context of the 2016-2021 Strategic Plan and the Funding Model to support the Deaf and disability arts sector, including artists living with psychiatric disability or who identify as Mad¹. With an overview of major artistic practices and fundamental concepts, the overarching goal of this document is to build on the Council's work to date, advance our policies and procedures, and further strengthen and support the artistic excellence and impact of the Deaf and disability arts sector at home and abroad.

The Council's commitment to advancing Deaf and disability arts is based on recognizing fundamental human rights and addressing power imbalances and inequities that are the result of political, social and economic discrimination. Deaf and disability artists are creating countercultural narratives that bring valuable artistic and cultural insight. The social model of disability² informs the Council's approach to supporting practitioners within the Deaf and disability arts sector in attaining their own self-determined goals and reaching their full potential.

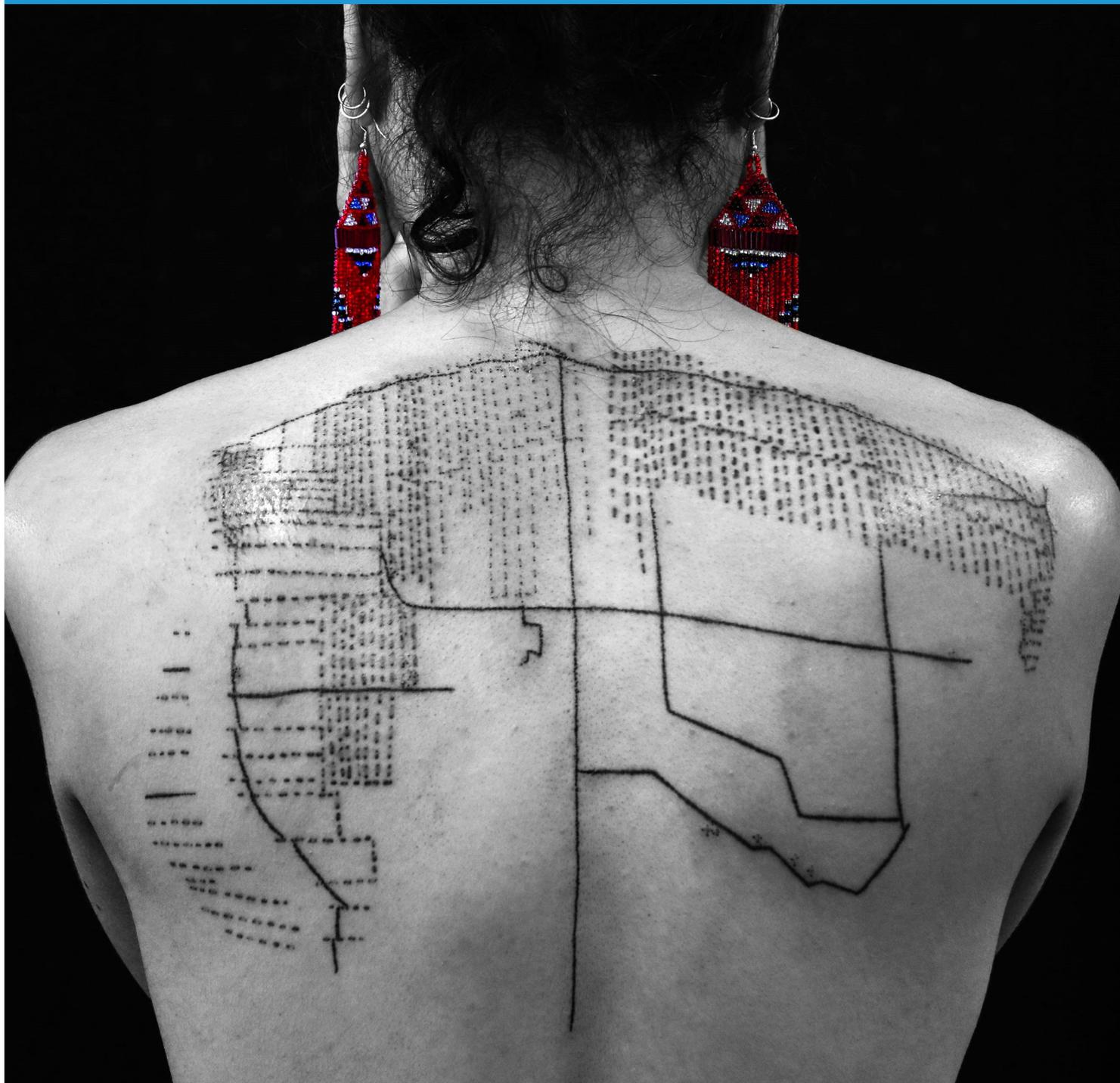
The Council is committed to increasing outreach and funding opportunities for Deaf and disability artists, including making sizable investments in Deaf and disability arts organizations within core grants. As a starting point, the Council officially recognized Deaf and disability arts as a field of practice within its Funding Model, and it is maximizing access to its six program streams in keeping with the historical doubling of the Council's budget between 2016 and 2021.

Building on the advances of the previous *Expanding the Arts* strategy, this updated strategy focuses on deepening the Council's impact on the Deaf and disability arts sector through two main areas of intervention:

- Supporting the **expression** of artists who are Deaf and/or have disabilities;
- Expanding the **engagement** of people who are Deaf and/or have disabilities.

¹ Adopting suggestions from members of the arts community, the Canada Council uses the terms 'psychiatric disability' and 'Mad' while also recognizing some prefer 'mental illness' or 'psychiatric survivor.' The Council acknowledges the significance of language in honouring history, identity and the evolving nature of terminology.

² See page 8 for more information



Demerara 1823 deconstruct

Video performance, installation

Afuwa (with cultural tattoo practitioner Dion Kaszas, and media artists Tia Taurere-Clearsky and Aerlyn Weissman)

Photo: Tia Taurere-Clearsky

Objective One:

Support the expression of artists who are Deaf and/or have disabilities. Invest in the creative development of the Deaf and disability arts sector by supporting artistic autonomy and innovation, ensuring equity in the Council's programs and services, and strengthening the Council's own capacity as an ally to the sector.

Actions:

- Increase funding and outreach to Deaf and/or disability-identified artists and arts professionals and to Deaf-led and disability-led arts groups and organizations.
- Monitor application and success rates of the sector to the Council's programs, and analyze gaps through comparative data and benchmarks.
- Continue to improve accessibility of the portal, website, print documents and person-to-person communication, and reinforce accommodation policies and equitable practices for internal processes and public events.
- Recognize, promote and assess Deaf and disability arts as a distinct field of practice.
- Actively solicit expertise from the sector, through organizing a second Equity gathering³ focused on Deaf and disability arts, among other activities, to bolster the Council and peer assessors' knowledge of aesthetics and artistic practices which will further the recognition and assessment of Deaf and disability-led work.
- Share knowledge, exchange best practices and explore partnerships with other funding agencies to keep current and relevant in facilitating overall sector development.

³ See context on page 9



Photo above:
je ne veux pas marcher seul (performance), 2015, produced by Joe Jack et John
Performers: Étienne Thibeault, Edon Descollines, Francis Ducharme
Photo: Adrienne Surprenant



Photo below:
je ne veux pas marcher seul (performance), 2015, produced by Joe Jack et John
Performer: Edon Descollines
Photo: Adrienne Surprenant

Objective Two:

Expand the engagement of people who are Deaf and/or have disabilities. *Extend and deepen the impact of the Deaf and disability arts sector on audiences at home and abroad. Support Canadian artists and arts organizations to expand their public and communities by forming sustainable collaborations with the Deaf and disability arts sector, and by presenting work which speaks to people on a continuum of ability.*

Actions:

- Explore strategies which increase the engagement of artists and arts professionals who are Deaf and/or have disabilities within the general arts milieu.
- Support initiatives to increase market access for artists and arts professionals who are Deaf and/or have disabilities within Canada and abroad.
- Identify, encourage and support practices that advance the accessibility of the arts sector, including artistic content, which will benefit both arts professionals and the public.
- Support Deaf and disability arts organizations' effort to increase their digital capacities to capitalize on opportunities of innovation and reach more peers and audiences.

“Arts and culture are an essential part of our belonging—to a community, country, society, and to humanity itself. On a personal level, art can reach the loneliest and most lost among us. It can soothe in times of grief, help us find our voice, or show us previously unimagined horizons. Art is how we come together to celebrate and share experiences that free us from the confines of everyday life. It plunges us into imaginative worlds that extend, complement and change our lives.”

- Simon Brault, *Shaping a New Future: Strategic Plan 2016-21*

In 2016, the Canada Council for the Arts (the Council) published its 2016-21 Strategic Plan *Shaping a New Future*. This plan reaffirms the Council's aspiration that Deaf Canadians and Canadians with disabilities share this sense of belonging by contributing to, and fully benefiting from, arts and culture. The plan states that the Council will “strive for equity in support and access” to programs and services for Deaf artists and artists with disabilities, to ensure that “all Canadians see themselves reflected in the country's arts landscape.”

Shaping a New Future foresees that by 2021, “Canada's major arts organizations will be models of diversity and innovation... [whose] programming and institutional decisions will reflect Canada's diversity—including...Deaf and disability communities.” In addition, the plan commits to raising the international profile of Canadian artists who are Deaf or have disabilities.

Expanding the Arts II: Deaf and Disability Expression and Engagement Strategy (ETA II) is a follow up to the Council's original Deaf and Disability Arts strategy, *Expanding the Arts: Deaf and Disability Arts, Access and Equality Strategy* which ran from 2012 to 2016. This updated strategy outlines objectives within the context of the Funding Model to support the Deaf and disability arts sector, including artists living with psychiatric disability or who identify as Mad. Over the coming years, our actions will be based on the following vision:

Deaf and disability arts is a vibrant field that is recognized and supported as bringing distinct perspectives and ways of being into the common cultural experience, shifting perceptions and understandings of the human condition and artistic expression.

ETA II provides an overview of major artistic practices and fundamental concepts, and proposes actions that closely align with the 2016-21 Strategic Plan. The overarching goal is to build on the Council's work to date, advance our policies and procedures, and further strengthen and support the artistic excellence and impact of the Deaf and disability arts sector at home and abroad.

3.1 Human Rights, Disability Justice and the Social Model

The Canada Council's commitment to advancing Deaf and disability arts is based on fundamental human and legal rights, including cornerstone legislation such as the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#), the [Canadian Human Rights Act](#), the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), as well as specific legal rulings.⁴ This legal framework is the basis upon which the Council provides accommodations and supports to applicants, peer assessors and staff who are Deaf or who have a disability.

The Council's commitment to Deaf and disability arts goes beyond the fulfillment of legal obligations to address power imbalances and inequities. One cannot fully understand the artistic practices of people who are Deaf and/or have a disability without the awareness that deafness, disability and mental illness (or psychiatric disabilities) have been met with persistent negative reactions from ancient times to the present. These views have influenced personal actions and societal transformations such as the Eugenics Movement which resulted in the systemic victimization, persecution and genocide of Deaf and disabled people around the world. This legacy of inequity continues to be challenged by Deaf and disability rights supporters through advocacy, legal action and collective cultural expression.

Deaf and disability arts, as a distinct field, is founded on the core values and principles of the disability rights movement and the social model of disability⁵, which maintain that:

- deafness and disability are collective identities rather than medical categories, and
- Deaf and disabled people should have full control and authority over determining their own goals as active and contributing citizens.

Experiences of inequality are understood as a result of political, social and economic discrimination. The focus is on addressing the inequities which can lie within the built environment (e.g., inconsistent levels of accessibility within venues and transportation and service systems), content delivery (e.g., absence of Sign Language interpretation and alternative formats), time allotment (e.g., lack of flexibility in scheduling and pace of events) and language and communication (e.g., terminology, attitudes and structured behaviour), which are dismissive of Deaf and disability realities.

The experiences of Deaf and disability inequity are furthermore strongly informed by race, class, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, and by histories of colonization and immigration. Within Indigenous nations, and some racialized communities, notions of disability and mental illness are often strongly influenced by collective experiences of trauma and social alienation resulting from the legacy of colonialism and racism.

Increasingly, practitioners are using the term “disability justice” to mean establishing equitable legal and social structures that support justice and wholeness for people with disabilities. In the field of arts and culture, Deaf and disabled artists are creating countercultural narratives that advance the principles of artistic autonomy and cultural authority. Much of this work frames Deafness and disability as a sociopolitical identity that brings valuable artistic and cultural insight.

By adhering to the social model of disability and recognizing structural inequities, intersecting identities, and human rights deficits, the Council is better prepared to support practitioners within the Deaf and disability arts sector in attaining their own self-determined goals and reaching their full potential.

⁴ In *Canadian Association of the Deaf v. Canada* (2006), the Federal Court ruled that federal government organizations must provide sign language interpretation to those requesting it. In *Jodhan v. Canada (Attorney General)* (2010), the Federal Court ruled that federal government departments are required to update websites to be accessible.

⁵An illustration of the social model of disability is provided in *Expanding the Arts: Deaf and Disability Arts, Access and Equality Strategy 2012-16* (ETA I).

3.2 History of the Council's Support for Deaf and Disability Arts

The Council's support to artists with disabilities can be traced back to the Explorations program in the 1970s. Over the years that followed, a limited number of projects led by artists with disabilities obtained funding through various disciplinary programs. In its 2008-11 Strategic Plan *Moving Forward*, the Council formally recognized "disability arts" as a priority area of exploration, and created the position of Disability Arts Officer within the Council's Equity Office to lead the development and implementation of the first *Expanding the Arts: Deaf and Disability Arts, Access and Equality Strategy 2012-16 (ETA I)*.

ETA I established an approach and understanding of "Deaf" as distinct from "disability," as well as a common framework of definitions which have been integrated into the Council's [glossary](#). Key achievements include the development of policies that have increased the accessibility of programs, such as the provision of documents in alternative formats; the production of signed and captioned videos; the publication of a comprehensive [guidebook](#) on accommodation protocols; the implementation of [access](#) and priority funding mechanisms across all programs, and the increased engagement of Deaf and disabled arts professionals as peer assessors.

According to Statistics Canada data, 15% of artists identify as being Deaf or having a disability.⁶ In 2011, the Council extended eligibility to its Capacity Building program to Deaf and disability arts organizations for organizational and sector development support. This contributed significantly to the sustainability of organizations such as [Corpuscule Danse](#), which was awarded three years of funding to strengthen its administrative and artistic capacity. Other successes include [Stage Left Productions](#), the first Deaf and disability arts organization to receive core funding from the Council in 2011, awarded through the InterArts Office followed by [Tangled Arts + Disability](#) in 2015 after receiving multi-year capacity-building funding from the Equity Office.

The Council also invited Deaf and disability arts practitioners to participate in a large-scale Equity Sounding held in 2013. This was designed to solicit community input on the needs and aspirations of artists from culturally-diverse, Deaf, disability arts and official language minority communities. One of the results was the development of the Cultivate Initiative (2014-17), which was the first arts-funding program in Canada that purposefully invested in the artistic and professional development needs of the Deaf and disability arts sector. The Cultivate Initiative resulted in multiple Deaf and disability-led projects in areas such as research and creation, dissemination, accessible programming and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange.

From 2011-12 to 2016-17, the Council's funding to the Deaf and disability arts sector (organizations and individuals) more than doubled, rising from \$1.1M to almost \$2.8M, and representing 1.2% of overall funding.

The Council is committed to increasing outreach and funding opportunities for Deaf and disability artists within the context of its Funding Model, launched in 2017, and the historical doubling of the Council's budget from 2016 to 2021. This includes making sizable investments in Deaf and disability arts organizations within core grants. As a starting point, the Council officially recognized Deaf and disability arts as a distinct field of practice within its Funding Model. The Council's commitment to the field has been further articulated by requiring organizations to have Deaf and disability identified artists or arts professionals within their leadership structure (including the Board) in order to be validated as a Deaf and disability arts organization. Organizations which don't necessarily meet this requirement but are working with Deaf and disabled artists are supported through the other disciplines. As well, the Council is actively maximizing access to its six program streams for Deaf and disability artists, arts professionals and organizations through the implementation of access and priority funding mechanisms, and ensuring appropriate peer assessment expertise.

⁶The 2011 National Household Survey asked whether a physical condition, mental condition, or health problem reduces the amount or the kind of activity that respondents can do at home, at work, at school, or in other activities. Source: Hill Strategies: A Statistical Profile of Artists and Cultural Workers in Canada, 7 October 2014, <http://hillstrategies.com/resource/a-statistical-profile-of-artists-and-cultural-workers-in-canada/>

“Disability identified art inverts [the tragedy of] impairment into a source of aesthetic appreciation by affirming disability aesthetics, impairment specific words, gestures, symbols, history and collective responses to disablism that cannot be authentically replicated by the non-disabled.”*

**– Michele Decottignies, Artistic Director, Stage Left Productions
(Canadian Theatre Review, 2016, p. 46)**

**The term disability is used here to be inclusive of Deaf, disability and Mad identities, while acknowledging that it is problematic to use one term to describe the many disparate cultures that exist within the disability arts domain.*

Building on the advances of the previous Expanding the Arts strategy, this new strategy focuses on deepening the Council's impact on the Deaf and disability arts sector through two main areas of intervention:

- Supporting the **expression** of artists who are Deaf and/or have disabilities;
- Expanding the **engagement** of people who are Deaf and/or have disabilities.

Specific actions for each area of intervention, as well as their context, are outlined below.

4.1 Objective One: Expression

Support the expression of artists who are Deaf and/or have disabilities. Invest in the creative development of the Deaf and disability arts sector by supporting artistic autonomy and innovation, ensuring equity in the Council's programs and services, and strengthening the Council's own capacity as an ally to the sector.

Actions:

- Increase funding and outreach to Deaf and/or disability identified artists and arts professionals, and to Deaf-led and disability-led arts groups and organizations.
- Monitor application and success rates of the sector to Council's programs, and analyze gaps through comparative data and benchmarks.
- Continue to improve accessibility of the portal, website, print documents and person-to-person communication, and reinforce accommodation policies and equitable practices for internal processes and public events.
- Recognize, promote and assess Deaf and disability arts as a distinct field of practice.
- Actively solicit expertise from the sector, through organizing a second Equity gathering focused on Deaf and disability arts, among other activities, to bolster the Council's and peer assessors' knowledge of aesthetics and artistic practices to further the recognition and assessment of Deaf and disability-led work.
- Share knowledge, exchange best practices, and explore partnerships with other funding agencies to keep current and relevant in facilitating overall sector development.

Context

For the Canada Council, Deaf and disability arts are artistic practices in which disparate, collective cultural experiences of being Deaf or having a disability are central to the exploration of narrative, form, and/or aesthetics. Grounded in the social model of disability, these practices break with dominant artistic conventions in creation, production and dissemination, shifting perceptions and understandings of the human condition. The work spans the performing and studio arts, combining customary and contemporary forms and aesthetics in ways often unique to the sector.

Deaf and Disability Arts as a Field of Practice

The Council has observed that the range of aesthetics, degree of innovation, scale and scope of activity within the Deaf and disability arts sector has risen dramatically over a short number of years. Correspondingly, the ways in which people identify, communicate and connect within the sector are extremely diverse and regionally specific. Across these diverse practices, the Council acknowledges the distinctions between the three groups outlined below based on their histories, perspectives and needs. It is important to note that there are other cross-cutting practices and that artists who are Deaf or have a disability do not necessarily produce Deaf and disability arts. Some choose to neither include nor represent being Deaf or having a disability within their work, and many choose to define their practices along traditional disciplinary lines.

Deaf Arts

Deaf arts are created by Deaf people, and explore identity, community and relationships both with the dominant hearing culture and within Deaf communities. This includes the different ways of identifying with Deaf culture. Some may prefer to identify as having a disability, small 'd' deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing.⁷

Deaf arts express Deaf history and culture through signed languages, which are regionally and culturally specific and distinct from written and spoken languages. In Canada, these include: American Sign Language, *langue des signes québécoise*, and various Indigenous and regional Sign languages. By framing the experience of being Deaf as the norm, Deaf arts play an important role in advancing the vitality and participation of Sign language

⁷ The Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (CCSD) uses the term Deaf with a capital "D" to represent a linguistic and cultural group of individuals with diverse experiences and who use one or more signed languages as a primary means of communication, cultural expression and social engagement. The Canada Council has adopted this convention and recognizes Deaf people and signed languages within a broad definition of artistic, cultural and linguistic diversity.

communities in cultural life, defying assumptions and values long held by the hearing population. For example, Deaf musicians challenge the perception that music is created and experienced only through hearing, instead broadening this experience to include a variety of visual, sensory and imaginary interpretations of sound.⁸ Within Deaf theatre, there is often minimal or no verbal interpretation of Sign languages, inviting Deaf and hearing audiences alike to experience narrative through visual cues and aesthetics. Within visual arts, Deaf View/Image Art (De'VIA) incorporates elements such as intense contrasting colors and textures, and an emphasis on facial features, especially eyes, mouths, ears, and hands to express innate Deaf cultural or physical experiences.⁹



In his work *Ultrasound*, Playwright Adam Pottle, subversively questions the discriminatory but accepted practice of routinely screening pregnancies for deafness or disabilities. Co-produced by [Cahoots Theatre](#) and [Théâtre Passe Muraille](#) and directed by Marjorie Chan (2016), the play illuminates the dilemma faced by a Deaf married couple who debate whether or not they will terminate a pregnancy after discovering their expected child will be able to hear.

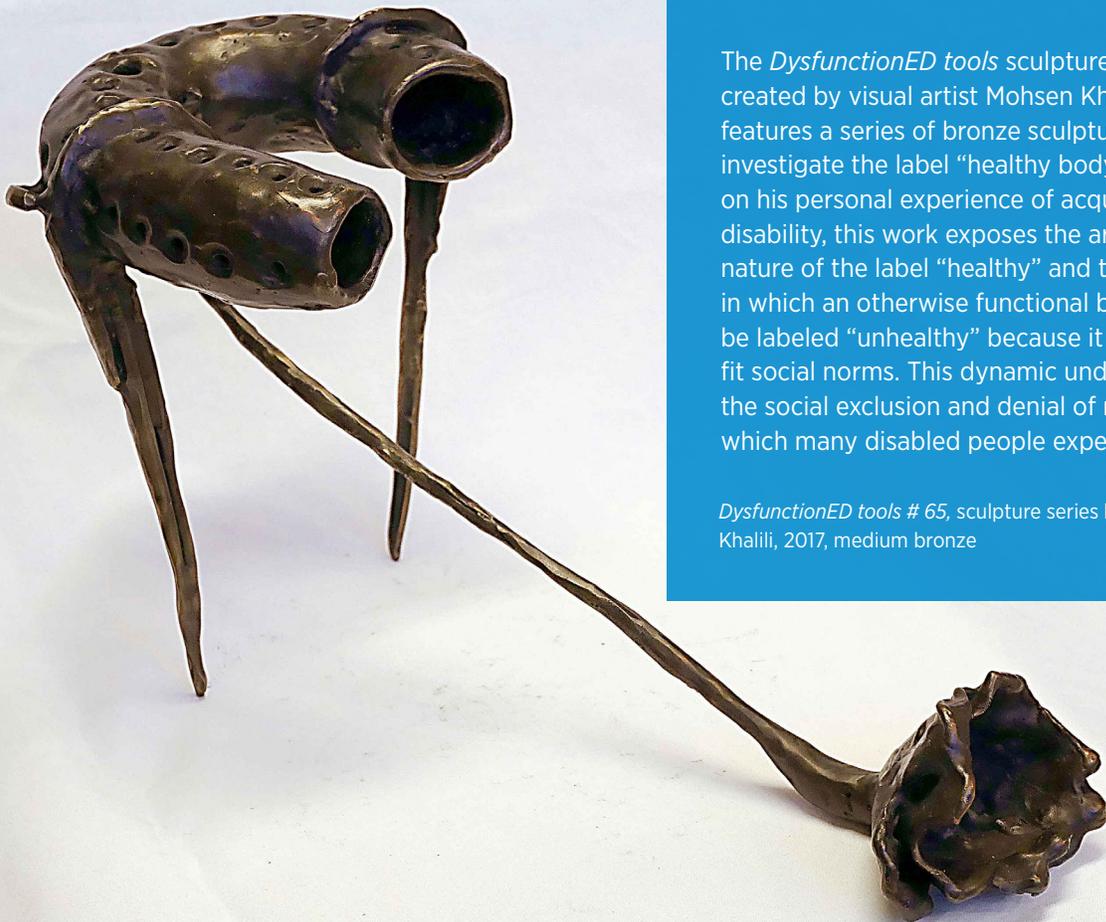
Ultrasound by Adam Pottle, co-produced by Cahoots Theatre and Theatre Passe Muraille
Featuring: Elizabeth Morris and Christopher Dodd
Photo: Dahlia Katz Photography

⁸ See Ted Talk by Evelyne Glennie: "How to Truly Listen" https://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn_glennie_shows_how_to_listen

⁹ *De'VIA Manifesto*, created May, 1989, at The Deaf Way. http://www.deafart.org/Deaf_Art_/deaf_art_.html

Disability Arts

Disability arts are created by people with disabilities who use their experiences of disablement as a point of departure towards creation. Impairments, whether learning, physical, psychological, neurological, sensory or intellectual, are not framed as limitations within the artistic process, but as grounds upon which choices are made in terms of form and aesthetics. This work counters and expands dominant notions of beauty, autonomy, and power, which commonly represent the disabled subject in terms of pity and charity.



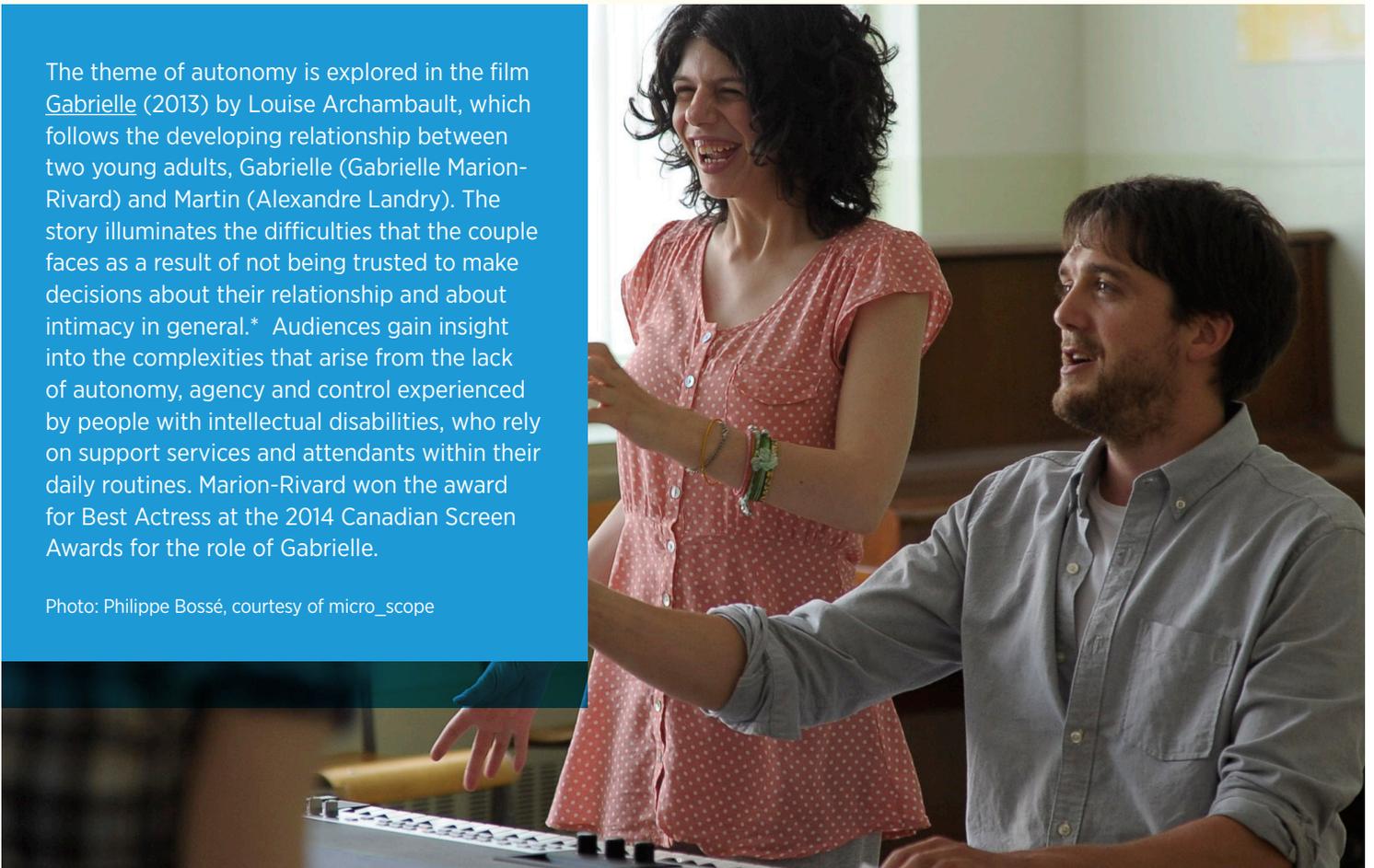
The *DysfunctionED tools* sculpture series, created by visual artist Mohsen Khalili, features a series of bronze sculptures that investigate the label “healthy body.” Based on his personal experience of acquiring a disability, this work exposes the arbitrary nature of the label “healthy” and the ways in which an otherwise functional body can be labeled “unhealthy” because it doesn’t fit social norms. This dynamic underlies the social exclusion and denial of rights, which many disabled people experience.

DysfunctionED tools # 65, sculpture series by Mohsen Khalili, 2017, medium bronze

Artists with physical impairments may use their mobility supports or communication devices to explore different approaches to movement and verbalization while artists with learning disabilities, who may acquire information through a range of sensory stimulation, often express their art through a re-invention or experimentation with language, sound and visual forms. Work by artists with intellectual, cognitive or developmental disabilities often challenge conventional ideas of intelligence based on intelligence quotient (IQ) test results or normative notions of rationality, transforming notions of power, creativity, genre and hierarchies.

The theme of autonomy is explored in the film *Gabrielle* (2013) by Louise Archambault, which follows the developing relationship between two young adults, Gabrielle (Gabrielle Marion-Rivard) and Martin (Alexandre Landry). The story illuminates the difficulties that the couple faces as a result of not being trusted to make decisions about their relationship and about intimacy in general.* Audiences gain insight into the complexities that arise from the lack of autonomy, agency and control experienced by people with intellectual disabilities, who rely on support services and attendants within their daily routines. Marion-Rivard won the award for Best Actress at the 2014 Canadian Screen Awards for the role of Gabrielle.

Photo: Philippe Bossé, courtesy of micro_scope



**While fictional, this story was inspired by Marion-Rivard, a professional actress, and Archambault's observations at Les Muses, a performing arts training centre which develops the talents of artists with intellectual disabilities. The production engages many actors who trained at Les Muses.*

Mad Arts

Mad arts are created by people who live with Madness and are an expression of Mad Pride. The term “Mad” has been reclaimed by people who identify as living with mental illness or psychiatric disabilities, and symbolizes pride, collective identity and community building. Within this context, mental illness is not framed as pathology, but rather as integral to identity and experiences shaped by social determinants of health such as income, social status, employment, working conditions, housing and food security.

Stemming from the Psychiatric Survivors’ movement in the 1970s, Mad Pride represents an international arts and culture movement that is founded on Mad histories and identities, framing the medicalization and institutionalization experienced by Mad-identified people as oppression and inequitable practice. Rather than concentrating on awareness and coping with stigma, Mad arts focus on expressing the unique ways people experience the world in making meaning and creating countercultural movements.



The Walls are Alive with the Sounds of Mad People was created by Ruth Ruth Stackhouse, Artistic Director of [Friendly Spike Theatre Band](#) and took place on the grounds of the Centre for Mental Health and Addiction, historically named the Toronto Insane Asylum. This site-specific piece, based on research of historian Geoffrey Reaume, uncovers the histories of people living within institutions in the nineteen and twentieth centuries. It celebrates their resilience in confronting experiences of confinement, slavery, abuse and neglect, and challenges the medicalization of mental illness.

Photo: Rob Saunders

Ongoing Challenges

Regardless of the type and nature of the practice, Deaf and disabled artists experience significant inequities, systemic discrimination and marginalization within arts training, production and dissemination. Many artists have had to continually confront the perception of their work as non-professional and perpetually “emerging.” This lack of recognition for their artistic endeavour and rigorous practice has impeded artists from being seen as cultural contributors fully capable of autonomous decision-making, and has aggravated their isolation from the artistic milieu. Artists with intellectual disabilities¹⁰ in particular experience significant barriers in gaining recognition as legitimate artists in their own right. As collaborations between Deaf and disability artists and non-disability artists become more common, many artists and allies are pressing for increased dialogue and research on methodologies and reciprocal models to ensure the artistic and cultural authority of artists with intellectual disabilities.

In terms of financial sustainability, Deaf and disability arts organizations often have limited infrastructure, particularly in regional contexts, and experience increased barriers to maintaining long-term operations. At an individual level, Deaf and disabled artists often create and produce art that requires more time and cost, and may also experience greater barriers in attaining employment to complement the low income generated from art. Significant proportions of artists who are Deaf or have disabilities are on income support and are limited in the amount of revenue they can generate towards supporting their artistic careers.

The Canada Council as an Ally

In addition to recognizing these diverse artistic expressions, the Council’s commitment to supporting the Deaf and disability arts milieu includes being an effective ally to the sector. This involves continuing to be actively engaged through outreach, knowledge exchange and the facilitation of events and activities that support the sector to mobilize around self-determined goals. These events, in turn, often inform the Council’s policies and foresight. In addition, by working in concert and exchanging with national and international peers through forums such as the Canadian Public Arts Funders (CPAF) and the International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies (IFACCA), the Council can nourish and diversify its strategies and approaches.

¹⁰ Based on ongoing consultations with the community, the Council has adopted the use of the term intellectual disability, while also recognizing that some artists prefer the terms cognitive disability or developmental disability.

Examples of public forums organized by Deaf and disability arts organizations funded in part by the Council:

SPiLL.PROpagation, an inter-arts organization based in Gatineau, Quebec, hosted the Canadian Deaf Arts Forum (2014), which brought together Deaf artists from across the country to develop Phonocentrism, an approach which redefines art techniques based on Sign language and Deaf centric perspectives.

Toronto-based **Tangled Arts + Disability** organized the Crippling the Arts symposium (2016) which brought together over 150 artists and arts professionals from across the country to engage in discourse, networking and artistic practice.

Edmonton-based playwright and actor Chris Dodd founded and became the Artistic Director of **SOUND OFF: A Deaf Theatre Festival** in 2017, a four-day event produced in partnership with Workshop West Playwrights' Theatre and the Chinook Series.



Deaf artists celebrating sign language in the arts in Canada at SPiLL.PROpagation's artist residency.

Photo: SPiLL.PROpagation

4.2 Objective Two: Engagement

Expand the engagement of people who are Deaf and/or have disabilities. *Extend and deepen the impact of the Deaf and disability arts sector on audiences at home and abroad. Support Canadian artists and arts organizations to expand their public and communities by forming sustainable collaborations with the Deaf and disability arts sector, and by presenting work which speaks to people on a continuum of ability.*

Actions:

- Explore strategies which increase the engagement of artists and arts professionals who are Deaf and/or have disabilities within the general arts milieu.
- Support initiatives to increase market access for artists and arts professionals who are Deaf and/or have disabilities within Canada and abroad.
- Identify, encourage and support practices that advance the accessibility of the arts sector, including artistic content, which will benefit both arts professionals and the public.
- Support Deaf and disability arts organizations' effort to increase their digital capacities to capitalize on innovative opportunities and reach more peers and audiences.

Parties should recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life [and] shall take appropriate measures to enable persons with disabilities to have the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential, not only for their own benefit, but also for the enrichment of society.

**- 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
(Article 30)**

¹¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/2016-census-age-gender-1.4095360>

Context

The 2011 Statistics Canada Census reported that 3.8 million Canadians identified as having a disability (13% of adult population), around 3.5% of the population reported hearing-related impairments, and 25,000 persons identified Sign language as the language spoken at home. The prevalence of disability increases with age and, for the first time in history, seniors outnumber children in Canada.¹¹ Regardless of age, Indigenous peoples of Canada experience disability at twice the rate of the non-Indigenous population. In light of these demographic indicators, a vibrant Deaf and disability arts sector is a key component of a truly diverse and inclusive arts landscape.

Undeniably, major changes are needed in cultural infrastructure and delivery of content to make art more available to this growing population. Audience members who are Deaf or who have disabilities continue to face significant barriers in gaining basic access to the arts. The challenges of navigating through inaccessible transit, venues, and websites, as well as a lack of Sign-language interpretation, audio description, and surtitles limit the participation of Deaf and disabled people within the arts, and thus of fully exercising their cultural rights.

Digital Access and Impacts

The Council's strategic plan includes commitments to "support the professional arts sector to effectively use digital technologies to create and share its work with audiences here and around the world." Artists who are Deaf and/or have disabilities have frequently been at the forefront of technological experimentation—seamlessly integrating digital media and adaptive technologies into their artistic practices. In addition, the use of digital media and online community-building has been heavily adapted by Deaf artists and artists with disabilities as a means of creatively combatting physical or social isolation, contributing to the creation of networks and dynamic collaborations.

Moreover, accessibility features originally targeting Deaf and disabled Canadians have benefited broader segments of Canadian society. Inclusive or universal design standards such as audible announcements and descriptions, and captioning for example, benefit not only Deaf and disabled Canadians, but also seniors, children and newcomers to Canada. Notably, voice recognition and touch screens, now standard features in the design and functioning of our computers, phones, and by extension our interactions with services and our communities, are a direct result of assistive technology originally developed to accommodate people with disabilities.



The Republic of Inclusion was a three-day event in June 2017 featuring Deaf and disability art works, presentations and discussions produced by the English Theatre department of the National Arts Centre in partnership with artists and arts organizations and institutions, including the Council.

Alex Bulmer and Kazumi Tsuruoka
Photo: Marnie Richardson and Martin Jones, NAC Digital Media

Nonetheless, it is imperative that the Deaf and disability arts sector is supported in the effective use of digital technologies to create innovative work and connect with wider audiences. While accessibility features are being increasingly incorporated into all sectors of society, the need to counter inaccessible infrastructure and socio-cultural isolation, and to keep up with the rapid pace of technological change remains high for Deaf and disability arts.



A number of Canadian artists and groups from the Deaf and disability arts sector have been featured at international festivals, showcases and touring circuits, including [André Cormier](#) (pictured), [France Geoffroy](#), [David Roche](#), [Joe Jack](#) and [John and Laurence Brunelle-Côté](#).

Photo: Claire Harvie

International Opportunities

The Council's strategic plan and *International Strategy Framework* set out a commitment to “support Canadian artists who are Deaf or have disabilities to take their place on the international stage.” Given the momentum of the Deaf and disability arts movement as a global phenomenon, the Council can capitalize on its funding structure and international focus to amplify investments in, and promote the profile of, the Canadian Deaf and disability arts sector.

Aesthetics of Access

Deaf and disability arts impact the arts ecology both in terms of creation and innovation, and through modelling equitable environments for artists and audiences.¹² “Aesthetics of access” refers to art practices that take into account individualized accommodation and needed cultural shifts within the creation process rather than after the completion of the work. These may include the access requirements of both artists and the public. Examples of this could include interactive multi-sensory installations, live performances created using both signed and oral languages or sound-based work with non-auditory aspects such as amplified vibration. These expanded ways of working in the arts are contributing to the artistic vision of the work in the realms of aesthetics and presentation.¹³

Informed by these practices, established arts institutions and networks have invested in the advancement of Deaf and disability arts, and in engaging audience members who are Deaf and who have disabilities. Presenters within the performing arts are hosting gatherings and panel discussions exploring the implications of Deaf and disability arts on contemporary practice. Museums have introduced tactile tours and audio description enabling blind visitors to directly experience the art. These initiatives are increasing the ways Canadians can engage with the work, bringing the arts to new audiences.



The Canada Council partnered with the British Council to support Canadian presenters in implementing Relaxed Performances (2016-17), a practice created by theatre artist [Jess Thom](#), that offers inclusive performance environments for audience members with varied conditions, such as those on the autism spectrum and with Tourette's syndrome.

Jess Thom, performer and co-founder of Touretteshero
Photo: James Lyndsay

¹² Michele Decottignies, *Canadian Theatre Review*, 2016, p. 46

¹³ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5819e3e4ff7c502184796803/t/5819fecfc534a52382df6516/1478098642029/Shifting_Definitions_of_Access_Disabilit.pdf

The last ten years have marked a sea-change in the trajectory of Deaf and disability arts. Substantial progress has been made towards recognizing, supporting and advancing Deaf and disability arts practices in Canada. The Canada Council is also being transformed by arts professionals who work tirelessly to bring about change. With specific efforts to hire staff, engage peers and consult with members of the Deaf and disability arts sector, the Council's knowledge and capacity have grown considerably.

In the context of its programs, the Council commits to going beyond simply increasing accessibility by continuing to advance equity within its mechanisms, policies and communications tools, and by expanding its cultural capacities to support the breadth and diversity of the sector. *Expanding the Arts II: Deaf and Disability Expression and Engagement Strategy 2019-21*, proposes concrete actions to ensure that the vitality and sustainability of the Deaf and disability arts sector is a crucial part of the overall Canadian arts ecology.

About the Canada Council

The Canada Council for the Arts is Canada's national arts funder. Its grants and payments to artists and organizations contribute to a vibrant arts sector in Canada. Its awards celebrate creativity by recognizing exceptional Canadians in the arts, humanities and sciences. The Canada Council Art Bank is a national collection of over 17,000 Canadian contemporary artworks – all accessible to the public through rental, loan and outreach programs. The Canadian Commission for UNESCO operates under the general authority of the Canada Council.



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