

# Foreword

In 1994 the former Combined Arts Department was drawn together. When I joined in 1995 the department was involved in an increasing number of extremely exciting and cutting edge digital arts initiatives with practitioners working in cross-cultural live art, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work. We commissioned National Disability Arts Forum to help us identify immediate ways to facilitate disabled artists to access this particular area of activity. The Digital Arts and Disabled People Bursary Scheme has been our starting point. Its very existence has encouraged disabled artists to think around notions of digital – disability – arts and how they interact. The scheme encouraged artists to connect with digital arts organisations, to train and develop their creativity. It is very exciting to see the work that has been borne from these developments and now more so to see the increasing potential yet to be realised.

I would like to thank all the artists who have made contributions to the publication, along with all those organisations that have helped with this work. Thanks to David Butler and Sue Jones at AN Publications and Ripe Design Consultancy. Thanks to Michelle Murchan at the Arts Council of England. Grateful thanks to The Gulbenkian Foundation for its financial support which helped to fire this project at its beginning.

Thanks in particular to Andrea Phillips for her editorial contribution to this publication.

**SARAH SCOTT**  
**Arts Council of England Policy Officer (Disability Arts)**

For further information and contact details of any of the artists mentioned please call Sarah Scott at ACE.  
Further copies of this publication, including on audiotape, are available from the Arts Council of England.

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Designed by Ripe Design Consultancy, Gateshead  
Distributed with the January 2000 issue of AN magazine  
Funded by the Arts Council of England  
Front cover image: Still from *Vusub Walkman Don'tWalk DoWalk* –  
the materialised Hugh Huddy

A large format version of this publication is  
available at: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk>

# Digitising Disability

'Bodies - I'm not an animal' - Sex Pistols 1977

**Colin Hambrook, editor of Disability Arts in London, gives an overview of the Arts Council of England's Digital Arts for Disabled People Bursary Scheme within the context of current developments within the field of Disability Arts.**

## Unseen bodies

For some disabled artists the process of making art cannot be separated from disability. As a student I opened up my personal history of mental illness to the canvas and the printing block. There were several reasons behind this, not least that the degree I did at Dartington College of Arts was about placing art within a social context. It seemed to me that there was an amount of deconstruction to be done when it came to looking at beliefs and perceptions of madness within the fine art world.

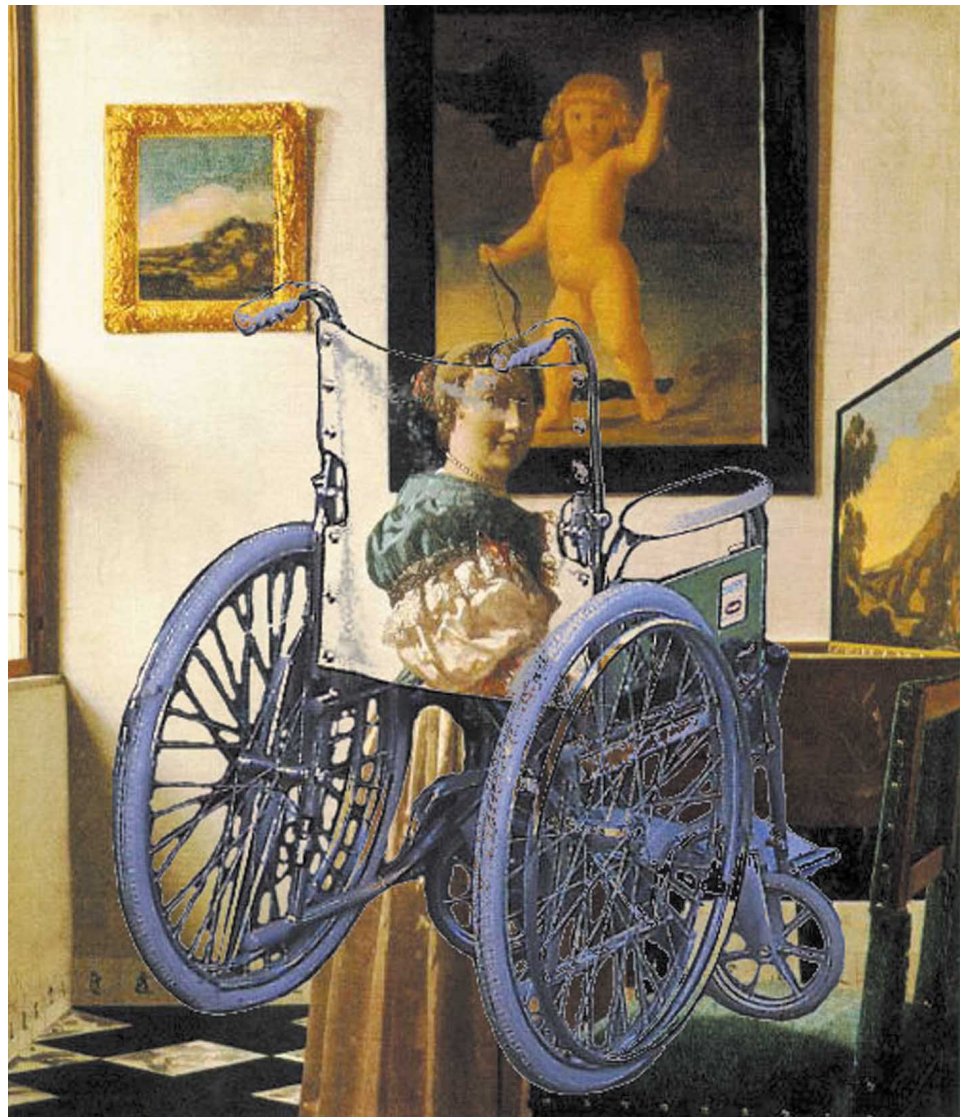
During the course tutors and students alike dismissed my work as 'polemical' – something which was clearly unfashionable at the end of the eighties. They simply didn't have the experience to see that I was struggling to rewrite the succession of languages that represent perceptions of madness – from the languages of religious and romantic iconography through to those of a more contemporary nature.

However, at that time, I found a huge resistance to valuing that process. Within the body of the institution, it was as if I was metaphorically invisible.

Ironic, considering that one of my themes was the pathology of invisibility. I was told directly at one interview for art college that I didn't understand the language of art. The language I was attempting to develop was relegated to the inconsequential time and time again, usually via the notion of 'therapy'. Art history has been defined in denial of a disability viewpoint. As a result the representation of disabled people has always been through the eyes of non-disabled artists

## Body politic

The Arts Council of England's Digital Arts and Disabled People Bursary Scheme was set up to help the evolving body of disabled artists interested in using technology to facilitate their work by offering small grants for training and access to expertise. Digital image-making has been at the centre of a disability arts renaissance, partly because its newness allows for fresh ideas on the nature of expression and partly because it offers both a way of processing and accessing art-making which can be better tailored to disabled artists' needs. Additionally, the interactive possibilities of the internet have made it easier to access material from other media such as film, radio and video. Arguably, it is a timely



coincidence that the expansion of technology has occurred over a similar time period to the one in which disabled people have been attempting to break the shackles of oppressive medical and charitable perceptions of their bodies, replacing them with a much more socialised model of disability. This development drastically transforms our perception of ourselves and the discrimination we face as a disempowered group.

## Technological bodies

As disability arts encompass a host of concerns, so disabled artists are using the ACE bursary scheme to develop their work from many perspectives. Whilst some are using it to develop their artistic process primarily through learning new skills in processing ideas through digital media, others are using it to question the form itself. Given that most software development, although giving greater general access to disabled people, has come about without the considerations disabled artists might employ, it is interesting that some artists and organisations are looking at ways of dealing with software as an artistic consideration. Hugh Huddy's work with Intermedia involves challenging the incorruptibility of software by reformatting files and changing the pixelation or filtering video material until the image is unrecognisable. The work is a collaboration: as a visually impaired artist Huddy is relying on the interpretations of his assistants to move the work along.

Emma McMullan's work entails building robots, one of which houses a TV camera and others of which hold a drawing implement. The idea is to build a system that can be placed anywhere. Along with hi-tech consultants Al Digital, she has collaborated with an electrical and mechanical engineer as well as a professor of computing, in order to glue elements of technological vision together in ways that may have useful offshoots elsewhere within the world of digital media.

Other artists come from a background of animation. Bim Ajadi's accomplished 3D animation *Racers* communicates the language of the software to an audience, illustrating the build up of layers within the programme. Jenni Meredith's application to ACE was a pragmatic solution to training needs. She had previously commissioned Declan Flynn and Mark Rowland from the Drake Music Project to compose music for her digital animation *Thru the Pane*. She wanted to learn the technology partly to give her more choice in a situation of financial constraint and also to gain a clearer notion of how to proceed in collaboration.

Patrick McBride also came to the bursary at a point where he wanted extra digital tools to enable him to realise a project, without having to rely on outside agents to interpret his ideas. He says 'Artec was great because of its proactive

attitude towards disabled people. At Artec I learnt how to make websites and to use the internet as a resource. It was only after I had rendered a 3-D animation that I realised how digital work was complete in its own right. This revelation was liberating.'

## Virtual bodies

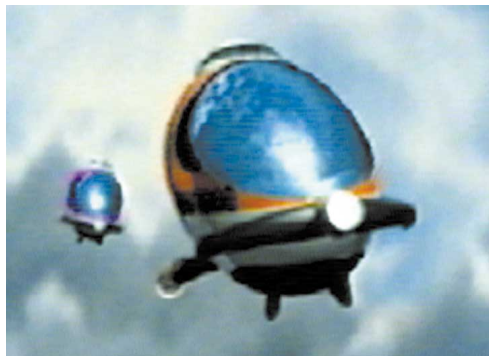
Questions of corporeality are a theme that runs through the work of many disabled artists. Ann Whitehurst, whose work amongst other things challenges the static view of the body, is informed by questions like 'What is the difference between life and art?' Being a disabled artist gives her a vantage point that is defined by invisibility. Her postcard portrait, riding the canal-ways in the guise of Dr Crazitis Crippulus, challenges religious iconography of disabled people who are always seen in search of a cure. Like many disabled artists she recognises that impairment can be an advantage in laying aside traditional ways of understanding material and form.

Barbara Ryan's concern is to reinterpret the world the body inhabits using all manners of representations from everyday consumer products to religious iconography. The computer is the perfect medium to explore her theme of the friction between the machine-made and 'hand-made'.

## Connected bodies

Within the broad context of developments in disability arts, one of the principal aims of the bursary scheme is to connect disabled artists in a mutual flow of ideas. One of the outcomes has been the formation of Outside Centre (an ironic take on the role of day centres as controlling agents of disabled peoples' lives). The project has linked Ann Whitehurst with performance artists Alan McLean and Tony Mustoe and theoretician Paul Darke. Paul says, 'we felt that there were a lot of organisations promoting disability art, but few making artworks collectively and

collaboratively'. Paul has broached digital media from a background in film and video work. He asserts that the techniques on offer 'have affected the way I think in terms of the amazing creative potential at the hands of everybody. Through the skills I am learning I can see ways of encouraging and supporting other disabled people who will become artists as a result'.



## Institutional bodies

The Arts Council's bursary scheme recognises a lack of access to traditional education systems and the need to encourage artists and host organisations to foster longer-term relationships. Media arts resources like Artec in London and VIVID in Birmingham have been able to look more seriously at their equal opportunities policy through recent relocations in fully accessible spaces. VIVID has also invited Paul Darke onto the management committee and linked up with D'ART, the West Midlands Disability Arts Forum magazine.

Hull Time Based Arts has had a long-term relationship with Tony Mustoe, Alan McLean and Ann Whitehurst and the organisation has learned and changed considerably through that process. Intermedia has also learned through practice, previously having commissioned Hugh Huddy. Both parties are aware of the collaboration needed to make any training scheme successful. Artability supplied training at Barbara Ryan's house.

## Other accessible bodies

Barbara Ryan is also a member of the Artshouse, another organisation concerned with questions of access and inclusivity. Its recent commission for two artists to collaborate on *An Outward Retreat*, a residency scheme set up at Mount Grace Priory, an English Heritage site in Northallerton, included a remit for a disabled artist who would not be expected to undertake physical work on location. Disabled cyber artist Ju90 thus added her reflections to the installation and interpreted the artistic process as a website.

For many organisations working with disabled artists for the first time, there is a steep learning curve in understanding the needs of disabled artists. The Fabrica Gallery in Brighton has an educational remit and set out with The Lighthouse Media Centre to provide disabled artist Alison Lapper with a bursary to learn digital skills and show the resultant portraits as part of an exhibition called *Pale Outline* – setting out to explore 'the body as the boundary between the public and private'. Liz Whitehead of Fabrica says the project has shown her 'the amount of barriers to making work through a denial of access that many disabled artists face'. Like VIVID, that is considering how to invest more highly in a smaller number of people, she is concerned at the lack of infrastructure for the support of disabled artists. The dilemma is intensified by the fact that exclusion is often the only common connection between individuals.

Joan Greening, Co-ordinator of Connections 'New Perceptions' bursary scheme for disabled film-makers, has gone as far as holding production meetings in a hospice to facilitate Richard Hill's *Tangled Web* internet-based project. Full Circle Arts is set up as a disabled artists' support agency with the remit to market and sell disabled artists' work, offering information and advice through regular surgeries. The organisation is currently working with disabled web artist Jo Wilson to help her set up an interactive website, delivering heritage industry educational information.

It's clear that educational bodies are beginning to address issues of access. The London Institute has recently added a Disability Arts module to its postgraduate courses and is attempting to encourage more disabled people to become art students through seminars and 'taster' days. Joe McConnell spent six years developing and running a vocational training course for disabled people wishing to learn computer-based desktop publishing skills at the City & Islington College. The course emphasis changed as it became apparent that more artists were wishing to learn to use digital media. His feeling is that 'there is a danger of ghettoisation through providing discreet courses... there is a need to confront the attitudes of institutions towards the way people refer to physical attributes. It's an issue for society at large, if it doesn't start in educational institutions it will never be taken on board.'



## Disabled bodies

Katherine Araniello has just achieved a first from the London Guildhall University's Fine Art course with two digitally animated films – *Slapping* and *Subversity*. Her aim is 'to challenge mainstream perceptions through making art that can be appreciated on its own terms, without making a big deal about disability.' Many disabled artists share the dilemma of needing to make work which explores issues of identity, sexuality, oppression and so on, but also wanting the work to be seen on its own terms, without the sense of it being fitted into a neat self-contained bundle. As the world becomes more dependent on information technology, so the context for work widens. The National Disability Arts Forum, The London Disability Arts Forum,

Disabilitynet, Cripptology, to name a few, have all produced websites with an increasing dedication to present the work of disabled artists. Disabled cartoonist 'Crippen' says 'I'm not only getting emails from people all over the world who relate to the humour and the issues, but I often receive responses from MPs and Government.' What is clear is that the internet is giving disabled artists a degree of control in producing work and finding an audience for a growing area of practice. ■