

## «In an arts funding system that is inherently ableist, how can disabled artists not just survive, but thrive?»

**Keynote by Jo Verrent** (Unlimited, UK) for IntegrART Conference 2021  
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Hi, I'm recording this remotely. You may hear birdsong or dog noises because I'm in a cottage somewhere in Norfolk in England whilst recording this. This will be an audio presentation accompanied by images of Unlimited commissioned work and some key phrases that I'm saying repeated on screen. Rather than audio describe every image as I go along, I'm going to provide a link at the end where people can download a detailed audio description of each of the images that I use.

It would just take too much time within the presentation for me to audio-describe every image as I go along and they don't carry meaning in relation to the topic that I'm talking about. What they do show however, is the range of work that Unlimited commissions and the quality of that work. So those images are dance, visual arts, theatre, anything that you can imagine in terms of art form. And they are high quality images showing high quality work.

They also show very clearly that they commission artists across all different forms of impairment. There are artists with physical disabilities, artists who have learning disabilities and again others – a very very full range. But as I say, I'll audio describe each image in more detail and provide a link at the end where you can download that audio description and then listen to that at your leisure afterwards.

Okay on to the presentation itself.

Hi, I'm Jo Verrent, I'm a senior producer from Unlimited. What's that?

Unlimited is an arts commissioning program, that aims to embed work by disabled artists within the UK and the international cultural sector. Reaching new audiences and shifting perceptions of disabled people. We aren't the only funder or supporter of disabled artists in the UK but we are an important part of the ecology.

Since 2014, Unlimited has awarded more than £4.7 million to over 400 ambitious disabled artists and companies for commissions, awards and support, which have been seen and engaged with more than 4 million people globally and online.

This sounds impressive but it's important to remember why we're here.

The so-called standard route for artists to find funding to create art works for some – but not all. It's inherently ableist. And we're here to fill a gap. But our big aim is to change the system entirely so we don't have to be here at all.

That's why our new mission will be to commission extraordinary work from disabled artists until the whole of the cultural sector does. This work will change and challenge the world.

And I say new mission as we're currently changing from program delivered by myself, Shape Arts and Artsadmin, two organisations in the UK – one disability lead and one centred on artists – to a fully independent organization. Watch out the news in early 2022 as we relaunch as that fully independent new organization.

So we're a funder of work. And I'll talk more about that later. But we're also in receipt of funding. Our biggest supporter is Arts Council England. We also get funds from Arts Council of Wales, Creative Scotland, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the British Council and the National Charity Lottery Fund.

Now all our funders understand and align with our Social Model approach to removing barriers for disabled artists and our work to create a more equal playing field. But there are also funders who struggle with this in some way or they wouldn't need to invest in us to deliver aspects of that for them. And it's really important to us that we don't just simply become part of the problem, an alternative route. That's not what we want.

We want to work with our funders and get them – and the system as whole – to shift. But we understand, change is slow, way too slow. And we need to offer both roots to funds and roots for disabled artists now, as we push for that change in the system. We need to illustrate what that funding could achieve and therefore show what's missing from the picture.

We've ended relationships with funders where we feel our values don't align. One funder became increasingly concerned with being able to measure things that we don't focus on. For example looking for improvements in wellbeing and happiness. There's a big increase in funding with this aim.

But we don't fund artists to be happy. We fund them to make exceptional art. Once we accept there is therapeutic benefit to making art for some artists, we don't focus on that. It's the work and the impact of the work that's important to us.

It's the hardest thing in the world to walk away from funding but it's really important if your values don't align. We're not doing this for charitable reasons nor because disabled artists are sad and they need help.

Disabled artists should be angry not sad. What they need is the barriers that prevent their access removed. They don't need help. They may need access and support, but that's very different from help arising from a pitying perspective.

So instead of saying to funders, 'disabled artists need your help', we flip it and say, 'you – the funder – need our help'. 'You need our support and our partnerships, because your systems

are so inaccessible for disabled artists. And therefore disabled artists are missing out and you are missing out the talent and potential and innovation of those artists.'

If you fundraise based on pity, then pity will always be in the eyes of your audience. Any deficit-focused fundraising will lead to enforcing that dominant view of 'disabled as deficit'. That has to be challenged and erased. We can't reenforce such a dangerous and incorrect view of disabled people. We're not in need of pity. We're in need of equality.

Deficit focused funding also leads to 'inspiration porn', a term popularized by Australian Stella Young, now sadly no longer with us. She used the term in 2021, to describe the betrayal of people with disabilities – as the say in Australia – as inspirational solely or in part on the basis of their disability.

So 'inspiration porn' can be images or video, memes or even art by disabled people, that is used to motivate non-disabled people. Suggesting that if a disabled person can accomplish something then surely a non-disabled person can. And supporters of 'inspiration porn' claim these images etc. inspire disabled people themselves because it showcases members of their community making and achieving things.

But what it does instead for art is, it often raises average or mediocre non-exceptional art into the exceptional category, into that territory – giving a very false senses of achievement. And for non-disabled people it enforces a sense that they hold anyway: The work by disabled artist won't be any good, can't be any good and will never be any good.

And this believe is fundamentally wrong. Art by disabled artists can be truly exceptional, on par, and even better than their non-disabled peers. As access, experience of impairment, experience of disability – now these can act as a creative spur to genuinely develop artforms, stretching form, adapting processes, responding to future imperatives and not just historical artform precedent.

The only reason, disabled artists aren't represented, aren't present in the proportional numbers that hold within the population – in the UK that's about 20% – that's due to ableism in the system, barriers that stop us, a lack of the access we need.

And this – well to be honest, a slightly softer version of this – is what we explore with our funders.

Now some jump on the numbers and accept that they need to increase the numbers of disabled people they support. And know they can do that via us and via learning with us.

Some look at the widening of audiences the work may bring. Showcasing and profiling disabled artists, generating accessible product. And all this plays part to drive that widening of audiences. Some funders, due to the shift in artistic form, focus on that element of the work. And some funders, due to a combination of all of those things.

So instead of pity we look to gain funds based on social justice and the inherent aesthetic benefit of disabled lead art, its quality, and its impact on the sector, for art form, venues, promoters and audiences.

And this means we have to fund exceptional work. Work that is high quality, work that is daring, takes risks and changes minds. And we have to do it in a way that addresses and removes barriers.

So what do we fund and how? And then how to we take that how and feed it back into the sector to make that essential change?

So let's break that down a bit.

What do we fund?

We work across all art forms, sizes, scales and audiences. Unlimited has set out to prove that the skills and talents of disabled artists are, indeed, unlimited, and that there is no part of the cultural sector which shouldn't have disabled artists embedded within it.

Unlimited have supported such well known disabled artists and companies as Jess Tom and Touretteshero, Claire Cunningham and Noëmi Lakmaier, Mind the Gap, many many more – and more too will soon become widely known.

And currently we fund across three strands, although that may change: We fund main commissions, research and development awards and awards to emerging artists, to make their first piece of work.

As a funder we try and set out an accessible process in order to encourage others to run better processes. But we're always learning! I'm not for a moment saying we're perfect!

The very nature of a competitive funding system will make it inaccessible for some people.

So how is our process accessible?

Once we have criteria about excellence and reach – for example – we don't tell people what to make work about or insist they use our language about disability or impairment to do so. That is very much their choice.

Our basic information is in text form, both in PDF and Word. It's also in BSL, audio and Easy Read. With phone and email contact address, so that people have somebody directly to contact around support.

Our time schedule is a long one. We spend a couple of months spreading the word about commission opportunities, when the application form is fully viewable, before people can actually apply.

Our applications are in two stages:

Expression of interest, which is as short as we can possibly make it. So people don't have to put a lot of work in unless they're in with a realistic chance.

The second stage – the main stage – only people who are shortlisted complete. Most people apply online, in words through the application portal, but people can also email in their responses. They can submit video or audio responses or anything else they might need for access.

Last time we had 468 applications, we shortlisted 77, and we funded 32.

So only those shortlisted artists get to fill the full form in. And they get an hour's worth of support from somebody on our team to make sure those 77 applications can be the very best they can be.

Access is available for both stages: expression of interest and full. That might be a sign language interpreter for meetings, or to explore the meanings of words and phrases in the form, or someone to help the artist construct their ideas into a linear form, or quite often help with budgeting.

Our selection panels are disabled led. Which means over 50% of the people on that panel are disabled people themselves. And we offer further support after commissioning an artist to help pairing up with people in the sector that might be able to help and help with showing and sharing the work.

Now last time, 11 of our awards were partner awards. We've done a couple more of those too, through strategic partnerships. This is another way of directly trying to challenge and change the sector.

By working hand in hand and co-commission with an organisation, that organisation gets to see all aspects of how we work. And how to embed access into all stages of our process. And they also see for themselves what difference it makes.

And we've had partnerships including Southbank Centre, Coventry City of Culture, twentytwentyone, Sage Gateshead, Pentabus Rural Touring Theater Company, and many many more.

Partnerships have meant we've been able to increase the amount of financial investment in disabled artists and also explore gaps within our program. By working with partners who work in art forms or for audiences who are currently underrepresented.

Now the last 18 months have been really tough globally for everyone. In the UK they've been especially tough for disabled people. 2/3 of all our Covid deaths have been disabled people. And they have also been especially tough for disabled artists who struggled with cancellations, postponements, lack of work. Though those employed within the arts, in jobs, have gained to some degree of Government support.

So disabled artists, basically, have had it doubly tough.

Now as a funder, it was doubly important therefore that we kept going. And kept getting money flowing out to artists. We ensured that all the artists we were working with knew that it didn't matter if things needed to change. Their commission money was theirs and they should do with it what they can, and not worry about what they can't.

We found new money to help some work pivot to make on-screen versions or outdoor versions of their projects. And we dug deep and found extra money for additional for additional micro grant activity as well.

We kept going with our main commission plan, knowing that great though short term measures were, they were never going to be enough to sustain the sector. People needed to plan ahead and plan for larger, non-emergency work too.

As the sector learned about improving access, especially online, we learned to, and are learning so much through this phase. And much of our learning is about care – the additional care we should have always been taking to ensure that our artists are genuinely okay at all times. And that our freelance sector as a whole has more support.

It means we have a new policy of 'nothing for nothing', never asking people not in a salaried position to do anything for free. And as a sector there's been so much learning about what's important and what's not.

Sadly we've seen ablism rise up strongly as venues reopen and prioritize cash over care. Wanting full auditoriums rather than those in which more people may feel safe but there may be less people over all.

We think building back should be about building back better, more inclusively. And we support the seven rules for an inclusive recovery, created by the campaign group We Shall Not Be Removed and others. Pushing for better behaviour, more inclusive behaviour in the sector at this time, promoting access to real life, online and hybrid events and activity.

So what's our role now?

To keep doing what we do supporting disabled artists. and to keep sharing how, so that this learning becomes embedded within all our funding practices going forward. Now just ours but the whole sector's. That's why I'm delighted to be here, even remotely, even with birdsong and dog noises, here speaking with you all today. Thank you!

Contact me to get the audio description of the images and the titles and names of the artists and the works on [info@weareunlimited.org.uk](mailto:info@weareunlimited.org.uk). Our twitter handles are @weareunltd and mine is @joverrent. And we are on Facebook: just look up We Are Unlimited. Thank you.