Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 72: Disabled Curators

Guest: Anna Berry

Host: Alice Wong

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For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey there! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is about curation with artist Anna Berry. Anna's the first curator-in-residence in a program created by DASH, a visual arts charity in the UK led by disabled people that connects disabled curators to major visual arts organizations. I spoke with Anna last year in the middle of her residency at the Midlands Art Centre, which is located in the city of Birmingham. For folks in the Midlands region of the UK, the exhibit Anna curated titled "Art and Social Change: The Disability Arts Movement," is open now until March 22, 2020. You can find details about this exhibit on my website. In our conversation, Anna is gonna demystify what curation is. She'll also share experiences of making her access needs known during her residency and why we need more disabled curators in the arts. Are ya ready?! [electronic beeping] Away. We. Go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, Anna, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

ANNA BERRY: Thank you so much for having me. Hello!

ALICE: Hello! So, Anna, why don't you introduce yourself, if you don't mind.

ANNA: OK, sure. My name's Anna, Anna Berry. I'm an artist, and I am newly a curator, trying to be a curator. I also write and do a little bit of public speaking and a little bit of music and stuff like that, but mainly an artist.

Anna's artistic work

ALICE: And tell me a little more about your work as a artist. I know that, based on your website, paper is a medium you really like to work with. So, tell me about your art.

ANNA: Yeah, I always find that question really, really difficult because a lot of people in that world, there's sort of these unwritten rules really about how to kind of brand yourself and how to describe your work. And that you either work with one process and explore different ideas, or you work with one idea and express that through different processes. And I find that because I'm always working with different ideas and different processes, it really kind of resists being corralled into something that's easily like artistic limiting. And actually, I think that's one of the things that leads to people being quite outsider in the art world. And I remember talking to

someone who was in publishing, and they were saying that they wouldn't publish your book even if it's really good if the marketing department doesn't already know how to market it. Like they have to know how to brand you and sell you before they're interested in the content. And I think it's quite similar with being an artist like me. I'm so, I guess almost fragmented from the perspective of someone from the mainstream art world that I really can't bring together, oh, my work [laughing] in describing it!

I guess a lot of it is very politically-engaged, and it's mostly not in an art spaces. Because I'm too kind of outsider for that, so it tends to be kind of quite pop-up or intervention-based or in places that I've just made an arrangement to show stuff in. And I do work a lot with paper. I come back to paper again and again and again. And originally, that interest was kind of a joke, actually. There was like before sort of Internet-based submission things, there was this book called *The Artist and Writers Yearbook*, and it had all the kind of magazines and things that you could submit things for. And as someone who really struggles with reading and writing and with assimilating information, I was kind of making a joke about this book was useless to me apart from as an actual building material. So, I started really making things [laughing] from the book and kind of making interventions.

And then it kinda moved on to this place where it was kind of quite anti-materialism, anti-capitalism, and that I would spend months and months and months doing this kind of making and this productivity to make a piece that was, you know, utterly non-archival, completely ephemeral, couldn't have a value because of that, and sort of questioning ideas about value and labor and what we are putting a value on in life. And then a curator said, "Oh! It's all this fragility. It's obviously all about your disabilities and your physicality." And I hadn't even thought about that. And I was thinking, god, yeah. She's totally, she's totally right. And then also, just because it's a really ubiquitous object, and it's something that people dispose of a lot. And so, it has all kinds of different meanings for different people. And it's very available, and it's very transformable. So, yeah, there's lots of reasons behind the paper thing. Was that too long-winded? I'm sorry. [chuckles]

ALICE: Not at all. I love it! And I think using everyday objects, things that are so commonplace, and then transforming it is also really amazing. I think about origami and how such a simple act of folding can make something so beautiful out of a piece of paper.

ANNA: Yeah. And that's another big part of it for me, actually, is that dimensional aspect that you're taking something from two-dimensional space and rendering it in three-dimensional space. And I quite like the kind of metaphor of kind of hidden worlds and hidden aspects of space from all of us. And that definitely comes from, again, aspects of disability and kind of living in a parallel cognition. And that kinda got me really interested in ideas in physics about dimensions that we can't apprehend because of the limits of our cognition. And the kind of act of folding paper in itself and creating a dimension that wasn't there before became quite symbolic to me, both of physics and of sort of aspects of having hidden impairments.

[bluesy, folky music break]

DASH's curator-in-residence program

ALICE: So, we're talking about curation today. And I've read a piece by you in Disability Arts Online about your experiences as the first curator-in-residence created by DASH, which is a disability arts program in the UK. So, when you first heard of this opportunity, what led you to apply for it?

ANNA: I'll be honest with you. I'd heard about the opportunity, and I did not consider applying for it. I didn't think I would be capable of doing it. I didn't even give it a second thought. And then the people at DASH who run the residency saw me speak about disability and outsider-ness in the art world. And they said, "Have you heard about our program? We'd love for you to apply." And then eventually, it was really their kind of faith and encouragement. And I thought, you know what? I've got nothing to lose, and maybe I can do this. And so, I just, I gave it a shot. And it was really exciting to get it, because suddenly, my world had a bit of like a paradigm shift overnight, and I found myself being a thing that was very unexpected for me. And it changed the way I saw myself and the way I saw my capabilities. So, it was, it was nice.

ALICE: Yeah. I don't know about you, but just the word "curation," it sounds very lofty, right? It sounds kinda mystifying and kinda intimidating. So, you know, you are an artist, and you must kind of interact with all kinds of people who are curators. But what were some of your own kinda misconceptions about what curation is all about?

ANNA: Do you know, it's interesting. I looked this up at the start of doing the kind of project. 'Cause to me as an artist, curators mean gatekeepers and people that you've somehow got to get your work in front of the eyes of. And if you're an outsider and you don't have the right art school pedigree and the right network, you know, you can't, you somehow can't reach them kind of things. They did feel like this very lofty kind of [laughing] problematic presence. And I was thinking as well, there's a lot of ways in which the term "curation" has been kind of appropriated in a kind of hipster-y kinda way. Like nobody just decorates their house anymore. It's like they've curated their living room, and it's a kind of pretentious usage in common parlance.

But I think originally, it just came from people safeguarding some sort of collection or heritage, you know, in a kind of conserving and interpreting kind of way. It's almost like a caretaker role. And in terms of contemporary gallery spaces, you know, it just means bringing together a show, bringing together work. But then, of course, it is more fraught than that because it's all about, well, how do you find the people whose work you're gonna show and why show their work and not another artist's work? And it becomes, I really struggle with that, actually, because I feel like all the choices I make, I have to kind of have some really objective justification for and not just my whim. Because the idea that I might be excluding someone by the same kind of structural prisons of my cognition as other curators would've excluded me, you know, [laughing] it keeps me awake at night! But then by the same token, you also have to be okay with the fact that you're allowed your own curatorial style. And actually, some of it is subjective and it is your opinion. And you can pick work just because you like it, and it has a visceral effect on you. Because that's kind of what art's about. So, it's kind of balancing, for me, it's kind of balancing those two things, which are a little bit in opposition.

ALICE: Yeah, and it must be, I think, there's a lotta tension involved in curation. But you know, after this residency, what does curation mean to you now? Like what did you kind of learn about what it means to be a curator?

ANNA: Well, I'm still in the middle of the residency. Yeah, MAC has been really flexible. But I decided I wanted to put on a show. So, I'm actually curating a show that will start in January on the Disability Arts Movement in the UK, which is kind of centered around late-'80s, early-'90s and how a very kind of activist element in disability arts that was kind of borrowing from the tenets of the anti-apartheid movement at the time. And then, it had a very kind of immediate effect on legislation, subsequent legislation that was positive for disabled people in the UK. So, that will be the outcome of the residency, is that show. And I'm being quite ambitious 'cause I'm doing parallel programing and commissioned writing and feature stuff and a little like symposium

for the day. And yeah, so it's kind of full-on. I wanna say I'm managing, but I'm completely drowning. [laughs] You know, it's all learning.

[bluesy, folksy music break]

Mentorship with Jess Litherland and creating narratives in curation

ALICE: Can you tell me a bit more about your relationship with your mentor, who's Jess Litherland. Can you tell me a little bit about kinda the working relationship with you and Jess?

ANNA: Yeah, she's great. I'm really, really lucky to get to work with her and get to learn from her. And she's so generous about just sharing her knowledge and letting me have a go at stuff. But yeah, no. We have quite a shared sensibility, I think, that's helpful. We both enjoy and sort of prize a lot of art that's been, that people have been a bit sniffy about in the past. So, we like things like ceramics and textiles and some of the things that people have kind of consigned to being craft with the kind of snobby idea that craft is less valid than proper fine art, which is more what men do and, you know, all of that stuff. So, we have kind of similar tastes and similar kind of anti-snobbery attitudes about things like craftsmanship and object-making.

ALICE: And you know, talking about earlier when you mentioned about resisting brands or resisting labels, how do you resist kind of putting artists in a box?

ANNA: I mean, I think part of the nature of curation actually is creating a narrative. I don't think you can separate that. Because as soon as you put something in the context of something else, you've already got a narrative, if that makes sense. And there's no way to kind of avoid that. So, I think what you do is decide on your narrative and then craft it and just try and make it as fair as possible. But be aware of it. You know, don't try and hide that narrative and represent it as something objective.

ALICE: Yeah. And you know, can you talk a little bit about developing the narrative for the exhibit and kind of the main kind of idea or theme that you really want the visitors to come away with?

ANNA: So, I mean, I picked the exhibition really carefully because in the main gallery, there's a show about Black musicians who've been kind of underrepresented because of their influence. So, they're kind of like super influential, but they haven't been as written into the narrative as they should have been. And so, I was, they like, at MAC, to have kind of connected programing. And so, I'm pivoting off the kind of idea of the politics in there and the fact that the politics in the disability art movement at that time was very related to the tenets in the anti-apartheid movement. And so, it's kind of connecting it all up, and it worked. It worked well.

And in terms of the content of the show, it will be featuring some of the art by the artists who are pivotal to that movement. But it'll also be featuring some of the objects of activism that were used at the time. So, there's kind of t-shirts, shirts and rosettes and posters and things like that, and kind of connecting up the political thinking with the art itself and how that kinda culminated in a little bit of a culture change. So, yeah, I'm hoping that the visitors will find that interesting and perhaps something they haven't thought of before, people from the kind of wider, non-disabled arts world.

And it's quite, it's actually quite confronting for able-bodied people seeing depictions of people with impairments in an art context, which I find really odd. But it is. You know, and sometimes people complain about. For example, when Alison Lapper's depiction was on the fourth plinth

and people were strangely almost offended by seeing a depiction in art of a sort of non-normative body. So, in some ways, it might be gently confronting as well, I hope.

ALICE: Yeah. And I think there are exhibits often, or shows, featuring disabled artists but not, they very often aren't curated by disabled curators. And what do you think is the kind of difference in terms of just perspective and kind of framing the narrative? What are your thoughts about that?

ANNA: Yeah, I mean, I think you've sort of put it in a really brilliant nutshell there. You know, we all have, we all impose our own narrative on the world that's based on our cognition and our life experiences. And when people are being, [sighs] you know, a little bit ableist or a little bit excluding, most of time, that's not a malicious thing. It's just, it's not, it's just not something they're thinking about. You know, it's not in their narrative. And so, that's the kind of virtue of making sure that there is a little bit of diversity in all walks of life. If you do get people with only similar life experiences, no matter how intelligent and how well-intentioned, there is going to be a poverty of ideas there. You know, as soon as you sort of open things out to people who have a different experience, whether it's of identity or disability or whatever, I think it becomes sort of much more than the sum of its parts. It becomes, you know, a very kind of cross-field virtuous circle kind of thing. And it just does come from that lived experience that is, in some way, different to a kinda more mainstream lived experience, I guess.

[bluesy folky music break]

Communicating about access needs

ALICE: So, let's change gears and talk about that piece you wrote on Disability Arts Online because you know, you wrote very honestly about the struggles you had in kind of expressing and communicating your access needs during your residency. What are some of the accommodations that you need right now to just fully participate in the program?

ANNA: I mean, the main ones are just them being a little bit flexible for me. So, things like, you know, not having to be there for eight hours a day, being able to turn up at half-eleven, those kinda things. If I'm tired, I can rest. There's a room booked for me that's like a quiet space, you know. So, just things that help me manage some of the day-to-day issues with pain and fatigue that I have, that it's just never even occurred to me that there would ever be any workplace that would be that flexible. So, just, it just seemed off the table to me to do anything that involved going into a workplace, really. And I think that's probably true for like 99.9% of workplaces. I think that probably is still true, is that, you know, it's kind of depressing. It's sort of, it almost became irrelevant that I'm a kind of intelligent and competent person. Because any value that I have to offer is somehow rendered null by the fact that I can't do this kind of, you know, eight hours a day from this fixed time to this fixed time in this seat.

So, yeah. That was part of that, is just, yeah, just telling people sometimes I'm not OK. And it's gonna have to be OK for me to be OK here, kind of thing! And I find that quite a struggle. You know, really, I really did. And I'm still finding it quite a struggle, 'cause I'm having to kind of rewrite my own little scripts about how I interact in the world and how much I hide. And not just hide, but hide from myself and kind of compartmentalize what I'm feeling at that moment in order to keep going. And it's really almost been like something, [laughing] kind of therapy to be able to kind of change and deal with, which has been a real surprise to me. I thought it would just be like, yay! They're offering me access, then go kind of thing. And actually, it's involved that this kind of intense psychological kind of reworking of how I interact with myself and with the world.

And there's some aspects that all the access in the world can't help me with. And that's also be a real reckoning. And it can stimulate quite a lot of depression in me because things like sort of executive function things and trying to organize the information. And with that kind of thing, there isn't an access thing someone can do unless I had someone here injecting themselves into my brain to organize the information, they can't help. And so, I'll end up cutting out 10,000 sentences and rearranging them physically on my kitchen floor, because that's the only way I can do it. And it sends me insane, and I have a bit of a breakdown.

And it's difficult because people are so enthusiastic about wanting to help me. And they're sort of saying, you know, "Whatever it is you need, you just have to say. We absolutely will meet this need." And for me, trying to say back to them, "Actually, there is some stuff that you just can't help with. Like, there isn't." Again, it's kind of utopian thinking that there is no impairment that can't be helped with the right access provision. And actually, that's just not true. And that can make me feel quite upset because it makes me very aware of the...[sighs] the sense that my disabilities, they are what they are. I'm gonna wake up with them tomorrow and every day for the rest of my life. And sometimes I don't wanna have to think about that every day and sort of telling people, "You can't help me with this." And sort of feeling that I'm disappointing them if I say, you know, "Actually, I know you wanna help, but I don't think you can help with this." Maybe there are ways in which I am just limited that mean I do this job worse than someone who wasn't limited in this way would do this job. And we all have to kinda just accept that. And nobody wants to hear that. So, that's all really quite difficult.

ALICE: And I also think on the flipside, having these limitations are also ways that shape the way we do our things. You know, I think it's really interesting about, in my mind, disability culture is that how much we use what we have even though we might not have a lot.

ANNA: Yeah, I think that's really interesting, actually, that idea of the particular needs of your own body kind of forcing your process in particular ways, which then can be really groundbreaking. And actually, one of the artists in my show, he's no longer with us, sadly, but he was one of the first people to adopt digital technology to draw with, like, I don't know, 30 years ago or something, because of his impairments. And so, that was really interesting. He was doing something that was artistically groundbreaking, actually because of how problematic his body was for him in certain ways. But I think also, there's a flip side to that in that...oh, if you're not managing to kind of do something creative and inspirational with that adversity, if you actually just need to sometimes say, "You know what? It really stinks that my body is making me feel this shit, and I can't do this thing that other people can do," sometimes people can treat you a bit as if you're almost betraying the community by being honest about that. By being honest about the fact that your body is disabling you, and it's not just about other people in society. It's what you're experiencing. And I find there can be a lot of quite gaslight-y stuff about how other disabled people expect me to kind of present my experiences of myself in quite a polished way in order to be kind of on-message politically. [laughs]

ALICE: Yeah, I agree with you. I think this is like kinda unfair to have to like always perform, you know? And I think being as honest and raw and just kinda unapologetic. I know that's a kinda such a buzzword right now, but I think it's really hard to be unapologetic about hey, I'm just feeling really bad or just feeling like a hot mess right now. You know, sometimes I totally feel like a hot mess, and it's OK to dwell in that. I feel like that's, we all need that kinda space to just be, you know? And not for anybody else, but just exist.

ANNA: Yeah, and I think this can be at a sorta tension between that being able to be as raw and honest and kind of toeing the political line. A lot of people see it as kind of like pandering to the

medical model or betraying the social model if you are honest actually about how you are struggling with physical things. And that it's almost like an airing the disability movement's dirty laundry or something. And we all have to be like very bracketed about the nature of our impairments for the sake of the kind of united front to kind of shift the kind of political rhetoric. And, you know, it's really, I find it really divides me. Because on the one hand, I completely see the kind of necessity of that and how useful that is. And then on the other side, I, yeah, I do feel a bit like I sort of get gaslighted about how I'm supposed to be experiencing and expressing my own experience of my own body. Yeah. [laughs]

ALICE: Well, that's OK. I think that's, you know, I think that's not compulsory, right? I think that's another thing too about disabled people. It's like we shouldn't have to feel compelled to make change all the time or anytime, you know? I think that's another thing too, these kinda unrealistic expectations that people seem to have just because we're different or "the other."

ANNA: Yeah, and it feels like a responsibility sometimes too, doesn't it, as you say, sort of taking on the mantle of fighting the good fight or something. And sometimes I do feel that responsibility. You know, and maybe not totally like self-flagellate about! [laughs] But it's definitely something I'm aware of.

And I had a bit of a transition with that, actually, on a residency where I would quite often contextualize my work for people, curators and such, by talking about the nature of some of my impairments and my experiences as a disabled person, because it really helped understand where I was coming from in creating the work. And they were so kind of awful and prejudiced about it. And they would be like, "Oh, you know, you don't need to mention that bit because looking at you, I wouldn't know," kind of thing. And I just kind of saw the kind of awful, awful prejudice, and I ended up sort of losing it with one of them and just kind of saying, "Look. If I was gay, would you be literally saying to me, 'don't be so in my face about your gayness,' you know. You'd be really shocked, right? And it's the same thing. Like this is actually who I am, and this is my life experience. And this is what I make work about. And the fact that you keep telling me over and over again that this is going to disadvantage me in the art world if I declare this identity is actually really offensive."

And before that, I had been essentially hiding that identity. And I know loads of disabled artists who absolutely don't declare themselves as disabled artists because they get niched. You know, you get kinda ghettoized. And I kinda made this conscious decision at that point to not do that and to kinda try and force a way into that world that didn't ghettoize me but that did just feel free and easy about acknowledging the disabled identity. I decided I wasn't gonna compromise on that and kinda pretend to not be disabled or pretend that that was irrelevant in order to be more effective in my career, I guess.

And that kinda is taking one for the team a little bit, I think. But I also feel quite a strong responsibility to do that after seeing just sort of curator after curator be so..... And I mean, again, without meaning to. The best one in the world, you know, they weren't kind of like deeply awful, prejudiced, conservative people. But they actually harbored this huge kinda subconscious prejudice about what disability art meant and that it absolutely wasn't compatible with having a kind of serious, rigorous, well-thought out practice. And that actually, if I want to be taken seriously in the art world, I've gotta jettison being out and proud about that kinda thing. And there is a bit of me that's just been like, "Oh. You know what? Fuck you. [laughing] I'm just gonna be who I am. And at some point, I'm gonna get some of you to take me seriously."

[bluesy, folky music break]

Vision for the future of disabled curators

ALICE: So, as we wrap up, I wanna ask you what's your kind of vision for the future of getting more disabled curators? Like what would you like to see?

ANNA: Yeah. I mean, what one would hope is that there'll be more schemes like this to get more people from different backgrounds and different life experiences, you know, more kind of integrated into the power structures of the art world. But it's quite difficult because you're sort of playing a game of catch up. Because you're kind of asking yourself, well, why are people from such a similar background there in the first place? And then you think, well, we've got to kind of work towards class equality and kind of racial equality and disability equality and all of these things from a much kind of earlier point in time so we get to the point that you're not in the position that the whole industry has a really kind of similar background in its infrastructure. So, I don't know. Yes, it's difficult. It's like partly, [laughing] let's cure society kind of thing. But yeah, also having programs like this that enable people to kinda jump the gap a bit between where they've come from and where they're able to get to.

ALICE: Great. So, Anna, thank you again so much for being on my podcast today.

ANNA: Thank you so much for having me! It was a really cool conversation.

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

♪ How far will they go?
Oh, yeah, yeah
How far will they go?
Oh, yeah, yeah…. ♪

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Anna's work at my website.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets!

♪ Rock it to the blast off
Stop, drop dance off ♪

ALICE: Byeeee!