# Towards an Inclusive Circus

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This article analyses a series of social circus workshops delivered by The Women's Circus in 2018 for people with and without a disability to document and understand inclusive methodology. The research responds to Sarah Austin's 2014 industry report *Beyond Access: the creative case for inclusive arts practice* which identified a gap in documentation of both the history of the Disability Arts Movement and of current methodological approaches in the field. Austin identified two frameworks or arguments for inclusive practice: social inclusion and creative aesthetic and these are used to locate the methodologies of the Women's Circus within the wider field. Along with responding to literature on disability arts, social circus and disability education the report draws from qualitative observation, participant surveys and interviews with key stakeholders. The article argues that the creative case for an inclusive circus practice that recognises the artists ability to influence and innovate the art-form must be considered in tandem with the social.

Keywords: inclusive circus**;** social circus**;** inclusive arts**;** arts and disability**.**

## Introduction

This research project was funded by The University of Melbourne and was conducted for the Women's Circus: a Melbourne based social circus providing training and creative opportunities for women since 1991. Over the past three years the Women's Circus has supported women with disabilities to access their programs through offering scholarships, one-on-one mentorships, residency opportunities and Auslan training for staff. In 2018, the company collaborated with Weave Movement Theatre, an ensemble of artists with and without disability who create performance that 'subverts audience's expectations and challenges conventional ways of seeing dance and disability' (Anon 2018).

The study investigates inclusive circus practice through qualitative observation, written evaluations and interviews with stakeholders, alongside current literature in the fields of arts and disability and social circus. This paper considers an inclusive circus practice through the potentially antithetic, but interrelated frameworks of social inclusion and creative aesthetic to reveal a unique methodology that disrupts a skills-based pedagogy in favour of *creative exploration, embodiment, critical engagement, universal language and heterogeneity.* It is concluded that a social development and well-being framework alone positions artists with a disability as 'service users' (Austin 2014, p. 21) and negates their ability to contribute artistically to the practice. The creative case for an inclusive circus practice must be considered in tandem with the social.

**Background: key definitions**

This paper defines disability as it is outlined in the 2006, United Nations (UN) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* to include 'those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.'

It is important to note that this definition is informed by Oliver's (2013, p. 1024) 'social model' of disability that views disability as the interaction between an individual's impairment and the prejudiced world they exist within, as opposed to the 'medical model', which views disability as a physical or mental deficiency that requires treatment or 'fixing' (Haegele and Hodege 2016, p.194).

The social model of disability problematizes the disabling barriers to participation faced by individuals and places the responsibility of change on the systems

of power. According to Oliver (2013), this paradigm shift has resulted in modifications in transportation; public buildings; laws (making it illegal to discriminate against people with a disability); health providers and government policy and funding. The social model of disability paved the way for the rise of arts and disability that has occurred over the past 30 years (Austin 2014). Within Australia, government agencies and peak bodies for the arts have been developing and implementing new policies that address barriers to participation and recognize the instrumental value and inherent creative potential of an 'inclusive arts' strategy.

'Inclusive arts' is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of 'creative practices and aesthetic strategies as they relate to the artistic practice of people with a disability' (Austin 2014, p. 8). The term first gained currency within UK policy and is now used within the Australian arts industry by governments and independent arts organizations who recognize the creative potential of an equitable environment where everyone is free to participate as artists and audiences. It should be noted that the term 'inclusive' has been critiqued by practitioner Hickey-Moody (in Austin, 2014) for reinforcing binaries of inclusion/exclusion. However, as the term is widely used across Australia, it has been adopted for purposes of speaking to and within a growing literature of research.

Whilst the Women's Circus does not currently have a specific Disability Action Plan in place, the company's strategic plan states that over its 25-year history it has developed 'a model for *inclusive and acce*ssible practice that recognizes the artist in all women and celebrates the creative and physical potential of each person.' Unlike other professional circus companies, the Women's Circus is a 'social circus', whose core mission is to provide personal, community and artistic development to all women, including those women and communities who are at-risk or face barriers to

participation. Therefore, an inclusive circus practice aimed at reducing barriers to arts participation for women with a disability, is well placed within the larger framework of the company.

**Material and Methods**

Over a period of eight months I observed six discrete workshops at the Women's Circus which had an identified focus of inclusive circus practice. Each workshop was held at the Women's Circus Drill Hall and was attended by adult women with and without a disability. Details of the workshops are as follows:

1. A one-day workshop entitled 'Physicality, Presence and Creation' that was jointly led by company trainer Tanya Scully and deaf dancer and choreographer Jo Dunbar.
2. A one-day 'Weave Masterclass' that was led by Weave Movement Theatre's Artistic Director Janice Florence.
3. Four two-hour 'Creative Lab' workshops led by Women's Circus trainers Tanya Scully and Franca Stadler and attended by the women of Weave Movement Theatre.

This series of workshops was positioned as both a site of enquiry and a site of knowledge production of practice in motion. The workshops were documented through a triangulation of methods: qualitative description, quantitative and qualitative participant surveys and semi-structured interviews.

According to Sandelowski (2000) 'Qualitative description' is a comprehensive account of any phenomenon with minimal interpretation or interference that accurately conveys events in their proper sequence. Sandelowski (2000, p. 335) warns that

‘descriptions always depend on the perceptions, inclinations, sensitivities and sensibilities of the describer’, and thus some consideration must be placed on my experience and curiosities in the context of these events.

This research project draws on my prior experience as a performer, teacher and socially engaged theatre practitioner. My practice involves creatively engaging young people through theatre workshops and performance projects. I was introduced to inclusive theatre practice whilst employed at St Martins Arts Centre, a youth arts company that works inclusively across the organisations workshop and performance programs.

As such, I approached the Women’s Circus workshops with a history of inclusive arts facilitation and whilst observing felt my interest gravitate towards the particular inclusive methodologies employed by the leading artists: I wanted to know *how* they were framing, structuring and delivering activities for engagement by all participants. Within the creative field it is the end product of another’s process that the public interacts with. The treat of being able to peak behind the curtains and witness process was met with a fascination of the practice itself.

Evaluation surveys were developed to compliment and re-affirm the data obtained through qualitative description. The surveys were distributed online to workshop participants and collected a combination of quantitative data and subjective responses. Questions were developed to ascertain whether the inclusive workshops achieved the primary goals of the company. Or put another way, whether any part of the Women’s Circus’ core goals were omitted in to order to make the workshops inclusive. The core goals of ‘creativity’; ‘gaining new knowledge and insights’; ‘being seen, heard and acknowledged’; and ‘connecting with others’ were identified through content analysis of the Women’s Circus strategic plan and discussion with the Executive

Director Devon Taylor. Questions around these benchmarks were included in all three surveys and were supplemented by questions particular to each workshop. Open ended, qualitative questions were included to gain further insight into individual experience.

Semi-structured interviews with key-stakeholders were conducted throughout the research period. These were either recorded or written and provided personal insight from lead artists, participants and the organisations involved.

**The social and creative case for an inclusive circus**

The personal and social benefits of arts participation is now widely accepted due to the rise in fields such as socially engaged art, applied theatre, community cultural development and their subsequent arts evaluation methodologies. According to the State Government of Victoria's 2008 report *Picture This,* there is evidence that all levels of government policy now recognise that involvement in the arts contributes to creating strong and inclusive communities. Furthermore, the report (2008, p. 2) states that 'the contribution of arts participation to improving social inclusion and well-being for people with a disability is now, in general, widely accepted and reflected in government policy and planning at all level of government, both overseas and in Australia.'

However, Austin's 2014 publication *Beyond Access: the creative case for inclusive arts* identified a shift away from programs for people with a disability that are driven by social inclusion agendas with respite and therapeutic goals, in favour of programs pursuing creative excellence and innovation. The report recognised that previous disability policies that focused on an agenda of social assimilation 'may have restricted the capacity of people with a disability to play an active part in the arts and creative industries' (Austin 2014, p. 43). *Beyond Access* concentrates on the 'creative case for inclusive arts', citing companies, artists and academic research from the UK,

USA and Australia and calling for greater documentation of the history, narratives and methodologies of Australian artists with a disability creating new work (Austin 2014 p. 44).

Both the social and the creative arguments for inclusive arts need to be considered within the framework of the Women's Circus, a company positioned as a 'social circus'. Social circus refers to the process of using circus activities 'as a method of social intervention' (McCaffery 2014, p. 30), targeting specific groups of people and communities who are identified as at-risk, marginalised and disempowered. Often participants of social circus experience 'intersecting axes of social differentiation' (Bessone 2017, p. 651) that create barriers to participation across multiple areas of their life. The target groups and subsequent aims of social circus programs may vary greatly, but are unified by aims of 'personal and community development rather than the training of professional artists' (Bessone 2017, p. 651). There is a growing body of literature, from authors such as Bessone (2017), McCaffery (2014), Seymour & Wise (2017) and Cadwell (2018), that have documented the benefits of social circus.

This paper inhabits the tension between the social and creative cases for inclusive circus. It considers the in-workshop 'practice' of inclusive circus under these dual lenses to unpack the methodologies and their potential benefits and outcomes. This research makes space for a larger, long-term impact study of the personal and creative benefits of the practice, which was outside the scope of this project due to the limited time-frame of the workshops.

This research responds to Austin's (2014, p.44) cry for 'greater documentation of methodologies' and offers a peak behind the curtains of inclusive circus practice, situating the practice itself as a site of knowledge, in the hopes of contributing to a growing articulation of the field of inclusive arts. Ultimately the report argues that both

the social benefits and creative potential of inclusive practice need to be considered in tandem to disrupt normative power structures and recognise the compelling potential of artists with a disability to contribute to the innovation of circus arts.

**Heterogeneity: individuals, together**

The circus has a long history of providing a space for people defined as outsiders, misfits or deviants to find an identity and a place within a larger group. The world of the circus welcomes all 'idiosyncrasies, quirks and eccentricities' (Seymour and Wise 2017, p. 82) as part of the art-form. Group cohesion is essential to achieve artistry and may have consequent community development benefits beyond the workshop arena. Importantly, inclusion within a social circus does not demand conformity, but rather the practice expands to adopt methodologies that are inclusive of all idiosyncrasies. The group of participants are positioned as individuals, each with their own way of doing things, that work together.

This concept of 'individuals, together' was introduced at the start of each Women's Circus workshop through a simple practice whereby participants were asked to speak, one at a time, and share information with the group: 'something you are an expert at'; 'what brought you to the workshop today?'; or 'how did you get here today?'. Each woman was afforded the time required. One participant used an electronic speech generator and the trainer checked to see how she would prefer to communicate: with the interpretive assistance of her carer, or with her communication device. With the device selected the room waited for the personal introduction to be typed. The waiting was comfortable, and this change in the flow of expected events was accepted without fuss.

Each workshop also included a discussion of working at your own pace, or doing it your way. This principle was articulated by trainer Jo Dunbar:

> It's about using *universal language*. Because everybody is different, right. Obviously, there were a couple of times when I was talking about the feet and then realised there are a couple of participants who weren't necessarily using their feet. But, it was more about everybody being comfortable in *their own explorations* because everybody moves differently more than anything else.

Jo's choice of language is important and calls attention to a nuance of ideological position. Her call for a 'universal language' demonstrates the way that circus practice can expand to include difference rather than demarcate boundaries and highlight limitations.

Additionally, Jo's phrasing reveals an emphasis on individual exploration, as opposed to a framework of adaptation. Inclusive arts practice runs the risk of establishing a binary of normal/abnormal, able/not-able where the adaptation of an exercise results in a feeling of deficit in some participants, thus reinforcing unequal power relationships between people with and without a disability.

Here, Penketh's (2014) critique of a body of text advocating for the role of arts practice in disability education highlights the subtle ways that attitudes of normal/abnormal can be inadvertently reinforced. Within the field of disability and education, visual art in particular has been identified as a powerful pedagogical tool, enabling engagement with significant ideas about cultural identity. However, Penketh's (2014, p.295) analysis uncovers the way that a 'drawing and print act as signifiers of difference, as deficit and the power relations in the representation of institutionalized system of practices is evident.' In these instances, the value of the artistic work produced is 'reduced compared to normalized concepts of art' (Penketh 2014 p.295),

with the value instead falling on the art practice administered as medicine. When the value of an individual's artistic expression is judged against a normalised concept of what that artistic practice should be, it reinforces unequal power structures. As such it is important that inclusive practice values the artistic expression of all participants equally, employs universal language and expands to recognise and include difference without comparisons to a standardised tradition.

**Trust and Critical Engagement**

The trust that is inherently embedded in circus practice creates the environment for what Penketh and Waite (2016) refer to as 'critical engagement' with the lived experiences of persons with a disability. Circus is predicated on risk and as such participants need to trust themselves and their abilities, trust the equipment and trust each other to take care, to support, to take weight and to spot. An atmosphere of supported risk, where it is OK to fall and fail without ridicule is fundamental to any successful circus practice. Within an inclusive circus, the necessity to trust one another demands a 'critical engagement'[1] with the lived experiences of disability and this process is shaped by the lead artists.

Cadwell's (2018) study examining the role of trust-building within various social circus programs identified the significant role that the trainers play in fostering an atmosphere of trust. He observes that:

> the reason trust –building is so difficult in practice is that it requires a certain set of skills – communicative, interpersonal and emotional – that a tutor must have. These skills are needed in order to prevent healthy risk turning into fear, to

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[1] D. Bolt and C. Penketh, *Disability, Avoidance and the Academy: Challenging Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 72.

> develop a feeling of trust between the participant and circus staff, and of the participant in themselves. (Cadwell 2018, p. 27)

Within the Women's Circus' inclusive circus practice, trust and safety were established by all lead artists through 'soft skills' and the careful layering of circus principles and language. Each workshop began with an open discussion of 'doing what you need to do for this to work for you.' Within this discussion participants disclosed necessary information through dialogue around previous injuries, mental health and the particulars of certain disabilities.

Importantly, within this space each person with a disability was seen as a distinct individual, with their own way of doing things. This principle was exemplified when Janice, the artistic director of Weave Movement Theatre and the lead artist of the second workshop stated, 'just because I have a disability, doesn't mean I understand all disabilities.' This statement acted as a catalyst for conversation around the specific needs of individuals, thus demonstrating social circus' ability to create space for 'critical engagement' with experiences of disability.

Penketh and Waite (2016, p. 68), in responding to Bolt's work on 'critical avoidance' in disability studies (whereby people without a disability avoid thinking about disability education with complexity due to an underlying social prejudice), look to art practices and 'critical engagement' as its antidote. Penketh and Waite (2016, p.72) argue that 'we first need to understand exclusion' and that this 'understanding *can* and *should* be developed through engagement with those who have experience of being excluded.' Within an inclusive circus practice the imperative to understand and work with other participants demands a critical, corporeal engagement with disability and difference that can transform understandings of disability.

In the Women's Circus workshops, critical engagement was reinforced as the workshops progressed with participants encouraged to engage with the specifics of each persons abilities and by incorporating assistive apparatus into creative exploration. The participants talked freely with each other, checking in and negotiating a path forward: 'Which is your better hand?'; 'Can you get me a chair?'; 'I can't get to the floor, cos I can't get back up again.' The risk, challenge and immediacy of circus practice creates space for complex critical engagement with the lived experiences of disability that may help to break down social barriers and build greater understanding between participants.

**Trust and Time**

The limited time frame of the workshop series, limited the depth and breadth of the work explored. Feedback from participants and workshop leaders alike pointed to the need for more time. Community consultation undertaken by the State Government of Victoria revealed that a careful consideration of time frames is needed when working with artists with a disability. The report *Picture This* (2010, p. 63), stated that 'due to disability or illness associated with disability, greater time might be required' to undertake a range of activities associated with arts practice. The report features Ross Onley-Zerkel from Deaf Arts Network, who discusses the need for extended rehearsal timeframes to allow sufficient time for signing and audio interpreters. Practitioners also discuss the need for greater time to create a safe space and to engage in creative processes without the pressure of 'tick-the-box outcomes' (State Government of Victoria, 2010, p. 64).

Similarly, time is fundamental to establishing the trust requisite of a successful circus practice. Cadwell's (2018, p. 28) examination of trust-building in social circus states that 'when insufficient time is given to trust-building within the class setting, the efficacy of circus as a strategy for personal development falters.' Within each of the

Women's Circus workshops significant time was dedicated to trust-building and laying the foundations of circus principles and performance language that enabled future risk-taking. One can only imagine the level of physical and creative-risk taking that could be achieved over a longer time frame.

Whilst discussing their involvement in Weave Movement Theatre's integrated ensemble, workshop participant Leisa, described the level of trust that can be established over a longer timeframe:

> I love the creation of something together. This sense of community and support and to me it's like you've all got each other's backs. I feel very respected as an artist and my ideas are respected and I respect other people's ideas and I get so much out of working with others and I learn so much by working with others…. My heart is always with Weave.

Listening to Leisa speak, one gets the sense that the connection within the Weave ensemble is unique and something deeper than experienced in other artistic settings. She repeats, 'My heart is with Weave.' This sense of trust and community can only come from a long-term engagement, the development of a safe space, time to creatively explore without the pressure of an immediate outcome and respect for each other as artists.

Social circus programs are often short projects that run for a defined period of time. Such timeframes align with a social interventionist agenda where communities and individuals are in need of development. Whilst the inclusive workshops that I observed were over a limited timeframe, a long-term inclusive circus would certainly deepen the social and creative outcomes of the practice.

**The body: embodiment, transformation and disruption**

In circus, the body is the nexus of practice: it is the site of performance, risk, knowledge and transformation. It is the body that moves up the Chinese pole, provides a base for an acrobatic trick, throws and catches objects with precise timing or soars through the air. Social circus when considered through the lens of disability and the arts provides a powerful site not only of 'sensory embodiment' and 'embodied transformation', but of 'creative disruption'.

Seymour and Wise (2017, p. 82) in their research into the therapeutic tools of social circus for autistic children discuss the way that, through circus, the children are able to 'locate their bodies in space,' a process known as 'sensory embodiment'. Through repetition the body learns new ways of moving, of coordinating body parts and finding different positions in space and this practice 'can activate the brain in specific ways that aid [their] development' (Seymour and Wise 2017, p.82).

For trainer Jo Dunbar, embodiment is fundamental to performing and was therefore a goal of her training methodology:

> I wanted them to get in touch with themselves and be embodied, to become more aware of themselves, who they are, because I think that is the essence of being a performer: being aware and being comfortable- maybe not always comfortable. But to get to a place where they know they can go from and to be with each other in that same space. And maybe some surprises for themselves. Some surprises of doing things that they may not have done.

Here, Jo positions embodiment, a sense of knowing oneself, as a gateway to transformation, or discovering something new about oneself. Social circus challenges its participants in unique and surprising ways. A trick or action that once seemed impossible is practiced with repetition, with the body, until mastery is achieved.

Through this achievement the boundaries of self-definition reconfigure to include new ideas of the self.

However, this is an over-simplification of the route from 'no trick' to 'trick'. Within circus practice the body is always situated in a process of transformation, as with each repetition muscle memory grows or with each exploration new ways of moving are discovered. The boundaries of the self are always in a state of becoming.

The process of embodied transformation was exemplified when the women of Weave experienced harness work. When suspended in the harnesses for the first time some of the women were immediately confident, whereas others gradually let go and explored new positions. Upon reflection, one ensemble member articulated a new experience of her body that was simultaneously kinaesthetic and emotional, an experience both new and old:

> I found my thing…I loved the feeling of falling but not falling – just to be able to let go. Because my head is actually the heaviest part, I suppose with everybody it is, but with me even more so and just being able to let that go and trust the harness. It was freedom. Absolute freedom.…It's something I used to do as a child: just to like get on the playground swings and just swing and swing and swing for hours. And you do it with your friends and you chat. So, it brought up that 'carefree let's just play' feeling.

This experience makes evident the non-linear pathways of embodied transformation. The participant learnt a new skill, but also discovered new embodiments of 'freedom', 'falling but not falling', 'being able to let go' and old feelings from childhood. The transformation in this moment is non-linear: it is an emotive connection to a memory called through the body. Through these experiences ontological understandings grow, transform and reconfigure.

There is a tension here in applying the language of embodied transformation to people with a disability. If considered through an assumed framework of normlisation where transformation is towards a goal of assimilation, it is deeply problematic and reinforces binaries of ab/normal and established power structures. However, when considering the disabled body through a creative framework of open possibilities, the disabled body is a powerful site with the ability to disrupt circus pedagogy and challenge power structures. When the 'multiple, contested and partisan histories' of both disability and performance intersect, they create 'unexpected encounters, fleeting moments, puzzles and unanswerable questions' that liberate the fixity of both (Kuppers, 2003, p. 1). At the intersection of disability and circus, both are in a state of becoming in a mutually affective relationship.

**Improvisation, creative exploration and creative tasks**

Theorists from dance and performance (Hickey-Moody 2010, Kuppers 2003) have located the disruptive potential of the disabled body within the field of performance. It is as Weave Artistic Director Janice remarked: 'When you can't do what other people do, you have to be creative.' Within the practice of circus, a field built on strength, flexibility, coordination, and the ability to execute tricks, the disabled body provides a creative disruption that opens exciting possibilities for the field of circus.

The Women's Circus and Weave Movement Theatre's inclusive workshops were driven by personal and collective creative explorations. This framework was verbally stated at the beginning of each workshop and was reinforced by the structure of each activity. These creative methods can be further broken down into three inter-related and often overlapping categories: improvisation, creative exploration and creative tasks.

During the Women's Circus workshop, lead artist Tanya introduced the aerial apparatus to the participants for the first time. Different objects hung from the rig: fabric at various heights, a metal cube, a metal rectangle, bars, blocks and mats. Without explaining the names or functions of any equipment, Tanya instructed the participants to move through the space and begin to explore whether any of the apparatus could take some of their weight: 'It's just about exploring. Just solo, in your own way first of all. What piece of equipment do you feel drawn to?' The women moved to an apparatus and began to experiment, finding their own way.

Often within a dance class, (or sports, or other physical discipline), students are taught technique through demonstrations that are to be replicated as precisely as possible. There is a right way to do something and then there is everything else. Only after mastery of the technique, can artistry follow.

A methodology of creative exploration deliberately withholds information about codified pathways or techniques and, in doing so, invites the participants to make decisions based on feedback from their bodies, their senses and their own aesthetic receptivity. Such an approach repositions participants 'from mere "service-users" to a framework that instead emphasises the personal artistic capacity and aspirations of artists with a disability' (Austin 2014, p. 21). Furthermore, this approach circumvents binaries of right/wrong, instead inviting more nuanced conversations that can lead to innovation within the field.

Similarly, Janice's dance practice is based on improvisation techniques and tasks that 'you do according to your capacity and your creativity' (Arts Access Victoria 2015b). During the Women's Circus workshop she guided movement exploration around verbs (such as 'mirror', 'mould' and 'extend'); established movement improvisations with a set of group rules; and she offered imaginative stimulus to

respond to with movement (‘imagine you have oil dripping, sliding down your spine’). It is through such improvisation and creative exploration that the performances of Weave evolve.

Shifting the emphasis away from technique and onto creative exploration disassembles knowledge power structures where only the instructor knows the correct answer. Valuing creativity and aesthetics allows for a multitude of voices and opinions. This principle was exemplified by Weave ensemble member Leisa’s experience exploring aerial equipment:

> With the frames and cubes, even though I didn’t hang off them or anything like that, I just had the freedom to be able to explore that and have it spinning around me and to be able to move in my dance way inside them and then have feedback from outside saying, ‘Wow that looks really interesting.’ Rather than have this set thing, ‘This is the cube. This is what we do with the cube.’ Just let me do something in the cube and have somebody going ‘Wow! We’ve never thought of using the cube like that before!’

Through exploration Leisa found an unconventional interaction with the circus apparatus and its aesthetic affect was affirmed by feedback from other ensemble members. In this moment, the workshop participants were given the power to make their own choices about artistic practice.

**‘Don’t crip it down’**

When asked what advice she would have for an ongoing inclusive circus ensemble, Weave ensemble member Leisa said, ‘Don’t crip it down.’ She went on to clarify that trainers shouldn’t overly adapt exercises ‘assuming people aren’t going to be able to do it’, but at the same time they need to be aware that ‘people are going to do stuff

differently.' 'Crip' is a term that Leisa borrows from writer and disability activist Stella Young (2014), who reclaimed the word 'cripple' as a form of identification and empowerment.

It's sage advice.

Kate Sulan, the Artistic Director from Rawcus, a 'critically acclaimed ensemble of performers with and without disability', shares Leisa's sentiment. Speaking of Rawcus' process she notes, 'We don't hold people's hands through it all or try to make it easier for them to understand it. In fact, complexity is something that's really important in our work' (Arts Access Victoria 2015a).

When working with artists with a disability it is important to investigate, to take risks, to innovate and to work towards excellence. This principle was witnessed throughout the Women's Circus workshops when trainer Franca explained to an artist how to let go in their harness; when Franca coached a participant into a more difficult counterbalance; or when trainer Jo instructed the group to 'run it one or two more times- I want to see seamless choreography.' Artists with a disability may as Leisa says 'do stuff differently', and it is precisely because of this that inclusive and integrated performance companies in Australia, the UK and the USA are innovating the field of performance and gaining international recognition.

The acclaimed UK company Extraordinary Bodies demonstrates the innovative potential of an inclusive circus ensemble. The company is the UK's leading, professional integrated circus, who make work with disabled, non-disabled and D/deaf performers working equally together. Their large-scale performance works tour the UK and headline festivals 'challenging people's expectations about which bodies are fragile and which are not' (Keating 2018). Co-artistic Director Billy Alwen discusses the company's process stating that 'We couldn't apply the traditional techniques of creating

circus because we work with different bodies. So, we had to re-think what we meant by circus' (Extraordinary Bodies 2017). The company are redefining the boundaries of what circus is and who gets to perform it. At this time, no-such circus company or ongoing inclusive circus ensemble exists within Australia.

**Discussion**

Whilst this paper has, at times, sought to critique binaries of thought that create a position of Other to a homogenised concept of normal, it also inadvertently contributes to this problem. In documenting and unpacking what makes inclusive arts practices unique, the paper also discusses artists with a disability and inclusive practice in ways that describe their difference. Whilst this is a burgeoning field of both practice and literature, it feels difficult to escape this binary when trying to put creative methodology into something as definitive as words.

Others in the field have recognised and addressed this tension. Award-winning theorist and arts activist Petra Kuppers (2003, p. 4) problematises the act of defining the term 'disability', as historically definitions and representations have attempted to isolate and position it as 'outside 'normal' society and bodies'. In *Disability and Contemporary Performance*, Kuppers' (2003, p.4) strives to 'subvert the structural position of 'disability' as a marker' through 'an undoing of certainties, a questioning of categories, about unknow-ability and difference.' The lived experience of artists with a disability and their methods for challenging stereotypes and subverting assumptions drive her research.

Importantly, Kuppers speaks comes from within the sector. Kuppers (no date) is the Artistic Director of The Olympias, an ensemble that 'focuses on new ways of working with different experiences of embodiment'. In striving for a new language of

practice, people with a disability need to lead the sector both artistically and academically to avoid assumptions and definitions that are limiting or misleading. This sentiment is shared by the then Executive Director of Arts Access Victoria Veronica Pardo (2014, p.3) who stated:

> The creative case recognises that we need artists with a disability to tell their own stories. These are, by and large, unique and untold stories, with the potential to move, provoke, educate and entertain. We also need artists with a disability to lead and shape creative practice, introduce new and diverse aesthetic forms and open new dialogue about what we think and what we know about artistic practice.

Whilst I am a person without a disability, I still believe that the work created by the artists of the Women's Circus should be communicated beyond the walls of the Drill Hall. It is my hope that this account of the inclusive circus practice can inform future discussions about methodology that have resonances throughout the arts sector.

**Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion**

A key element of any performance practice is the encounter with the audience. Both Kuppers (2003) and Hickey-Moody (2010) unpack the potential of the disabled body to break down audience assumptions and reframe social and cultural understandings of disability through performance. An in-depth consideration of the performer – audience encounter within the practice of inclusive circus is outside the scope of this project, which took as its research source a workshop series without a public performance. A greater research project might give thought to how an integrated circus performance encounters their audience and how artists with a disability inhabit, wrestle, contest and reclaim the circus' problematic history of exploiting the disabled body.

Additionally, this report makes space for a larger study following the long-term effects of an ongoing inclusive circus practice for its participants and the art form at large. Due to the limited time-frame of the project, this paper has instead provided an overview of the methodologies of practice and positioned these within the larger fields of disability and the arts and social circus.

This research contributes to the growing field of discourse around inclusive practice and, in response to Austin's call for greater documentation, provides insight into the methodological approaches of inclusive circus: specifically, that of the Women's Circus and to a lesser extent the dance practices of Weave Movement Theatre. Through a discussion of methodology, the importance of the position of the lead artists emerged and was demonstrated through in situ observations. It is hoped that this research might also be useful to other practitioners within the field.

It is a rare opportunity to witness art practice in motion and as such the *practice* of the workshops was positioned as both the site of enquiry and a site of knowledge production: able to make valuable contributions to a larger understanding of inclusive arts practice. What is evident from the research is that an inclusive circus practice establishes a reciprocal relationship with its members. Through sensory embodiment, risk, trust, critical engagement and creative exploration the participants gain personal confidence, social connection and the joy of creative collaboration: all of the (well documented) outcomes of social circus. However, what is less widely recognised is the ability of artists with a disability to make valuable contributions to the field of circus through creative disruption to skills based pedagogy and the necessity of creative innovation. In this way, people with a disability are positioned as powerful contributors to the artistic process and the art-form at large.

Inclusive arts practice is a growing field within Australia due to shifts in government policy, funding initiatives and the recognition of the artistic excellence of national and international inclusive companies. An inclusive circus practice is well placed to address issues of social inclusion and personal well-being whilst make exciting contributions to the national field of circus arts.

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