

# Disability Culture Leadership Initiative: A Chicago Model

## A Report on the 3Arts/Bodies of Work Residency Fellowships

by Carrie Sandahl and Esther Grimm



*“Part of developing who you are as a person is to see yourself mirrored culturally, and I think for a lot of Deaf and disabled people they do not get to see that in a profound way.”*

Arlene Malinowski, 2016 Fellow

## Welcome

3Arts and Bodies of Work (BOW) joined together in 2014 to establish customized three-month residency fellowships for Deaf and disabled artists to create new work and increase the public dialogue around disability culture and aesthetics. Expanding on this initiative in 2020, 3Arts launched the Disability Culture Leadership Initiative (DCLI) as a resource hub for the field, with 3Arts/BOW Residency Fellowship alumni featured in an ever-growing archive of video conversations. In both of these programs, our purpose reaches beyond considerations of audience accessibility and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act to the crucial work of determining the content we present, creating change and access by conceiving professional development tracks for artists, supporting the creation of new art, and ensuring the participation and leadership of disabled people throughout the sector. (Note that we are using disability-first language as a positive emphasis that honors the artists with whom we work who center disability in their art, identities, and activism. We are also capitalizing Deaf to refer to a culture and identity rather than an auditory status.)



**Image:** Andy Slater (2018 Fellow), a white man with red hair, mutton chops, and mustache, faces toward a reflected image of himself in an ornate golden frame located in a softly lit room. Two sconces hang on the distressed wall on either side of the mirror.

Photo by Mary Rachel Fanning.

The DCLI encompasses video conversations among Deaf and disabled alumni of the 3Arts/BOW Residency Fellowships program, a convening with those artists to discuss what they want to focus attention on next, and this lookback report on the residencies that we started in 2014 and that remain a focal point of our joint advocacy work in Disability Art and Culture. We hope that this report will be useful to our colleagues and that the video conversations of the brilliant artists we have supported over the years will be as memorable and informative for you as they are for us. In our writing, we are committed to mirroring their onscreen candor by sharing the highs and lows of an effort that began with a conjectural conversation, evolved into an exploration of ideas, was refined on a regular basis over years, and turned into an enduring program.

Together, the videos and report combine to document the substance and trajectory of our program as a possible model—or at least a prompt—for the field. We invite you to engage in this initiative by viewing the series of four videos featuring conversations between the Chicago filmmaker Justin Cooper and the alumni of our program, who are some of our city’s leading Disability Culture artists.



*“It’s important, as disabled artists especially here in Chicago, to make sure that this community is sustained and that it keeps going for generations to come.”*

Justin Cooper, 2021 Fellow

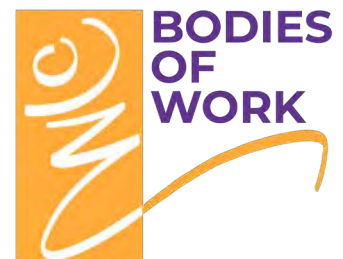
## Our Missions

The partnership between 3Arts and Bodies of Work is grounded in the complementary missions of our organizations.

3Arts is a nonprofit organization that supports Chicago’s women artists, artists of color, and Deaf and disabled artists who work in the performing, teaching, and visual arts. By providing cash awards, project funding, residency fellowships, professional development, and promotion, 3Arts helps artists take risks, experiment, and build momentum in their careers over time.

Bodies of Work (BOW), a nonprofit organization, is a network of artists and organizations that supports the development of Disability Art and Culture that illuminate the disability experience in new and unexpected ways. The University of Illinois at Chicago’s Department of Disability and Human Development and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s Disability Culture Activism Lab, provide Bodies of Work its administrative home.

Both organizations recognize that disability is an intersectional identity, and, as such, is inextricable from experiences of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.







*“I didn’t know where the opportunities were. I didn’t know where to look until my involvement with the Fellowship. With UIC as well as afterwards, I noticed a lot more opportunities opening up for me to teach, more networking opportunities, more opportunities to connect... Why didn’t I know about any of these before?”*

Robert Schleifer, 2014 Fellow

## The Backstory

Our alliance began in 2010, shortly after Carrie joined the faculty at UIC. Esther soon became aware of Carrie’s expertise in Disability Art and Culture and invited her to attend the 3Arts Awards, an annual communitywide celebration at which the latest 3Arts awardees are introduced. Shortly after that, we sat down together and talked about how 3Arts needed to improve the accessibility of its event and website and support more disabled artists. Carrie helped 3Arts immeasurably when she said, “Let’s show everyone what a fully accessible event looks like, whether or not anyone in the audience needs accessibility services.”

Three years later, Esther called Carrie with another problem to discuss—and a glimmer of an idea. Few Deaf and disabled 3Arts awardees were applying for the organization’s monthlong residency fellowships that take place at artist communities located mainly in secluded areas across the country and on the Mediterranean coast of France. For some disabled artists, travel to remote residencies cuts off access to crucial medical services or to their personal assistants who support the activities of daily living. For others, traditional residencies’ fixed schedules do not accommodate their periodic, unpredictable health issues that require flexible timeframes. Residencies can also be physically inaccessible beyond specific buildings and uneven terrain. Deaf artists told us that American Sign Language interpreters are generally unavailable. They also told us that spending long stretches of time with hearing artists who do not understand Deaf culture can be isolating.



**Image:** Esther Grisham Grimm, a white woman with short red hair, holds a microphone and stands in front of a projected image of a portrait by Riva Lehrer and the words “Beauty in Exile” above it. Carrie Sandahl, a disabled white woman with shoulder length blonde hair, and Riva Lehrer (2015 Fellow), a disabled white woman with short hair that is grey in front and darker in the back, are standing in front of a nearby music stand. Interpreters and event support staff sit on the edges of the image.

Photo by Brian Heyburn, taken at Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016.

Across the board, artists let us know that going to a remote location to have isolated work time was not necessarily what they needed, given that the most significant barrier was isolation itself.

The problem and the idea were one and the same: How could 3Arts establish a local residency program for Deaf and disabled artists, and who would be our partner?



**Image:** A behind the scenes shot of Reveca Torres (2018 Fellow), a brown skinned woman seated in a wheelchair. Reveca wears a long, black dress and white bonnet for the *Tres Fridas Project's* take on *Whistler's Mother* (1871) by James McNeill Whistler. An assistant kneels at the base of the chair, adjusting Reveca's skirt around the wheels. Reveca faces to the left of the frame and a background of white and green is taped up behind her. Photo by Elizabeth Sanchez, 2018.

In exploring that question, Carrie brought to bear her own experience as a disabled artist as well as data from a recently completed study she had conducted with Dr. Carol Gill at UIC. [This three-year study](#), funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), explored career barriers and facilitators for Deaf and disabled artists throughout the United States. The study found that the most significant obstacles include the lack of educational and professional opportunities. Further, artists reported that barriers to ongoing professional development included lack of accessibility in residency programs. With this in mind, we hatched a plan to co-create a local, customized, and accessible artist residency program that would address these issues head on. Our plan encompassed helping artists to create new work, develop public programming to build audiences, and simultaneously support the careers of disabled artists in the Chicago area.

We designed the 3Arts/Bodies of Work Residency Fellowships to address disabled artists' isolation by focusing on connection—to education, to mentors, to professional organizations, to their own goals, and, perhaps most importantly, to each other. One of the key findings of the NEA study was that engaging in the Disability Art and Culture movement resulted in noteworthy artistic advancement. Carrie herself had the transformational experience of becoming part of this movement in the mid-1990s. She found this experience so powerful that she devoted her career to making participation for others possible. To that end, she created the Program on Disability Art, Culture, and Humanities at UIC, which is dedicated to research on and creation of Disability Art as a means of exploring the disability experience in all of its manifestations. Carrie directs Bodies of Work with her graduate students as a creative research lab where participants can experiment with artistry gleaned from the specificities of disability experience. All of these experiences and resources have been integral to our collaboration.

The first 3Arts/Bodies of Work Residency Fellowships launched in the fall of 2014.





*“The Fellowship totally radicalized me...I learned so much more about other experiences that are similar to mine, people with disabilities outside of blindness, and realized that I wanted to communicate my work more towards everybody. I wanted to continue to make work for my community, and I wanted to do it without any kind of apology.”*

Andy Slater, 2018 Fellow

### 3Arts/Bodies of Work Residency Fellowships in Brief

Our Fellowships offer Deaf and disabled artists the opportunity to explore their creativity in the context of a supportive community. Artists in the Chicago area are identified in a process that involves recommendations from a wide network and are offered this opportunity based on their interest in exploring the relationship between their disability experience and their artistry.

Over the course of several months, we collaborate with these artists to further their professional goals by designing a project that would benefit from UIC or SAIC’s resources, including academic programs in Disability Studies, Museum and Exhibition Studies, the School of Theatre and Music, and the Disability Cultural Center.

Residents advance conversations around Disability Culture and aesthetics by engaging with students and the larger Chicago community through, for example, classroom presentations, workshops, exhibitions, artist talks, and sharing works-in-progress. Several graduate students have used their experiences as capstone projects for their master’s degrees in Museum and Exhibition Studies. Even more undergraduate students have used experiences working on the residencies as capstone projects in the UIC honors program and the UIC minor and major in Disability and Human Development. Artists also began having the option of attending Carrie’s graduate seminar “Disability and Culture” to learn about the Disability Art and Culture movement, share their works-in-progress, and provide feedback to students on their own creative projects. These relationships have evolved into ongoing artistic collaborations in many instances.



**Image:** Michael Herzovi (2019 Fellow), a white disabled man in a power wheelchair, and Carrie Sandahl speak to a crowded lecture hall for Carrie’s “Disability in American Film” class at the University of Illinois at Chicago as part of Michael’s Fellowship. The point of view is from the top of the inclined lecture hall, with the backs of several students sitting at their desks in the foreground and Michael, Carrie, and an ASL interpreter on the ground level facing the students.

Photo by Amanda Lautermilch, 2019.



Further, 3Arts and Bodies of Work facilitate connections between the artists and some of Chicago's most highly regarded arts organizations, including Victory Gardens Theater, the Poetry Foundation, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Loyola University, and Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative (among others) to present their work.

Residents receive \$1,500 monthly stipends, along with additional funds that can be used for accessibility services for the artists and their audiences, faculty and field mentors, supplies, travel, documentation, promotional materials, and administrative support from UIC students.

3Arts, UIC, SAIC, and other partners provide in-kind support, which has included studio space, exhibition venues, research support, and event volunteers. We have also coordinated the in-kind contributions of arts professionals—such as directors, curators, and technicians—who share their time and expertise with our residents. [Access Living](#), Chicago's influential disability advocacy organization, is a frequent partner in bringing the artists into Deaf and disability communities through special events and workshops.



*“We’re trying to find our place in society and we’re trying to see how my culture, so to speak as a person with a disability, fits into the larger culture.”*

Michael Herzovi, 2019 Fellow

## Disability Culture

Because this residency is committed to furthering the dialogue about Disability Culture, our initial conversations with prospective artists involve clarifying the context and meaning of the term, which is both relatively recent and rapidly evolving. Below is our working understanding of the term's history and current usage.

[Disability Culture](#) is a term that emerged in the 1990s to describe intentionally created [communities of disabled people](#). These communities are made up of disabled people with various types of impairments who nevertheless share experiences and values. In the 1970s, these communities, along with their allies, coalesced around gaining minority status in the eyes of the law and fighting for civil rights. In the United States, this activism resulted in the passage of legislation including the 1974 Vocational Rehabilitation Act, the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, which was amended in 2008.

This legislation covers a wide swath of people, many of whom would have little in common other than societal exclusion due to their various impairments. Those who identify with Disability Culture explore their shared experiences of exclusion and how to combat it. Out of these shared experiences developed a set of values in the face of societal barriers. Barriers include patronizing attitudes, inaccessible architecture and

communication systems, lack of education, and employment discrimination. In their most pernicious form, the barriers include outright hostility toward disabled people in the form of abuse and neglect, hate crimes, institutionalization, forced sterilization, and euthanasia campaigns. Taken together, these exclusionary forces can be described as ableism. Disability Culture reflects how disabled people survive ableism through resistance, collective action, and ingenuity.

Our residency program participates in the ongoing formation of Disability Culture through the Fellows' artistry, public engagements, and interaction with the university community.

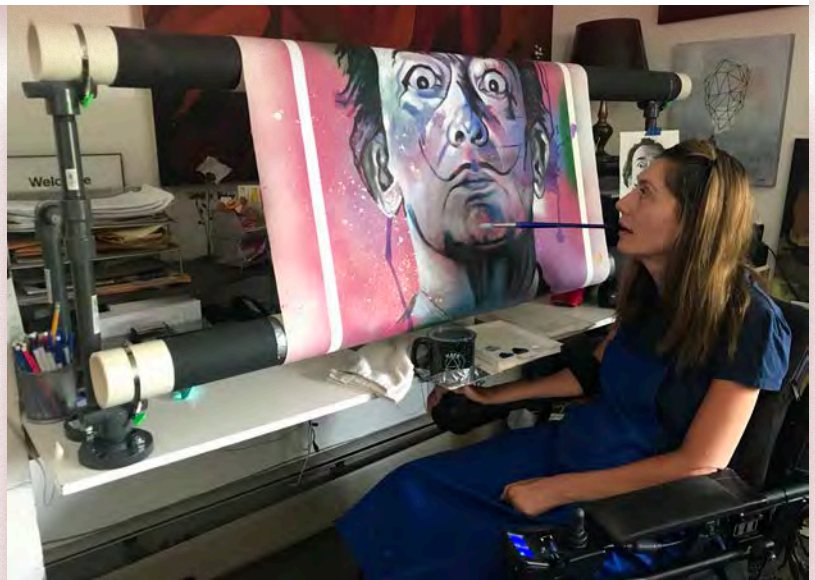


*“The activism part of my work probably relates more to how I talk about it to make people understand or get an insight into our experiences and how powerful our lives are...they’re not based on lack of ability or some deficiency somewhere... it’s very interesting to be able to communicate that through abstract painting.”*

Pooja Pittie, 2020 Fellow

## Deaf and Disability Artistry

Current and former Fellows explore how Disability Art manifests as an aspect of Disability Culture. We spend a good deal of time discussing the choices Deaf and disabled artists have made over time as a means of furthering the legacy of those who have come before us. Connecting with legacy not only decreases the isolation many Deaf and disabled artists experience, but it can also be a means of transmitting ideas and even technique.



**Image:** Mariam Paré (2020 Fellow), a light skinned woman seated in a wheelchair, paints a portrait of Salvador Dali in her home studio. The canvas is stretched across two large, mechanical scrolls, and various other paintings, drawings, and art supplies are positioned on the walls and surrounding tables. Dali is rendered in black and white against a background of bright pinks, purples, and greens. Mariam holds her long, blue paint brush in her mouth.

Photo by Jonathan Sexton.

Together, we explore what Disability Art is and can be. In general, the term has come to describe creative work that expresses Disability Culture values in content, form, and process. The Disability Art movement is constantly evolving and expresses itself differently in different contexts, but some qualities of this work have emerged and have been consistent over time in the following ways.

- Expresses disability community values such as interdependence, mutual accommodation, pride, support, and self-determination.
- Exists in all artistic mediums.
- Centers the experiences of Deaf and disabled people. These experiences range from the mundane to the profound.
- Considers Deaf and disabled bodies, minds, and senses not as obstacles to be overcome but as interesting in and of themselves.
- Challenges dominant culture's stereotypes and addresses discrimination.
- Engages with political issues relevant to Deaf and disability communities.
- Generates new forms of artistry based on Deaf and disabled bodies' movement and perception.
- Includes disability access and accommodations for both artists and audiences.
- Incorporates access and accommodations into the work itself, rather than as an afterthought.
- Accepts Deaf and disabled people's comportment (such as involuntary sounds or use of a service animal) as part of the artistic experience rather than an annoyance or distraction.
- Assumes a Deaf and disabled audience and often incorporates insider content.
- Asserts the full humanity of Deaf and disabled people, including aspects the dominant culture fears or ignores, such as sexuality.
- Incorporates the complexity of identity, creating work from the intersection of disability, race, class, gender, sexuality.
- Navigates intragroup dynamics such as incompatible disability accommodations, varying degrees of privilege, or tensions among those with apparent and nonapparent disabilities.
- Drills down to the "hard stuff" that can be unsafe to discuss outside Deaf and disability communities for fear that the materials will be weaponized against them (such as intractable pain, suicidal ideation, grief).
- Celebrates the joys of Deaf and disability experiences as individuals and community members.
- Deploys a wicked sense of humor that exposes ableism and ableist structures.
- Interrogates Deaf and disability identities, what it "means" to be disabled, and defines disability in the individual's and the community's own terms.

Investigating what Disability Art and Culture is now and what it can be in the future are at the heart of the residency experience.





*“When I think of the Chicago disability arts community, I see a community of people coming together, and being a part of that has really made me understand that we all have this great opportunity to take a really critical role in the heritage of disability arts for the future.”*

~ Mariam Paré, 2020 Fellow

## A Chicago Model

Our colleagues from the organization [DANT](#) (Disability/Arts/NYC Task Force) coined “The Chicago Model” in 2018 to describe our city’s distinctive mode of creating and supporting the Disability Art and Culture movement. We quite like the moniker and find it useful in explaining what we do in the 3Arts/Bodies of Work Residency Fellowship program and how it operates as part of a larger city-wide context. We choose, however, to replace “The” with “A” to recognize that additional Chicago histories undoubtedly exist with their own narratives of structural support—formal or informal—for Deaf and disabled artists and their work.

The model to which we refer can be thought of as a network of support that connects, nurtures, and sustains the development of Deaf and disabled artists. This network, which took shape informally in the late 1980s, evolved through connections Deaf and disabled artists, activists, and academics made with each other—from person to person to person—to form a larger community.

Deaf and disabled artists, activists, and academics came into contact due to Chicagoans’ involvement in the disability civil rights movement in the United States, whose impact is felt both nationally and internationally. Chicago has an active chapter of the disability activist organization [ADAPT](#), which has fought for accessible transportation, personal assistant services, and deinstitutionalization. Access Living, Chicago’s Center for Independent Living, is a premiere advocacy organization whose influential late founding



**Image:** Kris Lenzo (2017 Fellow), a white man seated in a wheelchair, leads a movement class to a crowded room in front of a large projection screen paused with the title of the film, *Ripped*. The audience is seated in a semicircle around Kris and his collaborator, Sarah Cullen Fuller, as everyone lifts one arm out to the side with their elbow bent at a ninety-degree angle.

Photo by Alison Kopit at “IN/MOTION: Chicago’s International DANCE FILM FESTIVAL,” 2017.

Executive Director, [Marca Bristo](#), was instrumental in passing the Americans with Disabilities Act and served in the Clinton administration as Head of the National Council on Disability. Many aspects of this history were explored in the exhibition, [Chicago Disability Activism, Arts, and Design: 1970s to Today](#), at Gallery 400 in 2018.

UIC's Department of Disability and Human Development instituted the world's first-ever PhD program in Disability Studies that focuses on the cultural, social, and historical aspects of disability. The Deaf Studies Program at Columbia College Chicago includes among its faculty renowned Deaf Culture artists and trains a cadre of arts-savvy American Sign Language interpreters. The [Arts of Life](#) and [Project Onward](#) are respected programs that provide training and resources for artists with intellectual and other mental disabilities. Chicago's annual [Disability Pride Parade](#) hosts open-mics and performances by disabled artists in the heart of the city. A number of disabled art students and faculty found common cause as they fought for access to The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), which continues to train and support disabled artists. Two companies featuring disabled dancers were established in the Chicago area, Dance>Detour and [Momenta](#), to showcase physically integrated and inclusive dance—and their influence is worldwide.



**Image:** Ginger Lane (2019 Fellow), a white woman in a power wheelchair, moves across a stage that is lit in shades of purple and pink. Ginger's arms are spread wide while fellow dancer, Anita Fillmore Kenney, lies on her stomach across Ginger's lap with her legs stretched out and ankles gently crossed behind her, one arm reaching out above her head and one hand on the joystick of Ginger's chair. Photo of the dance piece, "Prayer," choreographed by Ginger Lane and performed at the Access Living Gala, 2013.

Courtesy of Access Living.

Deaf and disabled artists have been among the forefront as leaders in this fervent of activist, academic, and artistic domains. These artists—including painters, performance artists, dance artists, playwrights, sound artists, designers, photographers, and poets—began to organize through The Chicago Disability Arts Collective that met at Victory Gardens Theater in the 1990s. Victory Gardens Theater has been the home of [Access Project](#) since 1995, a program that has provided a consistent gathering place for Disability Art and Culture events. The Access Project had a long-running Disability Art and Culture series called "Crip Slam" and a workshop for emerging disabled playwrights. These are only a selection of this Chicago Model's foundational and ongoing participants.

Nondisabled allies are an important part of this ecosystem and have participated in the growth of Disability Art and Culture in museums, theaters, galleries, disability service organizations, academia, and civil rights organizations. The [Chicago Cultural Accessibility Consortium](#) (CCAC), for example, is a nonprofit organization that "empower[s] Chicago's cultural spaces to become more accessible to visitors with disabilities." Founded in 2013, the CCAC provides cultural

administrators professional development opportunities to make the entire cultural sector accessible, an endeavor that creates an environment in which Deaf and disabled artists can share their work publicly without the onus of educating presenters from the ground up.

A key feature of our Chicago Model developed from the 2006 Bodies of Work festival. The festival's steering committee created a structure in which partner organizations provide most of the funding and infrastructure for Disability Art and Culture events. These events are programmed among the arts organizations' usual offerings. Partner organizers receive Bodies of Work curatorial support, technical assistance, and promotion to the disability community. In this way, arts organizations avoid becoming reliant on Bodies of Work as an outside organization to produce Disability Art and Culture for them and thereby become equipped to produce future events on their own. Bodies of Work continues to partner with arts organizations to present the work of 3Arts/BOW Residency Fellows, increasing their capacity to work with Deaf and disabled artists and audiences.

Based on feedback we received over time from our outside evaluators, Peter McDowell (2018) and Lise McKean (2019), as well as the artists themselves, we simplified the residency to make it more sustainable. The funding categories now include the artist's stipend, mentorship, administration, and expenses related to the public presentation.

The necessity for social distancing due to the pandemic has complicated the current Fellows' plans, but they continue with projects suitable to the circumstances, with a primary focus on research and development.



*“The residency was really life changing. I think it kind of changed my work and helped elevate it. Not just the actual work, but also the way that I interacted with other artists.”*

Reveca Torres, 2018 Fellow

## What have Fellows done during their residencies?

Each of the program's artists identifies a “[representational conundrum](#),” a term that Carrie has coined to describe a paradoxical or puzzling issue unique to disability, that they would like to explore. Such a conundrum could be, for instance, how a dancer might solicit the audience's gaze when our culture prohibits us from extended looking—or staring—at disabled bodies, or how to represent experiences of pain and aging while avoiding the pervasive disability stereotypes of the inspirational overcomer or tragic victim. Fellows' explorations of such questions contribute to emerging conversations in the international Disability Art and Culture movement around the formation of disability aesthetics.



## 2014: [Robert Schleifer](#), actor

Christine Mary Dunford, Director of UIC's School of Theatre and Music, took the lead on our 2014 inaugural residency by hosting Deaf theater artist **Robert Schleifer**, who had been a 3Arts Awardee the previous year. Schleifer focused his residency on creating an American Sign Language translation of the award-winning play *Art* by Yasmina Reza. Written originally in French and translated into English, Schleifer's project was, in effect, a translation of a translation, allowing him to explore how art connects communities across culture.

In 2016, [Steppenwolf Theatre Company](#) produced a workshop production of Schleifer's translation for their [LookOut performance series](#).

## 2015: [Riva Lehrer](#), artist and writer

Lisa Yun Lee, who was UIC's Director of the School of Art and Art History at this time, hosted **Riva Lehrer**, a painter with a physical disability, who focused her residency on creating a portrait of [UIC Professor Lennard Davis](#) as part of her series "The Risk Pictures." This series engages with issues of portraiture and power, sittings as relationships, and portraiture's roots in anxieties about death.

The portrait has been exhibited at [Printworks](#) gallery in Chicago and the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art in New York City. Lehrer's [Golem Girl: A Memoir](#), published in 2020, includes a reflection on work created during her Fellowship.

## 2016: [Arlene Malinowski](#), actor and playwright

Christine Mary Dunford hosted the actor and playwright **Arlene Malinowski** in the UIC School of Theatre and Music. Malinowski used the residency to develop her work-in-progress solo performance called *A Little Bit Not Normal*. The piece focuses on her experiences of both mental illness and being the hearing daughter of Deaf parents.

In 2017, Victory Gardens Theater produced a fully staged version of *A Little Bit Not Normal* in their [Up Close and Personal Series](#).

## 2016: [Barak adé Soleil](#), dancemaker and interpreter

Dance artist **Barak adé Soleil** focused on the research and development of *what the body knows*, a piece that explores the intersection of race and disability through dance. He spent ten days with a group of Black dance artists and scholars, including Jerron Herman, Francine Sheffield, Sadie Woods, Nichole Bruce, Phaniel Antwi, Victor Cole, and Alana Wallace. He performed a work-in-progress at Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative at the end of the residency period.

In 2016, Stony Island Arts Bank staged the fully realized world premiere of [what the body knows](#).

## 2017: [Matt Bodett](#), multimedia artist

During his residency, **Matt Bodett** developed and presented an ambitious multi-media performance series entitled [Twelve: a series of koans](#) in various Chicago venues, including Steppenwolf (LookOut Series), Victory Gardens Theater ("Crip Slam"), Intuit: the Centre of Intuitive and Outsider Art, Poetry Foundation, Access Living, and Gallery 400. In these works, Bodett focused on themes of penitence, forgiveness, and language, and the roles they play

in understanding and healing mental illness. The public events invited public dialogue that confronted personal and social understandings of mental health.

Bodett's Fellowship led to numerous additional opportunities, including performances for the 2019 [No Limits Festival](#) in Berlin, the [Freud Museum](#) in London, and the Visual Arts Exchange's 2020 series [The Full Light of Day](#) in Raleigh, NC.

### 2017: [Kris Lenzo](#), dancer

[Kris Lenzo](#), a wheelchair-using dancer, focused his residency on the creation of a new solo dance piece called "Journeyman." Choreographed by Loyola University professor Sarah Cullen Fuller, the work explores pain, insomnia, memory, aging, and disability. Cullen Fuller built the movement vocabulary from Lenzo's unique body and way of being in the world. The two experimented with what they called "sustainable choreography," which is dance practice that does not injure or strain the dancer's body and can adapt to different performance environments over the course of a career.

"Journeyman" premiered in the spring of 2017 [Momenta](#) concert and has been performed continuously since then in convenings and spaces as diverse as hotel conferences, public squares, and professional stages.

### 2018: [Andy Slater](#), sound artist

For his residency, [Andy Slater](#) developed elements of a sound installation entitled "[A Space for the Overactive Ear](#)." Slater explains that since he is "visually impaired/legally blind" he has a "unique relationship with sound and a trained ear for detail." The installation is an active listening booth within a gallery and is wheelchair accessible. "Listening" is extended to multimodal experiences, such as transducers that provide tactile experiences for Deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences and American Sign Language interpretations of metaphor-rich textual descriptions of sound.

"A Space for the Overactive Ear" was presented in Gallery 400's exhibition, [Chicago Disability Activism, Arts and Design](#). The residency led to numerous opportunities to collaborate nationally and internationally, such as Slater's participation in the 2018 show [Eavesdropping](#) at the Ian Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne, Australia.

### 2018: [Reveca Torres](#), multidisciplinary visual artist

The central activity for [Reveca Torres](#)' residency was developing the [Tres Fridas Project](#), a collection of photographs and video documentation recreating iconic images in art history with disabled people as their subjects. The project was collaboration with two other disabled women artists, Tara Ahren and Mariam Paré.

In 2019, the [Tres Fridas Project](#) was exhibited at the [Bridgeport Art Center](#) in Chicago. A video about the work, [Stuck in The Studio: Tres Fridas Project](#) (2020), was created by the [Cleve Carney Museum of Art](#) in Glen Ellyn, IL, when the live exhibition was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2019: [Michael Herzovi](#), actor and voice-over artist

For his residency, **Michael Herzovi** reflected on his artistic identity over several projects. He developed skills necessary to plan a new podcast and worked on his solo performance, “Turn Around and Face Front, or, This Bus Ain’t Going Nowhere!” During the residency period, he also recorded guest appearances for the Fox television program, [neXt](#), which debuted in 2020. Each project provided him the opportunity to consider the line between disability art and activism—a line that is never clear but constantly negotiated.

## 2019: [Ginger Lane](#), dancer and choreographer

**Ginger Lane**, a dancer who uses a wheelchair, focused her residency on choreographing and performing two new pieces: a community dance and a concert piece called “Flow.” This work explored how movement is expressed throughout the lifespan and is translated and passed down to younger generations of dancers. Lane wanted to ensure the continuation of integrated and inclusive dance as part of the larger Disability Art and Culture movement.

“Flow” premiered at Momenta’s 2019 annual concert. The podcast [Dancecast](#) features an extended interview of Lane with Silva Laukkanen.

## 2020: [Mariam Paré](#), mouth painter

**Mariam Pare**’s residency centered on issues of identity and disability culture in relationship to both her artistic practice and the way that she frames her practice for the public. Paré completed two paintings over the residency, “Basquiat” and “Dali,” which allowed her to experiment with technique without the usual commercial pressures.

At the beginning of the pandemic, which coincided with the end of her residency, Paré created a free [mouth painting tutorial](#), and her collaboration with former Fellow Reveca Torres is featured in [Stuck in The Studio: Tres Fridas Project](#) (2020). This video was produced by the [Cleve Carney Museum of Art](#) in Glen Ellyn, IL, when the live exhibition was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2020: [Pooja Pittie](#), painter

**Pooja Pittie**’s residency re-examined her own artistic practice and the tension she experiences between her mind and body during her painting process. She became inspired by the concept of “bodymind,” a term that the disability studies scholar Margaret Price uses to describe their interconnectedness. Pittie rented studio space that allowed her to create larger scale work through which she explored bodymind in the artmaking process. Though she was largely unable to use this new studio during our city’s stay-at-home orders, Pittie created three paintings and several yarn and pencil drawings during the residency period.





*“Our number one task, in a way, is to let the world know that there’s a culture. Because that changes everything. It changes grants, it changes what museums want to show, it changes schools. Once the institutions know that there’s a coherent culture, and that you’re working within it, and you’re commenting on it, and you’re furthering it, that changes it from just a couple of artists who seem to be doing this project to a really profound social context.”*

**Riva Lehrer, 2015 Fellow**

## **What lessons have we learned?**

Since 2014, we have learned some valuable lessons (many have been learned the hard way) that have allowed us to expand and (we hope) improve our work. These lessons include how to make the most use of a university setting, how to frame the work both for our organizations and for our current and prospective funders, and how to make the residency more manageable for implementation by a small handful of people.

Here is a selection of what 3Arts and Bodies of Work have learned:

- **Finding funding is not easy.**

There are few dedicated channels of support for disability arts in general, and some of the significant ones are impairment specific. Given that we are committed to not centering our work on a medical model and that we are focused on the artists’ work and disability justice, funding has been hard to come by. In the early days, 3Arts was the sole supporter, and we struggled to locate additional support, with our proposals rejected across the board. The feedback we received from funders indicated that most foundations at the time were interested in reaching larger numbers of community members for a “greater return on investment.” With a program dedicated to months-long professional development for each individual artist, we simply didn’t fit that profile. Eventually, and thankfully, the National Endowment for the Arts entered the scene with matching funds that allowed us to continue and also expand the program with more public presentations. In 2019, The Joyce Foundation provided further support that helped bring the DCLI to fruition. We want to take this moment to express our gratitude to these two supporters for understanding that the work of Deaf and disabled artists is field-changing work.

- **Serving one is serving many.** Chicago is known for its collaborative arts world, and the Chicago Model of disability programming is based on networking person-to-person-to-person.

Although it appears that each residency serves one artist at a time, it actually serves many. Residents often use part of their funding to hire other Deaf and disabled artists as mentors, contractors, or collaborators. Many students, community members, and arts administrators learn from and with each artist. Hundreds of audience members have attended our public programs, and the work produced lives on beyond the residency, often begetting new opportunities with even further reach. We have sometimes struggled to reach wider audiences while supporting the artists' customized residencies and specific artistic goals simply because our implementation team is made up of two to four people at any given time. We have learned to streamline the administration to account for this.

- **Hosting the Residency within a university setting allows for essential time and resources** that benefit both the artist and students, further expanding the program's reach.

Each artist comes to the residency with unique goals and needs, which requires a substantial investment of time and resources not covered by grant funding. By hosting the residency within a university environment, we can fold the Fellows' inquiries into our own research and creativity. Faculty, staff, and students learn along with the Fellows as we connect the artist to campus and community resources, do necessary paperwork (grant reporting, assessments, contracting), event production (promotion, ushering, providing disability accommodations), and research (archival, literature reviews, dramaturgical support). This learning feeds into academic publications, capstone projects, theses and dissertations, and disability art administrative experience. Time must be devoted to training new students to make the experience pedagogically sound. The pay-off comes with students building ongoing relationships with artists and cultural venues.

- **Flexibility and security are key.** Administering the residency in a university setting can create bureaucratic hurdles, yet also provides other supports.

Large universities have complex financial mechanisms when it comes to procurement, contracts, and hiring hourly workers. Perhaps ironically, the slow processes allow for flexibility in terms of disbursement of funds and time frames. These mechanisms exist for a reason, ensuring that safeguards such as insurance for university-sponsored events and employee background checks are built into the system. Often, we request disability access and accommodations from different units within the university when activities must be made available to students. This leveraging provides financial and logistical support for garnering disability services that other funding sources cannot cover.

- **Depth can be more sustainable than breadth in terms of programming.**

We have moved to fewer events per artists. The Fellows, students, and administrators benefit from breathing room to reflect on their experiences rather than moving too quickly from one event to the next. Finding ways to thread residency activities into syllabi, campus offerings, and existing community series can provide structures that are replicable. With each replication, the quality of disability accommodations, documentation gathering, and assessments improves.

Developing consistent record-keeping systems and investing in documentation is well worth the effort. Being clear about delegation and boundaries is also important. While flexibility is key, deadlines for completing certain tasks are important such as due dates for reports and choosing the next year's residents.

- **Public presentations are opportunities to share in-progress, not necessarily polished, works.**

Because this program is about experimentation, it has been important to relieve the pressure of a finished, polished product. Some artists use their time to venture into new territory; others use it to hone a presentation. While the residency's timing and duration is flexible to take individual circumstances into account, indefinite extensions to "finish" a project are not sustainable. We accept that whatever work happens during a three-month period *is* the residency, requiring only one student engagement and one public engagement. Sometimes, due to health-related issues or other unforeseeable circumstances, events happen outside the residency's time frame.

- **Building and maintaining relationships with partner organizations maximizes in-kind support.**

Working with the same partners across different residencies builds trust in the programming. We find that program partners provide resources because they value our contributions and know they will benefit from the mutual mentorship that occurs between the administration of partner organizations, the staff, the students, and the artists.



- **Bigger isn't necessarily better.** Large audience numbers at any individual event are not necessarily an indication of impact or success.

Artists often benefit from a small, select audience when trying something new. Some of our Fellows, for instance, had not previously had the opportunity to lead workshops, teach classes, present at academic conferences, or give artist talks. In every case, artists with less experience in one or more of these areas gained the skills and confidence to seek opportunities unavailable to them before the residency. Because academic communities tend to hire disabled artists for teaching or presenting their work, some Fellows gain access to new income-earning gigs as well as valuable exposure.



**Image:** Arlene Malinowski (2016 Fellow), a white woman with shoulder length blonde hair, stands in a circle with students in the UIC Department of Theatre as part of a workshop conducted during her fellowship period. She holds one hand up with the palm facing forward and the other hand blurs slightly as it moves with a finger pointing toward the ceiling.

Photo by Meghann O'Leary, 2016.

- **Professional, in-depth evaluations are worth the investment.**

It is easy to get consumed in the details of each artist's residency and lose track of the big picture. Capacity building and nurturing artist development benefit from both quantitative and qualitative data that can be used for reports, new grants, and faculty promotion. This work is intensely creative, and it must be framed as creative activity, teaching, and research (as opposed to service) by experts in the field to "count" as such in an academic faculty member's dossier.

In 2018 and 2019, we hired outside evaluators to provide extensive evaluations of the four residencies. The evaluators conducted in-depth interviews with the artists about their experiences, assessments of the artists' projects, and recommendations for further development. Having these evaluations "legitimizes" the work as fitting within an academic department.

- **Publicity is necessary to attract and develop general audiences,** including audiences in the disability community and other artists who are key to networking.



*“We are activists every time we go out and try to make a theater or class space accessible. We’re making a statement just by being there and by insisting that we have a seat at the table. We’ve seen the growth of this movement over the past 25 years, which has been terrific and helps us celebrate our resilience and our strength as artists and really what it means to be human.”*

**Ginger Lane, 2019 Fellow**

## **Disability Culture Initiative Videos and Convening of Fellows**

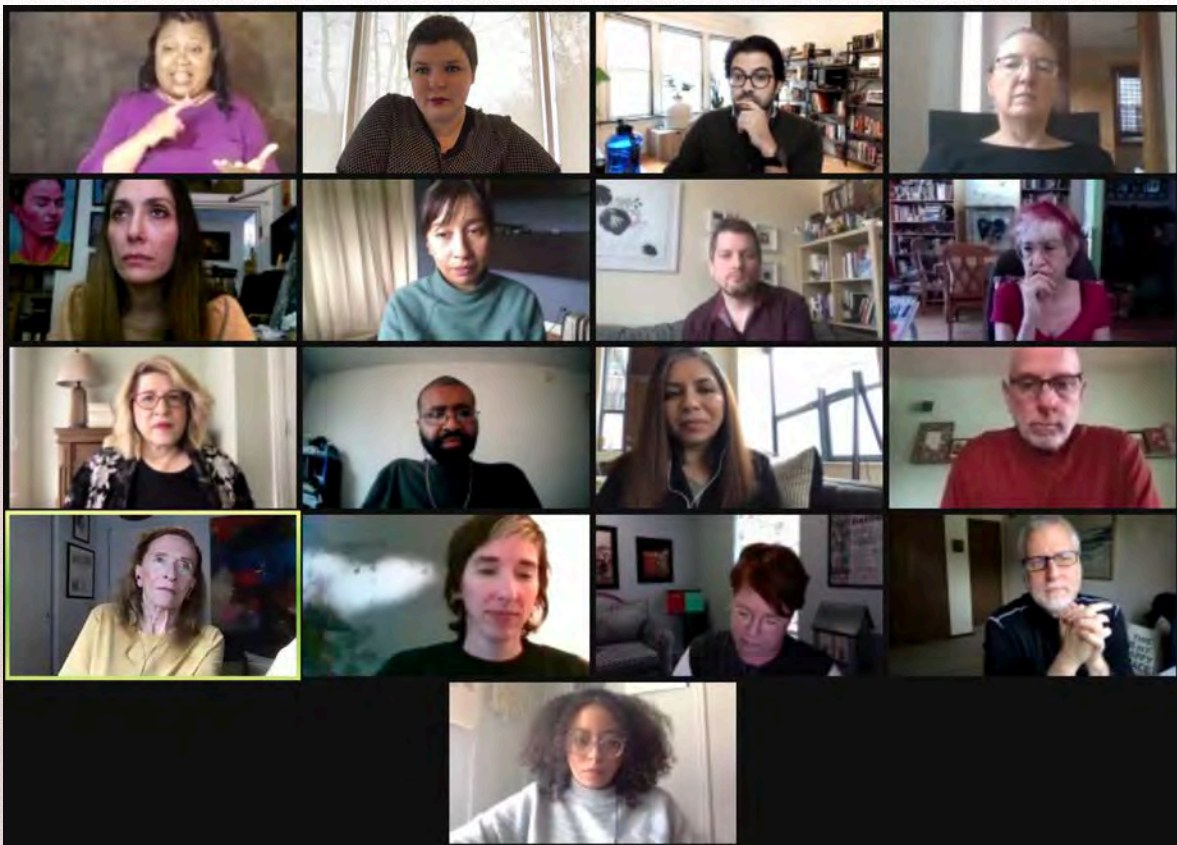
In June of 2020, the Chicago-based disabled filmmaker, Justin Cooper, conducted interviews with small groups of our alumni Fellows to date. We had plans in place to record these interviews live at Steppenwolf in March of 2020, prior to when Chicago’s stay-at-home order went into effect. Before it was mandated, 3Arts and Bodies of Work, along with our media partner, [studiothread](#), had already decided that in-person gatherings were too dangerous, especially for groups of disabled people at risk for complications. When we realized the scope of the pandemic, we changed course entirely to conduct the conversations online. The resulting videos not only capture the artists’ reflections on their residencies and thoughts about Deaf and disability aesthetics, but they also capture a historical moment when connection in the face of isolation has become more important than ever. Deaf and disabled people bring a unique perspective to the current crisis as many have had experiences of social isolation due to health-related issues as well as lack of access and accommodations. This perspective, along with the emotional intensity this time has wrought, is palpable in the DCLI videos.

As a follow-up to the video conversations, we held an online convening in November 2020 for our cohort of alumni to discuss disability aesthetics and the future direction of Disability Art and Culture. This discussion, facilitated by Deaf actor and 3Arts awardee [Richard Costes](#), explored how we might further support Deaf and disabled artists through our residency program and as a community. This conversation reinforced what has been our resolve all along: to connect Deaf and disabled artists to each other and to other organizations and opportunities.

Below are some of the convening’s key take-aways, including the changes they hope to see in the arts world, expressed by the artists:

- A strong desire to pass their knowledge on to the next generation by mentoring younger disabled artists, perhaps via a second, follow-up residency, one in which they could mentor new fellows.
- The possibility of future collaborations with each other and the growing cohort of artists from this residency.

- The creation of new work that might not be for public consumption but for each other and the wider Deaf and disabled communities.
- A drive to chart a unique path of the artists' own making, instead of waiting for gatekeepers to "grant permission."
- A new accessible space, or a dedicated center, that could incubate new work and opportunities for socializing and networking for Deaf and disabled artists.
- A call to find an existing space for socializing, rehearsing, and creating new work, a "ramshackle, radical, risk-taking" space that does not replicate the corporate norms.
- Further conversations and practical strategies for Deaf and disabled artists to represent each other across identities and impairments.
- An archive, online or physical place, of Chicago Deaf and Disability Art and Culture.
- A continuation of financial support and a prioritizing of Deaf and disabled artists by funders.
- Savvy scholarship and criticism of their work in academic and popular press. Ideally, a program for Deaf and disabled writers to write about their work.
- Regular convenings with no agenda.



**Image:** Seventeen faces of alumni and staff from the Fellowship program appear in a screenshot from an online convening held in November 2020.

Screenshot taken by Maggie Bridger.





*“I want us to have what we need, but I want us always to be able to be a little bit startling, a little bit on the margins so that we can stay aware of the power that we do have in being different...the envelope of humanity is made out of elastic, and people want to make it out of concrete. I want us to be able to keep it elastic.”*

**Riva Lehrer, 2015 Fellow**

## **Where are we headed?**

The activities of the Disability Culture Leadership Initiative (DCLI) provide valuable insight into how the 3Arts/Bodies of Work Residency Fellowship program is part and parcel of the larger Disability Art and Culture movement now and into the future. This Chicago Model is our legacy and foundation from which to grow and develop Deaf and disability artistry.

Based on the input of artists during the DCLI convening, 3Arts is working to create an online hub with artist conversations, profiles, and resources to support a greater level of awareness in the field. This platform will serve as a resource for colleague organizations across the country where they can learn about Chicago artists' work and identify artists for their programming.

We also want to develop ways to make this advocacy effort as visible as possible so that the work that artists are doing in disability culture will not pass by unnoticed but can be leveraged to propel a lasting breakthrough in disability justice.

Practically speaking, we must continue to build sustainable administrative infrastructure and systems that simplify and routinize aspects of the residency such as recordkeeping, contracting, event planning, and scheduling.

More importantly, we are intentionally incorporating anti-racism into our infrastructure by taking the lead from the disability justice movement as articulated by the Bay Area performance collective *[Sins Invalid](#)*. Disability justice emphasizes cross-movement solidarity. Practices must sustain disabled people as individuals and as members of intersecting communities. Sustainability has become a central goal for all involved: artists, partner organizations, students, and administrators.

We are buoyed by our cohort of artists' enthusiasm for the future of Disability Art and Culture and our Fellowship program's ongoing role in supporting its growth. With the valuable take-aways from our cohort, 3Arts and Bodies of Work will work toward strengthening what we have in place, changing what needs to be changed, and dreaming up new ways to move into the future.



*“We live in a historic moment where being accepting of one’s body and disability, in and of itself, is activism. Whether or not it’s artistic, whether or not it comes out as an artistic medium, that somehow being accepting of oneself is an activist moment. And that is a powerful idea. It is activism just by being accepting of ourselves.”*

**Matt Bodett, 2017 Fellow**

## **A Few Recommended Sources on Disability Art and Culture**

1. Alice Wong’s [Disability Visibility Project](#) (2020)
2. Riva Lehrer’s [Golem Girl: A Memoir](#) (2020)
3. Sins Invalid’s [Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People](#) (2016)
4. Steven E. Brown’s [What is Disability Culture?](#) (2002)
5. Bess Williamson’s [Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design](#) (2019)
6. Sara Hendren’s [What Can a Body Do? How We Meet the Built World](#) (2020)
7. Carol A. Padden & Tom L. Humphries’ [Inside Deaf Culture](#) (2005)
8. H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, Editors. [Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity](#) (2014)
9. Pamela Kay Walker’s [Moving Over the Edge Artists with Disabilities Take the Leap](#) (2005)
10. James LeBrecht and Nicole Newnham’s [Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution](#) (2020)

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