

An Accentuate Publication

# Cultural Shifts

A collection of essays about disability, success, art, sport and the influence of the London 2012 Paralympic Games

Edited by Camilla Brueton and Esther Fox

[www.accentuateuk.org](http://www.accentuateuk.org)



**Accentuate, the 2012 Legacy programme for the South East, has been inspired by the Paralympic Movement and through 15 transformational projects has brought together Deaf and disabled and non-disabled sports people and artists, inspired young people and developed international connections to share experiences and identities across the globe.**

Accentuate has been funded by a range of partners, in particular, Legacy Trust UK, which is creating a lasting impact from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games by funding ideas and local talent to inspire creativity across the UK.

New ideas, new ways of working, allied to innovative projects have also delivered notable results, including injecting millions of pounds into local economies and creating over 700 new jobs and employment opportunities, many filled by disabled people.

Due to its huge success and its innovative plans for the future, Accentuate's work will continue for at least another year thanks to the continued support of Legacy Trust UK.

The Our View Core Group are a group of Deaf and disabled people who have been at the heart of Accentuate and have ensured the views and contributions of disabled people informed every level of the programme. Moving forwards, Our View will become the Accentuate Ideas Hub. They will incubate innovative ideas, they will initiate change and through their networks and roles as national and international ambassadors, they will continue to activate a cultural shift.

**Our View**, in conjunction with Programme Director Esther Fox has produced this publication.

Published by Accentuate  
c/o Screen South  
The Wedge  
75–81 Tontine Street  
Folkestone  
Kent  
CT20 1JR

[www.accentuateuk.org](http://www.accentuateuk.org)

ISBN:978-0-9574436-0-0

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Cover design and illustrations: Jon Adams  
Design and layout: Erica Smith

More writing from Our View can be found at:  
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# What does success look like?

Esther Fox introduces the key themes explored in this publication: success, identity, culture and equality.

**Diversity of opinion and discussion is just as prevalent within the disability cultural sector as it is in the mainstream. Accentuate is often at the heart of this discussion, as we have deliberately brought together a group of Deaf and disabled people to share and dissect their varied experiences. As the Paralympic Games were fast approaching the debate became more heated. There was a sense, particularly in the disability arts sector, that the Paralympic Games and ‘super-crips’ might be more harmful to the ‘average’ disabled person, than helpful. Uncomfortable with this assumption, I became interested in how we define ideas of success and achievement and was keen to explore some context about what constitutes Deaf and disabled peoples’ identity, how this may relate to success and whether success may actually be seen as a threat.**

This was the germ of the idea for this publication. The Our View Core Group has worked closely with Accentuate over the last three years as a key internal steering group for the programme. We started to explore these themes and each member of the Core Group has offered their own unique insight into them in these essays, exploring ideas about what constitutes success, how this may or may not fit with a disabled person’s identity and the historic context of the Disability Rights Movement. All of this has been set against the spectacular backdrop and unprecedented success of the Paralympic Games.

The social and medical models of disability are outlined and critiqued, as no model adequately reflects the complexities within disabled people’s multi-faceted and fluctuating identities. If the

social model is designed to ensure that barriers are ultimately removed, would success by default then take place in the mainstream and would there be no need for distinct cultural activity? The Paralympic Games has been a remarkable event, surprising to all in the profound change it has potentially provoked. These essays were written during this zeitgeist and reflect some of the shifting opinions. There is an uneasy conflict between the success of the games and the harsh social reforms that may jeopardise independence and reduce opportunities for Deaf and disabled people to succeed. There is also some exploration into the differences of approach to either align oneself with the disability arts movement, embracing disability as a defining characteristic or to choose to forge a path within the mainstream, being judged purely on the quality of the work produced. We should allow growth, change and shift within our identities so we can respond to new opportunities, thoughts and experiences. Relying solely on models for our understanding of disability does not always allow for progressive approaches but it is important to explore what underpins the context of the disability cultural sector and disability identity.

My own early experience was that I did not disclose that I was a disabled person (challenging at times with having a very obvious impairment, being a wheelchair user) and I did not align myself with the Disability Arts Movement. I wanted to be measured against what I perceived to be talent and quality of work. I wanted equity of access in order to achieve my measure of success: a profile as a national exhibiting visual artist. I was then introduced to the social model and began to witness my own internal shift. I have come to realise that my identity is in constant flux.

## **“We should allow growth, change and shift within our identities so we can respond to new opportunities, thoughts and experiences.”**

Sometimes my identity as a disabled person is at the forefront and at others it is not relevant. I am proud, however, that part of my identity is that of a disabled person and I would not change this if given a choice. Seeing high achieving disabled people in a variety of roles may well do more to shift public opinion as well as raising aspirations.

Research has demonstrated that there is evidence corroborating the need for disabled role models to enable disabled people to understand their sense of self and in turn build aspirations (S. Shah 2005). Self-understanding and projects that help young people acknowledge and reframe their adversities all have a beneficial effect on young people's resilience (Newman 2004).

Disabled sports people appear to embrace the idea of disabled people as role models, but those within the disability arts sector are often opposed to this idea, voicing a concern that typical role models normalise the disabled person (Lennard J. Davis, 2010)

There is a current movement that is exploring resilience; seeing the benefit in making people and organisations more resilient. This is undoubtedly tied into success. Building resilience has been identified as particularly important for disabled young people (Hart and Blincow 2007). Disabled young people's increasing marginalisation (and statistics demonstrate there is a far higher degree of unemployment and poorer education opportunities for these young people, against a background of decreasing support from social services along with a growing incentive to encourage disabled people into work) means that finding ways to increase their resilience and their sense of self becomes a key priority. So

exploring why there is apparent, and perhaps understandable, reticence in celebrating success could be a key priority when thinking about not only the current generation of disabled people, but also the next. It would be a wonderful result if disabled young people had a more positive association with disability and therefore their own identity and consequently were able to recognise themselves within an aspirational framework.

The non-disabled world needed to perceive disabled people in a positive context and the recent global event, the Paralympic Games, has provided a platform for this. The right thing at the right time. There has, unsurprisingly, been some resistance and concern within the broader disabled community about the apparent bias of attention towards Paralympic sport. There is now, however, an opportunity to extend this positive context across the arts and broader cultural sector and place disabled people in the spotlight rather than in the shadows.

Accentuate, along with our key partners and individuals, will continue to work to change perceptions, building profiles and aspirations around disability and being at the forefront of brokering new relationships and collaborations, continuing to bring together ideas that on first glance may appear to be at odds but in their diversity bring strength. We need to do this with sensitivity and understanding, ensuring all Deaf and disabled people have an opportunity to lead as well as participate on a number of levels, in this challenging economic climate. Accentuate will ensure legacy is real and definable and will contribute to a new and invigorated landscape consolidating the 'cultural shift' beyond elite sportspeople and artists.



## The race to mainstream acceptance

In this essay **Jamie Beddard** unpicks the relationship between disabled artists and athletes and mainstream culture.

**In the afterglow of the Olympics and Paralympics, the profile of disabled athletes and artists has never been higher. The Opening Ceremony of the Paralympics dominated front pages of newspapers and drew Channel 4's largest audience in over a decade, whilst an unprecedented 2.7 million tickets were sold during the games. Disabled performers were placed centre-stage and high into the night sky above the Olympic Park during the critically acclaimed opening show, 'Enlightenment'. Ian Dury's song, 'Spasticus Autisticus', previously banned by the BBC, was riotously belted out across the stadium and from screens worldwide. Disabled athletes ran, jumped and shot into the mainstream, accompanied by a plethora of disabled artists invigorating the Cultural Olympiad.**

The 'mainstream' had long been regarded as the Promised Land, where disabled artists and athletes may become accepted and celebrated in the rarefied orbit of the dominant culture. We may now have reached a tipping point whereby acceptance and, more importantly, equality is being reached in the mainstream, with disabled people appreciated for their own merits and on their own terms. Legacy is, however,

dependent on mainstream acceptance beyond the 'criporazzi', those at the forefront of media coverage, and requires a major reconfiguration of what being disabled in our society means. We must ensure that the changing representations and perceptions engendered by the Paralympics drip down for the collective benefit of all, disabled and non-disabled people alike.

Terminology used around 'disability' has, in the past, implicitly suggested an amorphous mass, rooted in collective consciousness and experience, providing a convenient way of separating 'us', the non-disabled, from 'them', the disabled people. Thus both have been kept in their respective places in the pecking order, and the status quo maintained. Of course the 'us and them' construct bears little resemblance to the day-to-day realities of disabled people. We inhabit all walks of life, come in all shape and sizes and harbour all kinds of values and aspirations. Every disabled person has their own unique experience of, and way of interacting with, their disability and the world around them. Although society is arranged in such a way that disabled people may share commonality of experience, understanding and mechanisms for overcoming barriers, we are fundamentally as different, inconsistent and individual as the rest of society. In

**“Of course the ‘us and them’ construct bears little resemblance to the day-to-day realities of disabled people. We inhabit all walks of life, come in all shape and sizes and harbour all kinds of values and aspirations.”**

short, the diversity that exists amongst the non-disabled is mirrored amongst disabled people.

Disabled artists exist across the cultural sector. At one end of the spectrum are artists for whom disability is a central tenet of identity and creativity. These artists have propelled the Disability Arts Movement since its inception in the 1970s. The experience of disability in a world constructed of barriers, prejudice and exclusion has provided the stimuli for artists to create work, make statements and fight for rights. Politicisation has underpinned this counter-culture and been a direct response to the lack of opportunities and misrepresentation prevalent in the ‘mainstream’. Disability Arts have existed in opposition, a direct expression against the status quo, as dissenting voices in the wilderness. The Disability Arts and Disability Rights Movements were inextricably linked, with artists and activists sharing a fundamental commitment to the social model of disability, intent on exposing inequalities and fighting discrimination.

At the other extreme, are those artists who choose to disassociate from, or conceal disability. In the ‘us and them’ paradigm, in which, both, mainstream glass floors and ceilings have been out-of-bounds, denial

or disguise has been the favoured option of some. Between these two extremes, are artists for whom the relationship between identity and disability is in flux, and often ambiguous. The only worthwhile generalisations is that the experience of disability is fluid, and to a greater or lesser extent, an aspect, rather than a defining characteristic, of identity.

Disabled athletes have followed a different path into mainstream consciousness, culminating in the memorable scenes and fervour that accompanied the 2012 Games. The Paralympic Movement grew out of a gathering of World War II veterans in 1948 at Stoke Mandeville, under the pioneer Ludwig Guttman. Sport was couched in therapeutic and rehabilitative terms, and seen as competition, a method of normalisation and a means of overcoming the physical and psychological damage of becoming disabled. Disability was to be beaten rather than embraced. Elite athletes necessarily found themselves part of the Paralympian umbrella, abiding by the rules and principles of a sporting movement. Measurement underpins sport; jumping higher, running faster, scoring more goals, beating records or achieving personal bests. For Paralympians, these measurements are further complicated as impairment becomes





Continued: **Jamie Beddard**

## The race to mainstream acceptance

a fundamental base for categorization and comparison. Disabled swimmers, for instance, fit into one of fourteen categories, resulting in 148 gold medals as opposed to 34 in the pool at the Olympics. The classification and importance of impairment in Paralympic sport implicitly fulfils the principles underlying the medical model of disability.

So whilst artists can have fluid relationships with their disabilities, athletes are bound by, and labelled according to their impairment. Quantifiable, rather than qualitative assessments underpin Paralympic sport, leading to a transparency at odds with the self-determined and abstracted concepts prevalent in the arts. The medical, not the social model of disability continues to hold greater sway in wider society. Whilst many have perceived sport as a means of overcoming disability, the Disability Arts Movement embraces and celebrates disability and whilst the 'mainstream' can understand the former, the latter may be regarded as a threat. In addition, we live in a society predicated on competition, and in which sport is so engrained in the national psyche that the Paralympian Movement and values have popular appeal.

The coverage of the Paralympics was initially characterised by healthy dollops of sentimentality, as back-stories and struggles dominated copy. Sporting pursuit and achievement was afforded the metaphorical significance of overcoming disability. Words such as 'inspirational' and 'brave' were writ large over early Paralympic coverage as stories of trauma and accident proliferated. Athletes with acquired disability made particularly good copy, with associated themes of loss, redemption and recovery. These are concepts that can easily be accessed by non-disabled audiences as notions of 'there but for the Grace of God go I' are provoked. This heady mix of sport and schadenfreude was a media dream.

However, as the Paralympics progressed, these fundamental tenets of representation began to shift, with sport itself becoming the primary driver for coverage. Spectacle, achievement and high-level competition were grabbing the headlines. Many of the panellists and experts commentating were themselves disabled sportspeople, educating their non-disabled counterparts and the general public alike. The feats of David Weir, Ellie Simmonds and Oscar Pistorius were recognised as 'superhuman' in sporting, rather than mundane daily living, contexts.



## **“So, disability is suddenly in vogue. Perceptions are changing and disabled sportspeople, and artists are riding a wave of public appreciation.”**

There was a reconfiguration of media portrayal and mainstream consciousness as the traditional fare of triumph over adversity was subsumed by sporting prowess and achievement.

Many Paralympians expressed the view that their disability was integral to who they are and what they have achieved. Such statements are the antithesis of the curing or rehabilitative notions on which the Paralympic Movement was based, and show a degree of politicisation previously confined to Disability Arts. Perhaps we are beginning to see a convergence between Paralympians, Disability Arts and activists and mainstream consciousness. The controversy surrounding Atos’s sponsorship and involvement in the Paralympics served notice on the strength of feeling against the company behind the ‘fitness-to-work’ assessments. The hypocrisy and contradictions of current government policy were highlighted, as benefit cuts and the victimisation of disabled people

ran alongside the ‘superhuman’ epithets so readily attached to our athletes. We were left in little doubt of the public’s perception of these paradoxes by the vociferous boos greeting the Chancellor, George Osborne’s appearance at the Paralympics. There is a widening gap between our political leaders and the communities they are trying to ingratiate through the Olympic and Paralympic ‘feel good’ factor. Mainstream acceptance appears confined to public, rather than political spheres.

So, disability is suddenly in vogue. Perceptions are changing and disabled sportspeople, and artists are riding a wave of public appreciation. The realities of mainstream recognition and inclusion are being debated and the extent to which a lasting legacy will be achieved is yet to be discovered. And all this against a backdrop in which the vast majority of disabled people are neither artists nor athletes, and are in thrall to the harsh social, economic and political realities of life in the UK.

# What does disability identity and our relationship with art and culture mean today?

Colin Hambrook examines some key moments in the development of the Disability Arts Movement and its relationship to Disability Studies.

I first came across the social model of disability<sup>1</sup> in 1994 when I was awarded an apprenticeship with Disability Arts in London Magazine, published by the London Disability Arts Forum (LDAF). At that time the social model was spurring a community of disabled people to refute our medicalisation as victimised objects of pity needing to be cared for and ultimately 'cured.' Throughout the 1990s there was a surge of artistic, documentary and political expression challenging discriminatory attitudes towards disabled people. Disability Arts was very much linked with cabaret and spoken word. Performers and musicians like Ian Stanton, Johnny Crescendo and Barbara Lisicki challenged the status quo, exhorting disabled people to 'piss on pity' and advocating empowerment by demanding that disabled people be in charge of decision-making processes, with the rallying cry 'nothing about us without us.'

Tony Heaton's 'Shaken not Stirred' was a sculpture-cum-performance piece commissioned by LDAF in July 1992.<sup>2</sup> It was performed at a press conference at the Diorama Gallery in London as part of the Disability Movements' demonstration against ITV's Telethon campaign. The sculpture

consisted of 1,683 red charity collecting cans, arranged in a pyramid standing two metres high. Without warning, Heaton entered the conference in his wheelchair and flung a prosthetic false-leg wearing a 'bovver boot' at the pyramid, scattering the cans.

The action was intended as a slight on the hierarchical structure of charities with disabled people at the bottom of the pile, with reference to the general public's conscience being 'shaken' by pleas for charity, without them necessarily being 'stirred' to find out what the money they are donating is being used for. It led to media coverage giving voice to disabled peoples' criticism of what the Observer described as "Telethon's parade of begging, drooling cripples, displaying their infirmities in return for charity hand-outs." It was ITV's last Telethon campaign.

A gathering groundswell of arguments for the social inclusion of disabled people arose with an emerging awareness of the social model of disability. The redefinition of disability as 'oppression' challenged medical model assumptions about disability as, by definition, needing cure or treatment. It led to debate and action about how to dismantle the barriers of physical access and was the beginning of a journey that led to the Disability Discrimination Act.

**“Performers / musicians like Ian Stanton, Johnny Crescendo and Barbara Lisicki toured the ‘Tragic but Brave show’ extorting disabled people to ‘piss on pity’ and advocating empowerment by demanding that disabled people be in charge of decision-making processes with the rallying cry ‘nothing about us without us’.”**

In terms of the arts, a key change was Paddy Masefield’s influence on the Arts Council National Lottery’s decision-making process. His engagement on an Arts Council Board in the late 1990s led to a condition of the Arts Lottery system that any building that receives an award has to be made accessible.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the 90s many media and arts organisations began developing disability-specific programmes intended to enable disabled and deaf people to develop careers in arts and media. In recognising the barriers to education that had prevented disabled people from equal participation it seemed that changes were afoot. Alongside the institution of the Disability Discrimination Act, campaigns for the recognition of British Sign Language and the provision of captions and audio description led to mainstream arts organisations beginning to take sensory access, as well as physical access, more seriously.

In 2001 I set up Disability Arts Online<sup>4</sup> as an outlet for artistic expression giving a voice to a community of disabled artists beginning to forge careers in the arts. Amongst those voices are disabled people who are not necessarily okay with the idea that difference is always a cause for celebration. A flip-side to Johnny Crescendo’s anthemic song ‘Pride’ is a sense that the Disability Movement,

having concentrated on challenging barriers to access hasn’t sufficiently tackled the negative aspects of living with impairment on a daily basis. Aside from issues of being seen as objects of pity or made the subject of stereotyping judgments, living with impairment is sometimes just plain difficult.

To open these issues further Colin Cameron completed a PhD thesis in 2010 titled ‘Does anybody like being disabled? A critical exploration of impairment, identity, media and everyday experience in a disabling society’.<sup>5</sup> In his research Cameron advocates for an affirmative model of disability defining impairment as “physical, sensory, emotional and intellectual difference divergent from culturally valued norms of embodiment, but which is to be expected and respected on its own terms in a diverse society.”

Key to the ideas behind the affirmative model is the notion that impairment is to be expected and respected as an ordinary part of life. Building on the social model argument defining ‘disability’ as an unequal power relationship, Cameron’s research pivots around a series of interviews with a wide-ranging cross-section of disabled people. He examines impairment more closely “as a valid human characteristic among other human characteristics”.

Continued: Colin Hambrook

## What does disability identity and our relationship with art and culture mean today?

At the heart of Cameron's ideas is an examination of our choice to decide whether or not 'disability' has 'nothing to do with us, or everything to do with us'. He says that: "Identifying as disabled is not a decision that suddenly somehow means everything is all right, but involves a new understanding of the relationship between the impaired self and the physical and social contexts in which the impaired self is located."<sup>6</sup>

By examining both the internal and external struggles that people with impairments face on a daily basis, Cameron attempts to open up arguments about empowerment. A caucus of people with impairments, including artists who have emerged through the Disability Arts Movement, feel that "if we are successful in maintaining a competent public presentation people around us will recognise and value us for our other personal characteristics" aside from being identified as disabled people.

Taking on the baton of challenging disabling barriers and structures is not necessarily an easy choice, but can give an empowering perspective. Cameron says: "Being positioned as an outsider can provide an opportunity to gaze critically at the mainstream, a point that is at the heart of Disability Studies. If this leads to being wary of the attractions of the ordinary life

of the community, an affirmative sense of self establishes the claim to the right to be different."

On a personal note, I was drawn into the Disability Arts Movement as an artist and writer, in a baptism of fire from which I haven't looked back. My involvement has been a natural progression, something I felt I could put my heart into, despite, and maybe because of, how difficult and painful it can be at times. On the one hand I've struggled with social model rhetoric about being disabled by society, but on the other I could never hide my mental health history – in the best and the worst of times – and my experience always felt like being refused a place on the bus – the same bus other disabled people couldn't get on to because of similar barriers.

The Disability Arts Movement is continuing to undergo many changes. In the last decade we've seen the decline of the Disability Arts Development Agencies and an emergence of 'mainstream' arts organisations who have taken on the unique value that artists and performers from a disability background can bring to the arts. Organisations like Arts Catalyst, Live Arts Development Agency and ArtsAdmin are producing more work by disabled artists who frame their work within a Disability Arts context. At the same

**“... my experience always felt like being refused a place on the bus – the same bus other disabled people couldn’t get on to because of similar barriers.”**

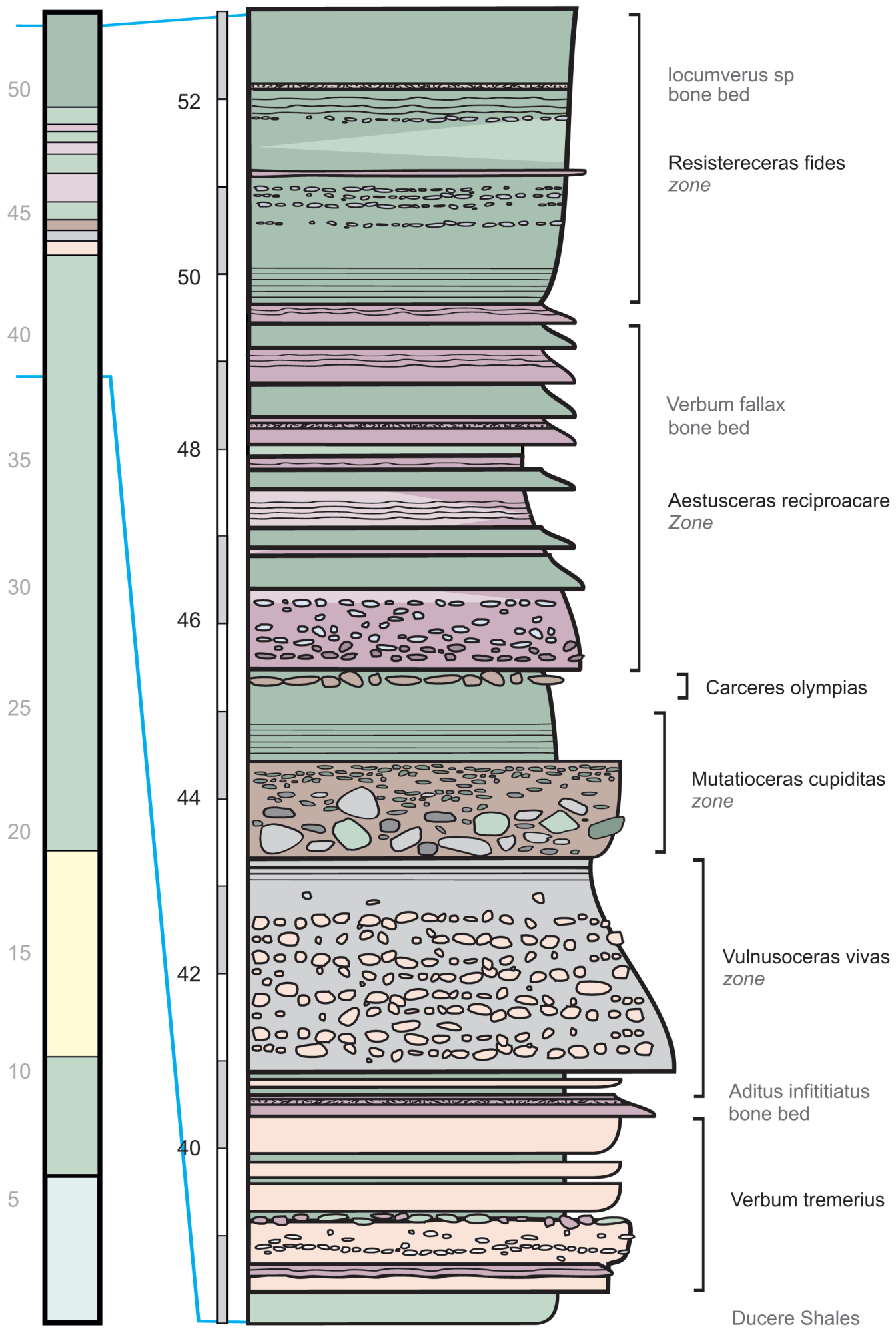
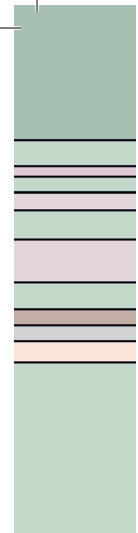
time the disability context remains a subject of debate between artists whose opinions vary enormously on its value as a tool for identifying and understanding the context within which work is made.

To go back to the original question posed in this essay ‘What does disability identity and our relationship with art and culture mean today?’ there are a growing number of disabled artists whose work illustrates what it is to be affirmative, to say “This is me... This is what is ordinary for me, even if it is not part of the accepted idea of what is and what is not normal.”

I think the challenge will continue to grow. The old order in which an artists’ impairment-related history remained hidden is changing as more exhibitions are curated with an examination of the disability identity of contributing artists. As that work progresses so our relationship with art and culture will change and the legacy of the Disability Movement will grow.

## Notes

- 1 For an archive of research papers on the social model of disability go to Leeds Universities Centre for Disability Studies at [www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/)
- 2 For a discussion of Tony Heaton’s ‘Shaken not Stirred’ read the Live Art Development Agencies Guide to Live Art and Disability by Aaron Williamson available at [www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/Study\\_Room/guides/aaron\\_williamson\\_guide.html](http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/Study_Room/guides/aaron_williamson_guide.html)
- 3 An obituary highlighting Paddy Masefield’s achievements was published in the Guardian on 24 July 2012 at [www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/jul/24/paddy-masefield-obituary](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/jul/24/paddy-masefield-obituary)
- 4 Disability Arts Online can be found at [www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/home](http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/home)
- 5 Cameron, Colin (2010) *Does anybody like being disabled? A critical exploration of impairment, identity, media and everyday experience in a disabling society*. PhD thesis, Queen Margaret University can be downloaded from <http://etheses.qmu.ac.uk/258/>
- 6 Colin Cameron – further towards an affirmative model of disability (Dec 2009) can be read at [www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/affirmative-model-of-disability](http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/affirmative-model-of-disability)





# Competing tides

In this essay and accompanying visuals, **Jon Adams** shares his experience of disability, labels and life as an artist.









**Since discovering I was dyslexic in 1999 I have flirted with labels trying to find tangible tastes of belonging or home. I know now that I ‘suffered’ abuse at school because of disabilities that, although buried from me, were obvious to others as weaknesses and exploited by them. Although referred to as ‘hidden disabilities’, in ‘the field’ we do not pass ‘unseen’ without the greatest of efforts, constantly facing barriers that are mainly imposed by others. Just because we’re seen erroneously to have ‘perceived choice’ does not mean we have an advantage or don’t feel the sting of others’ tongues. This intimately gathered evidence contradicts what I feel to be an untruth, that there is a ‘choice of defining’ for those with hidden disabilities.**

I am proud of stepping forward as a person with Aspergers and dyslexia, which for some, although socially disabling is potentially a rich advantage, becoming core elements of artistic or scientific success. I do, however, struggle with issues of being boxed and locked in by others who say they know better. Personal experience has shown me that by just getting on with it and learning to ‘work positively’, with

your perceived disability left ‘unannounced’ you are seen as unqualified, often scorned rather than celebrated by the ‘hard-line’ when you succeed.

Maybe we should all encourage individualistic choice along with tailored support and rejoice in where and when artists wish to position their work, without fearing castigation or accusations of selling out.

I would also question the need to preface ‘disability’ before everything we do. Is this to assure our qualifications and seek people’s consideration? Or should ‘strength’ lie in the quality, relevance and context of the work not in ‘multi-coloured conjured words of comfort’? People engaged by this strength may then choose to drill deeper to see between the layers, uncovering hidden histories – a more meaningful choice to understand the influences and derivations behind the work or process. With difficulty, I choose not to evolve within certain ‘self-nominated’ restricted faunas. I would rather reclaim my label of ‘artist’, innocently announced and inhaled at the age of six.

Key					
	Artist		Artist forming		Dyslexic artist
	Artist for others		Artist disabled		Undecided artist
	Mislabeled artist				Unawareness artist





## Success and the social model

In this essay **Sarah Playforth** responds to the question:

“If the social model were to be totally successful, and all barriers were removed (be they physical or attitudinal) does this not mean a disabled person could achieve success in their chosen field, and without barriers, this success would be within a mainstream arena? If this is true, why are disabled people who are successful (especially within sport and art) accused of selling out and becoming ‘normalised’, often by the very people who hold the social model very close to their hearts?”

### An answer in two halves...

#### Introduction

I’m writing this having watched the opening ceremony of the Paralympic Games, followed by Newsnight, where five disabled people commented on the reality of life for many who are afraid of the effect on them of the dramatic changes in disability support funding, or who are already affected by them. The disparity between the Games and everyday life for disabled people is stark and, ironically, many Paralympians themselves may face reduction in support outside the rarefied world of Paralympic sport. Reductions that could affect their ability to live and work as they choose, let alone compete.

The hope is that the demonstration of success in sport will help shift the perception of disabled people in our society, but disabled people themselves seem divided in their view on this and many, like myself, are divided within ourselves. With this in mind, it is helpful

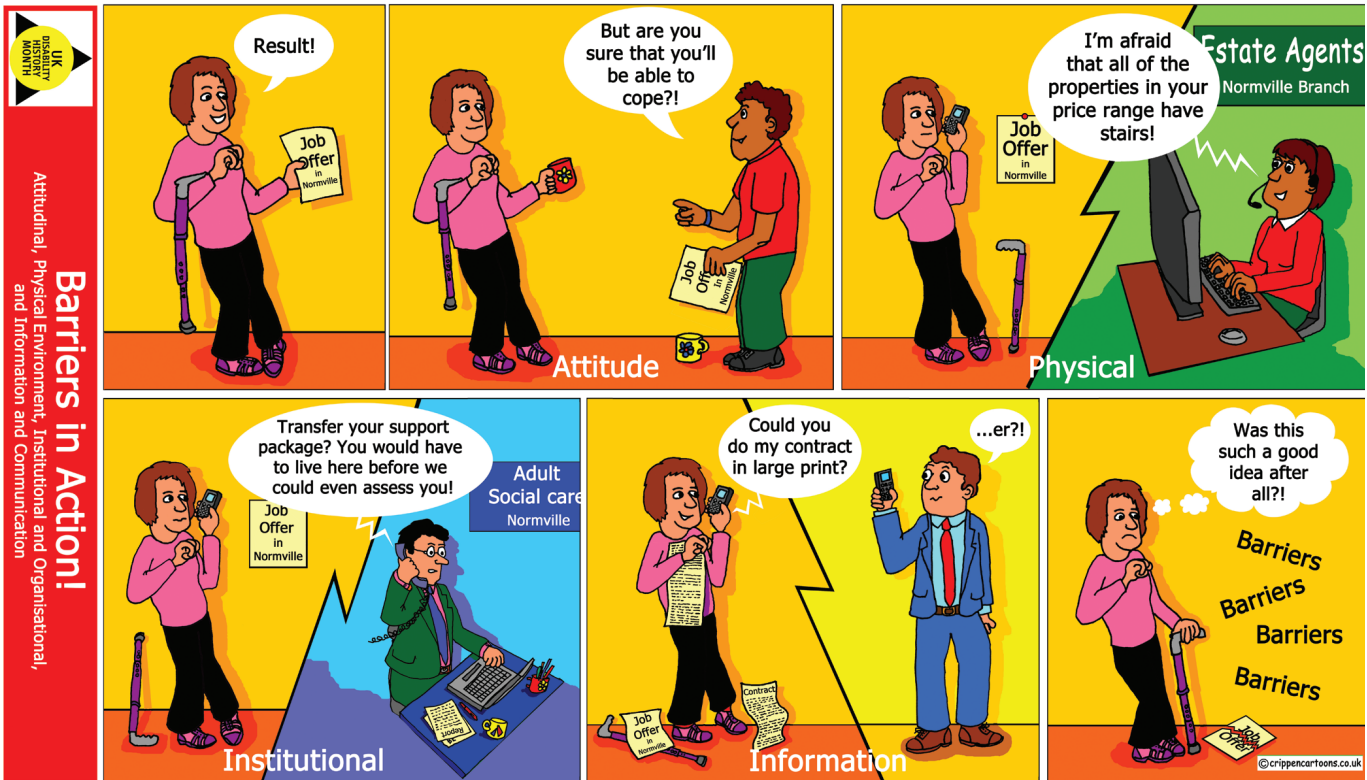
to approach the two halves of the question separately, as they address two distinct issues.

#### If it were successful?

*If the social model were to be totally successful, and all barriers were removed (be they physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional or attitudinal) does this not mean a disabled person could achieve success in their chosen field, and, without barriers, that this success would be within a mainstream arena?*

To begin to answer this deceptively simple question, we need to explore how possible it really is to remove all barriers and look at both external and internal realities for disabled people. Can we really simplify the lives we lead to a straightforward removal of the barriers, and if we do so, will we all be able to realise our potential? A brief consideration of the reality of our lives will show this is a false assumption; the question cannot have a finite answer.

While acknowledging that individual factors of talent, skill, hard work and opportunity all



go in to the mix for success, insurmountable barriers can render all this meaningless. We cannot afford to discard the social model, which is a truly important contribution to the lives of disabled people. It has achieved more equality of access than is sometimes realised by disabled people who were born after the era of struggle to achieve parity and anti-discriminatory legislation or who were fortunate enough to be born into families with sufficient resources and enabling attitudes to support the development of independence and confidence.

Those of us who are 'successful' may believe or be told that this is all down to our unaided efforts, but a moment's thought may show us that this success also depends other people removing barriers or lessening their impact.

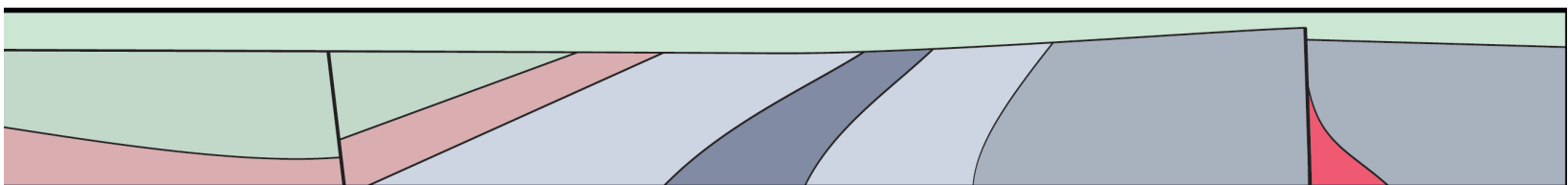
The determination shown by Paralympians and Olympians and by successful disabled and non-disabled artists, writers and

performers alike is fostered by people in their lives who have those 'enabling attitudes' and have demonstrated a belief in their capabilities that boosts self-belief and self-confidence, both essential for achievement alongside innate talent and personal effort. This does not diminish those magnificent achievements in any way but helps us to see that the social model is inexorably part of them, even if it is not acknowledged as such.

**Without barriers, would this success be 'in the mainstream?'**

Disabled people themselves hold varying views on the value of being in the mainstream and on what the barriers to this might be.

Success in sport's mainstream is exceptionally difficult to achieve and quantify, witness Oscar Pistorius' struggle to compete in both Games. Simply because of the physicality of sport, mainstream success has





## Continued: Sarah Playforth

### Success and the social model

to depend on a body being fully functional. Arguably, deaf athletes and sportspeople should therefore be able to achieve it; however communication is so much a part of the mainstream and access to training and facilities so much less achievable for deaf people that we cannot take this for granted. Simply having the drive and determination is never going to be enough for disabled people to win in mainstream competition; parallel and equally valued competition is the nearest to be hoped for and we moved closer to this with the Paralympics this year.

In relation to the arts, success in the mainstream depends very much on the choice of the individual artist. They may choose to emphasise and demonstrate their impairment within their work, its consequences for them and the barriers they face and to showcase it in specific disability art exhibitions and venues – or to present it without qualification to mainstream exhibitions and venues.

Some artists and performers clearly believe that their work is deeply influenced and enriched by their experience of disability. It is important for others to recognise this without allowing prejudice to blunt their critical faculties so they either under or over value the work, particularly if they are being paid to articulate those views in public media.

*“Disabled people are discovering a new freedom to define their self, including their self-perception as a disabled person, and reshape their lives so that the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ match. In time, fewer disabled people will desire to remain a staunch political affiliate to the disability cause because they no longer depend on it for survival, and they start to express themselves in a more diverse, pluralist way. This pluralism includes people who ‘normalise’ themselves as well as those who do not.”*

**John Walker, Deaf academic and British Sign Language user**

Taking this stance requires a positive view of disability as a valid topic to explore on the part of both art producers and consumers.

Others will choose to work with and in the mainstream and set their work against that of non-disabled artists and performers, some leaving the question of their impairment unasked and unanswered by their audiences and colleagues and others allowing it to be referenced. The work may be influenced by impairment related issues but is not presented as being so. In doing this, they implicitly accept the views of critics who will apply the same critical standards as they

do to any other productions. This approach only works, of course, where the impairment is either minimal or not visible or becomes known after the work has already been seen and assessed and where the social model is in place to remove the barriers which might disable the artist or performer and make their impairment public.

To conclude, this question is one only the individual can answer and their approach will depend on very many factors relating to background, self identification, intensity of impairment and whether being disabled is seen as positive or negative.

### **So what about my pain?**

The social model relates to external realities and cannot always address the internal realities at the same time. How much those internal realities are affected by the application or otherwise of the social model depends on a multitude of factors and can vary day to day. How “disabled” we feel can relate to internal factors (pain, physical and/or mental discomfort, immobility) or external factors (patronage, lack of physical or sensory access, ill treatment of all kinds). We are both individual and collective and any social or political philosophy that ignores this truth will always be incomplete.

Clare Allan neatly expresses this dichotomy in her Guardian column of August 1st 2012, in response to a report on a survey into life satisfaction published by the Office for National Statistics:

*“owning your own home, being married, having a stable professional job all increase your chances of scoring highly on the [life] satisfaction scale... it is not surprising that*

*“The [social] model cannot deal effectively with things that are both inside and outside, such as – for example – the idea that disabled people are “inferior”, or “less than”, which affects everyone, including disabled people. This idea is a huge barrier. So huge, that, even when barriers are removed, sometimes disabled people are not able to fulfil their potential. And so huge that, conversely, even when disabled people do succeed, other disabled people might think that they have only done so by ‘selling out’ in some way. The very idea of ‘selling out’ pre-supposes separation and inequality. Of course, it’s also true that some people, when they succeed, want to ‘pull the ladder up’ behind them, or dissociate themselves from the group they came from. That happens with race as well. But it’s also in the eye of the beholder: sometimes, when we succeed, we also transcend our own particularistic history, and no longer need to always be in a state of struggle and opposition – then we may associate less with those whose identity depends upon struggle.”*

**Razia Aziz, Co-Director of Equality Academy, executive consultant/trainer and Interfaith Minister**



Continued: Sarah Playforth

## Success and the social model

*the survey revealed the highest levels of reported wellbeing among those best able to determine both their physical environment and how they spend their time... I've always felt that my sense of wellbeing derives from internal factors more than it does from external ones [but] there is little doubt that external factors can get in the way of inner content as surely as a sharp stone in the bottom of one's sandal"*

and Julian Baggini, in the Independent of August 18th 2012, says:

*"the common good is what enables individual lives to be nourished, rather than degraded by the society they live in... the good of individuals depends in all sorts of ways on the quality of the social air they breathe"*

If we see the "common good" as a social model perspective, we can see that the value of the social model lies in its ability to create a fairer and more equal society – a level playing field being a particularly apt phrase here! The difficulty is that this does not allow for the individual behaviours (some would say human nature) and conditions that get in the way. A fully successful social model would require all physical, intellectual, emotional and sensory barriers to be removed and every individual to share a common and consistent accepting, open

minded and non-judgmental perspective on each other and also to be permanently free of pain and discomfort – a very tall order indeed.

### A limited hypothesis

So the first part of the original question cannot be answered satisfactorily – the hypothesis is too limited. Tom Shakespeare makes this very point in his academic research paper calling for a new approach. It would, however, be a foolhardy step to abolish the social model since, even with

*"Many of those that support the social model do appear to berate those that succeed in their field and so in essence they would seem to be damned if they do and damned if they don't. I do find that many people in the disability movement are very set in their views allowing no leeway in the processes that people use to achieve their aims."*

**Mo Reece, retired Disability Equality Trainer, working with organisations on patient and public involvement and ensuring inclusion, equality and diversity**

*“The basic human failing of the tendency to see another’s success as diminishing us interacts in a toxic way with the political and social divisions and economic forces dividing those who ‘have’ and ‘have not’. And those who seem to be ‘achieving’ and those who do not. Is this about definition of ‘normal’ and ‘success’? We could challenge both ideas and see them for what they are – only perceptions with which we cut ourselves up- and cut ourselves off from other people. This would be truly holding the social model dear in my view.”*

**Claire Debenham, Equality specialist living with a mental health issue**

its limitations, it is a vital practical tool in explaining to non-academics (and there are more of them than academics!) and to both disabled and non-disabled people how disability can be created by barriers that can and should be removed.

## Success

*“Why are disabled people who are successful (especially within sport and art) accused of selling out and becoming ‘normalised’, often by the very people who hold the social model very close to their hearts?”*

If we accept this as a true or even partially true statement, this relates less to disability than to an individual’s response to success in others, which in turn relates to how we each see ourselves. That depends on our upbringing, education, background, opportunities and, some would say, on indefinable personal qualities.

## Conclusion

The second part of the question proves to be even more impossible to answer. As long as we have a society presented by mass media as inevitably predicated on limited ideas of what ‘success’ looks like – riches, fame, acquisition of property, beauty and winning (by doing better than other people as opposed to pushing oneself to the limit for personal reasons), many of us will measure ourselves against others and all too often find ourselves lacking. Disabled athletes, artists and performers are all potential role models with a vital part to play in showing the way to self fulfilment, but it helps us all if they pay loud and frequent tribute to the factors that contributed to their success.

Their huge and admirable efforts were bolstered by families, carers and supporters, friends, teachers and others and by those who started and maintained the revolution in thinking about disability that is the social model.

*Many thanks to Dave Lupton for allowing me to use his cartoon in this article and to Razia Aziz, Claire Debenham, Mo Reece and John Walker for generously sharing some of their views.*



## London 2012; The Games of Change

In this essay **Kristina Veasey** explores cultural shifts and tensions before, during and after the London 2012 Paralympic Games.

**To many, the idea of a Paralympian is a talented and driven athlete. I heard this frequently in the run up to London 2012, which was a refreshing change. When I retired just before the Beijing Games a colleague asked me what I missed about playing internationally. I flippantly quipped that I didn't miss all the hours of training. "Oh, so do you have to train a lot then?" he replied. I'm not sure if he thought all world class athletes were naturally talented and didn't need to train, or if we just turned up to 'have go'. Somehow I can't imagine he'd have said the same thing to Jessica Ennis!**

Mainstream society's view of Paralympians has definitely improved; there has been an enormous change as a consequence of the Olympic and Paralympic Games coming to London. The branding successfully conjoined the two events, and the coverage of the Olympics left the country wanting more. In the last few days before the Paralympics, tickets were almost entirely sold out and non-disabled people were talking about it in the streets. This is a sharp contrast from competing in Sydney 2000 where many hadn't even heard of the Paralympics. This time around, disabled athletes became household names.

In my work as an equalities consultant and trainer I live in a bit of a bubble. It is easy

to forget just how little most people know about disability politics. So perhaps I should not be surprised that when the press prints stories stating that 75% of disability benefits claims are fraudulent, people believe it. This was borne out in a report commissioned by Inclusion London last year entitled *Bad News for Disabled People*. As Tanni Grey Thompson stated in the run up to London 2012, "At the moment the portrayal of disabled people means either athletes competing for GB, or work-shy benefit scroungers. But that's not reality for the majority – those things are right at the edges and there's a whole load of stuff in the middle that doesn't get shown much." (The Big Issue, Aug 24th 2012)

The polarisation of disabled people by the press has fuelled hate crime and provided a less than positive backdrop for the Games. It also drove a wedge between many in the disabled population.

Disabled people have not always been supportive of the Paralympics. In recent email correspondence with Tanni she recalled attitudes she encountered when first succeeding at elite level that left her feeling that "we were the enemy of the campaigners". This opposition to Paralympians grew as London 2012 approached. I felt it myself, a



**“... perhaps I should not be surprised that when the press prints stories stating that 75% of disability benefits claims are fraudulent, people believe it.”**

growing hostility. I've seen it on blog pages, on social networking sites and even in the mainstream press.

Just recently there was an article in The Guardian claiming “the Paralympic spirit insults disabled people like me” (Robert Jones, Aug 30th 2012). This article echoed what is now a familiar rhetoric: if Paralympians can do it, why can't all disabled people? Words like 'inspirational' which dog coverage of Paralympians only reinforce this view. They undermine the majority of disabled people, and antagonise many others. It is not an intended consequence of the Paralympic Movement. As Tanni explains; “My view is that the Olympics are like the Paralympics... in that it takes a different type of person to become an elite athlete. I don't think that there should be any shame in that. You wouldn't compare an Olympian to someone who goes to the gym, so why compare a Paralympian to an average disabled person?”

If the coverage of the Paralympics this year had matched that in previous years there would have been outrage from all disabled people. But thrust Paralympians into the limelight, give them prime time viewers and mainstream supporters, and we suddenly have a disabled community that is divided. It seems a little ironic!

A key factor in this 'super crip' issue becoming so 'hostile' was the controversial sponsorship of the Games by Atos. It brought everything to the fore, with the rage of a maligned community behind it. Their anger is bound up in a frustration and feeling of powerlessness. They felt dependent on Paralympians using this previously unheard of opportunity in the limelight to make a protest. I try not to take the hostility personally. If we didn't have the Paralympics, I expect the focus would shift to the next high profile set of disabled achievers and we would all be harassing artists to stand up and protest. As it stands, I haven't seen any of the artists involved in the Cultural Olympiad on the front pages damning Atos.

This surge of ill-feeling is a real contrast to the increased popularity of the Paralympics in the mainstream (albeit a mainstream where the majority are completely unaware of disability politics). Missed by many in the run up to the Games were the huge debates and protests against Atos and government cuts. In recent correspondence with groups like Atos Victims I heard stories that made my blood boil. Over 1,000 disabled people have died after being found fit for work. A colleague of mine lost her brother to cancer just two weeks after being found fit for work by Atos assessors. As Paddy Murphy of Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) has said, “it



Continued: Kristina Veasey

## London 2012; The Games of Change?

is completely inappropriate that Atos are sponsoring the Games. Now they are trying to portray themselves as supporters of disabled athletes. It's offensive." (Disability Arts Online) Organisations like DPAC and Black Triangle have led the way in public protest. Disability rights activists called on Paralympians to make a stand, to voice their concerns, even to boycott the games.

It was difficult to reconcile a love for the Paralympics with their sponsorship by Atos. It seemed a real smack in the face for disability equality, and not at all in line with the Paralympic spirit. Our current political climate, our previously skewed media coverage, and our welfare reform have all contributed to a scandalous undermining of disabled people; of their security, well-being, confidence and aspirations. How can anyone aspire to achieve when the rug is being pulled from under them?

I suspect most Paralympians did not hear the calls for protest. Many are not politically aware, and others will have been shielded in order to focus on the Games. Even if they had heard, they would have been in a very difficult position. All athletes have to sign a document to say they will not be critical of the Games or bring it into disrepute. Even as torchbearer I had to do this. For the athletes competing, making a protest would have lost them their

career. A few athletes, like David Clarke, spoke out about a need for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and equality, but none could directly address the Atos issue without risking all they had worked for.

During the Beijing Games I spoke out as Amnesty International's Paralympic ambassador. It was easier to do this as a retired athlete but even so, my stand was not appreciated by many within the Paralympic Movement. I can understand that. We have worked hard to build the Paralympics to this size and recognition; nobody wants to rock the boat. It is a hard balancing act for Paralympians. Despite this, there were unsubstantiated rumours that athletes entering the Opening Ceremony in London hid their lanyards to conceal the Atos logo from view. This wouldn't surprise me; we did something similar in past Games. Personally, I would like to see athletes and torchbearers have the freedom to speak out. No one wants to see the Games sullied but protests only happen when there is something to protest about! Perhaps governments should look more carefully at their policies and chosen sponsors? When I carried my torch I raised my fist in a human rights salute against Atos and welfare reform. It was a public show of solidarity in the fight for disability equality, and recognition of the Paralympic Movement's role in that.

**“A key factor in this ‘super crip’ issue becoming so ‘hostile’ was the controversial sponsorship of the Games by Atos. It brought everything to the fore, with the rage of a maligned community behind it. Their anger is bound up in a frustration and feeling of powerlessness.”**

The Paralympics have brought disability into the mainstream. I used to fight to have my press coverage put in the sports section of the paper rather than the community interest section, and yet this year I have seen my team mates in the centre spread of the Guardian. I hope that other disabled people will also see this as a leap in the right direction and celebrate rather than demonise our Paralympians. It is only through a combination of disability rights protests and the mainstream audience the Paralympics have brought, that our voices are now being heard. Everyone knows the name Atos now, and not for the reasons Atos might have wanted!

On my way to London to watch the Paralympics I was struck by the size and number of billboards inviting us to “Meet the Superhumans”. Channel 4 set a precedent with the number of disability related programmes they beamed into the front rooms of the nation. I am sceptical about the positivity of many of these, but those relating to the Paralympics have been fantastic; offering a real insight into the training, competition and intensity of athletes reaching the top of their field. We Paralympians are a rare breed, as are Olympians. After all, who else would put themselves through all that physical and mental pain and endurance, and enjoy it? We are not your average Joe. We love sport, and

we love to push our bodies and minds to the limit. The Paralympics is our showground; it is our time to shine.

London 2012 was my first Paralympics as a spectator. I was unsure how it would compare to being a competitor, but in fact my time at the Olympic Park was fantastic. The atmosphere was electric and I was lucky enough to witness Jonnie Peacock, Hannah Cockcroft and David Weir all win their gold medals. They ignited our passion and as a crowd of 80,000 we screamed and cheered and waved like never before. My children, caught up in the excitement, were so alive and buzzing, I felt quite emotional sharing with them something that’s been such a huge part of my life.

I thought again about the Superhuman poster, and thought yes, they’ve got it right. What athlete doesn’t want to be considered superhuman: strong, powerful, a fighter and at the top? It conveys such a striking and positive image, not a way disabled people have ever been portrayed in the public arena before. I think it’s wonderful! Even if the mainstream only sees this one type of disabled person, the ‘super-crip’, they are at least starting to see disabled people as achievers, contributors and participants. This is the opening of a door and the first step towards a real cultural shift; something that should benefit all disabled people. There is a real change afoot, and I hope it is here to stay.

## Author profiles

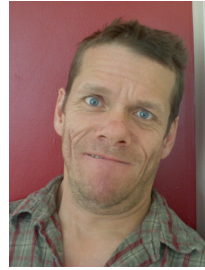


### Jon Adams

As an illustrator for 30 years, Jon's present outcomes as a self taught and 'outsider' artist are wilfully diverse, ranging through sound, video, print, and public interventions, underpinned by unique personal reflection, synaesthesia and an ability to draw.

Jon uses his creativity to weave together art and science. Using observation and interpretation of the landscape, and by incorporating autobiographical experiences of Dyslexia and Aspergers, his work is a unique visual perspective of recording history, time and place. Inclusion and accessibility also lie at the heart of it.

Jon is a trained geologist and is driven by his personal struggle to become an artist within the conventional teaching environment as a child, and being forced to find an alternative career as a field geologist and palaeontologist. He has since reverted to art and become a successful illustrator and conceptual artist. Jon is able to uncover the hidden and unexpected; he is a collector by nature, highly observant, and an authentic detailer – all things needed to be a successful geologist. Recently, for his Cultural Olympiad social engagement projects and quality of work he was awarded a RSA fellowship.



### Jamie Beddard

Jamie has a wealth of experience as a director, writer, actor, consultant, trainer and workshop leader. Recently he directed 'Breathe/ Battle for the Winds', an Unlimited commission for the opening of the sailing in Weymouth as part of the London 2012 Olympics.

Jamie co-founded the Big Lounge Collective, a collaboration of seven experienced disabled artists. He has also been Associate Director of Graeae Theatre Company, co-editor of 'Disability Arts in London' magazine (DAIL), Diversity Officer at the Arts Council and facilitated in many higher education institutions, drama colleges and community settings. He has performed, directed and written for companies including the BBC, Channel 4, Theatre Royal (Stratford), Diverse City Fitting's Multi-Media, Greenwich Theatre and Paines Plough and is a Clore Fellow.



## Esther Fox

After graduating from Winchester School of Art in 1999, Esther Fox pursued a successful career as a visual artist; exhibiting widely throughout the UK. During this time Esther became aware of the disability arts sector and developed an interest in finding new ways to promote Deaf and disabled artists and cultural leaders, particularly focussing on how to ensure this work was more widely profiled within mainstream arts organisations and venues.

Esther is currently Programme Director for Accentuate, the London 2012 Legacy programme for the South East and particularly enjoys this cross sector working, bringing together diverse thinking to create dynamic new approaches. Esther also sits on the National Accessible Tourism Stakeholders Group and ITV Meridian South East Diversity Forum and has been invited to sit on the Access Panel at the Royal Academy of Arts.



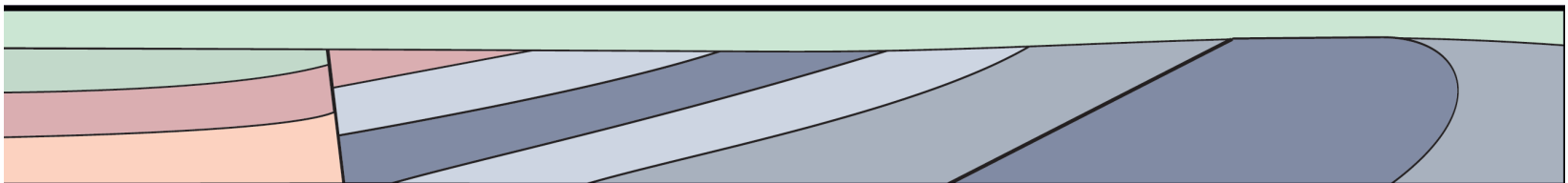
## Colin Hambrook

Colin is the founder and editor of [disabilityartsonline.org.uk](http://disabilityartsonline.org.uk) – a unique journal dedicated to showcasing the artistic practice of disabled artists, writers and performers through blogs, reviews and discussion.

Over the last 18 years he has worked on a variety of web and print based publications as manager, editor, sub-editor and researcher. He has an ongoing personal and professional interest in disability representation, particularly with regard to mental health issues.

As an Up-Stream commission produced by Ardent Hare as part of Accentuate, Hambrook produced an illustrated poetry collection / exhibition titled '100 Houses' in May 2011 for the Brighton Festival.

Following on from this work he has recently received a Grants for the Arts award to produce an exhibition and poetry collection: 'Knitting Time: a journey through loss' as a further response to the experience of psychosis.





## Continued: Author profiles



### Sarah Playforth

Sarah serves as a Lay Member on Employment Tribunals and was a Member of the Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board for eight years. She is Chair of East Sussex Disability Association and a member of several other advisory groups. Sarah has over 40 years experience as a volunteer, trustee, officer, middle and senior manager in the statutory and independent sectors, managing and developing public library services and equal access to them and researching, planning, and campaigning for full equality and inclusion in society for all in all areas of life. Sarah's experience and knowledge gives her insight, expertise and many skills, which she uses effectively to work with individuals, groups and organisations.



### Kristina Veasey

An integral part of the Great Britain wheelchair basketball squad for 10 years, Kristina is a two-time Paralympic athlete. She competed in both the Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004 Paralympic Games. In addition to a bronze medal at European Championships, Kristina also won two silver medals at the World Cup.

She retired from sport in 2008 becoming Amnesty International's Paralympic ambassador during the Beijing Games. In 2012 she was selected as torchbearer, helping to carry the Paralympic flame from Stoke Mandeville to the Olympic Park. In the same year she managed to combine her love of sport with her work as an artist, earning her the London 2012 Inspire Mark for her project 'Beyond the Torch Run'.

Kristina has over 15 years experience working with disabled people in coaching, participation and advocacy settings. Drawing on this and her Paralympic experience, she runs her own training and consultancy business advising around access and inclusion. She also delivers presentations, and interactive workshops in schools.