

Tone Pernille Østern,
Terje Olsen, Elen Øyen,
Lise Lien and Lene Christin Holum

Artist – an accessible profession?

A research project about artists
with disabilities in Norway

Tilgjengelige kunstnerskap?

Tone Pernille Østern, Terje Olsen,
Elen Øyen, Lise Lien
og Lene Christin Holum

Et kunnskapsprosjekt om kunstnere
med funksjonsnedsettelse i Norge



English summary

The full report is available in Norwegian at www.kulturdirektoratet.no

Summary

Artist – an accessible profession? A research project about artists with disabilities in Norway

The aim of this study has been to identify *enablers and barriers for professional artists with disabilities* in Norway. We have aimed at developing knowledge about how institutional structures influence disabled artists' equal participation in the arts and culture field in Norway, as well as the experiences of the artists themselves.

The research was carried out by a team of five co-researchers with and without disabilities from Fafo¹ and NTNU – the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. A qualitative and collaborative research design using semi-structural interviews was utilised as the main method. In total we interviewed 45 representatives from the arts and culture field, and 19 individual artists with disabilities.

The results show that the barriers to working as an artist with a disability in Norway are greater than the enablers, and that the barriers are systemic and normalised in the arts and culture field as well as on a societal level.

Art and cultural institutions face several barriers for including artists with disabilities. We have identified the following barriers as being central

- a general demanding working culture and weak economy for artists
- weak finances limiting institutional scope for action
- low and fragmented expectations of artists with disabilities
- lack of role models

1 Fafo is an independent social science research foundation that develops knowledge on the conditions for participation in working life, organisational life, society and politics, the relationship between politics and living conditions, as well as on democracy, development, and value creation. <https://www.fafo.no/en/about-fafo/fafo>

- a low level of formalised ambitions concerning the inclusion of artists with disabilities in the institutions' strategies and action plans

The institutions do, however, focus on inclusion more generally in their ordinary activities. In this work, societal demands for inclusion and anti-discrimination affect and guide the institutions. We have identified three enablers for inclusion of artists with disabilities among the art and culture fields included in this study:

- a new focus on equity for artists with disabilities in some institutions
- the importance of the Norwegian organisation Balansekunst in stimulating critical self-reflection and a new awareness among the institutions
- the trainee program for artists and culture workers with disabilities financed by Arts Council Norway

Through our artist interviews, the two strongest barriers we have identified are:

- lack of access to higher arts education
- finances and NAV (the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organization) – a lack of collaboration between artist grants and disability benefits

Massive difficulties in accessing higher arts education, and the negative consequences arising from that, are a clear barrier for most of the artists we interviewed. Weak finances, resulting in a lack of financial freedom, is another clearly prevalent barrier. NAV is a welfare institution with which almost all the artists have an ambivalent relationship. Other barriers we have identified based on the artists' perspectives are

- the majority having the power of definition
- closed artistic networks
- Arts Council Norway and other funding authorities
- lack of interest in art by disabled artists from institutions producing and presenting art
- low representation in influential organs and positions
- weak audience interest
- stereotypical roles in film and theatre

- patronising attitudes and low expectations
- artistic production and touring characterised by a demanding working culture on the majority population's terms
- weak universal design of working places, educational institutions and websites

The barriers often come together in clusters, with one leading to another.

We have also identified a few enablers for the artists based on the artist interviews. These are:

- key persons and organisations
- higher education, network and working possibilities abroad
- the disability as central for the art
- disability benefits with some similarities to artist grants
- approved grants, scholarships and assignments confirming the artistic practice
- successful user-directed disability assistance
- energy and optimism in disability communities
- a strong self-driving artistic force despite everything

All enablers have a flipside: either the enabler is simultaneously a barrier, or a consequence of a barrier. Summing up enablers from an artist perspective, this study shows that individuals in the artists' personal networks have been crucial supporters. These individuals have provided the courage, faith in the future, and support needed for the artists to develop basic artistic qualifications. The interviews also show that it is the smaller organisations and media houses on the fringe of the established arts and culture, educational and media fields that have created and provided the possibilities to develop qualifications and experience as an artist. Even though these individuals and organisations are positive enablers, it is a serious problem that the wider public arts, cultural and educational institutions have not encouraged and facilitated for the development of artists with disabilities – in fact, rather the opposite. The key individuals and organisations have been necessary for artists with disabilities to fight *against* these large and powerful organisations, as well as against NAV, to find alternative ways to become an artist. A strong self-driving artistic force despite severe systemic discrimination is clearly evidenced through our artist interviews.

The barriers for artists with disabilities in Norway are thus deeply rooted, multifaceted, and systemic. The artists act within ableist frameworks, both on a societal level and in the art and culture field. By ableism we refer to the systemic discrimination of disabled people in a society created by

and for non-disabled people. Ableism is a parallel to racism, which concerns discrimination on the grounds of race. Such structures are deeply rooted, and there are no quick fixes to rebalancing the situation towards an art and culture field characterised by equity. We recommend long-term efforts (see below) with specifically targeted measures combined with a more general sectoral change. The guiding values for all action taken to expand and change the Norwegian arts and culture field to one which welcomes artists with disabilities should be those of equity, inclusion, and diversity.

On the basis of the results of this study we recommend 10 fields of action to promote equity, access, and participation in all parts of the art and culture field for artists with disabilities. We describe these recommended fields of action in more detail in the final chapter of this report.

Field of action 1

Ministries should lay down guidelines for equity, inclusion, and diversity with explicit focus on persons with disabilities as a central value in the arts and culture field. This is in line with Norway's international obligations through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified in Norway in 2013.

Field of action 2

Arts and Culture Norway and Arts Council Norway should establish diversity as a central part of its core activities, with diversity as comprehensive focus in the forthcoming strategic period, in line with countries like Great Britain, Ireland and Canada, where artists with disabilities are acknowledged as a self-evident element of the arts and culture field. To increase shared knowledge across the field, Arts and Culture Norway should facilitate the establishment of an accessible resource bank with existing knowledge and documentation about art by artists with disabilities in Norway.

Field of action 3

Educational institutions should promote and develop knowledge about, and access to education for arts students with disabilities. This is particularly important in higher education, but also in primary, secondary, and upper secondary schools, as well as in *kulturskole*.

Field of action 4

NAV (the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organization) and the arts and culture field should improve their collaboration to facilitate financial support, activity and employment for artists with disabilities, based in welfare rights as well as in the arts.

Field of action 5

The arts and culture field should challenge its own attitudes, traditions, and norms and develop more inclusive working cultures, more open definitions of quality and professionalism, as well as broader aesthetic preferences in order to create space for artists with disabilities within the field.

Field of action 6

Producers, programming institutions and curators should seek out and actively facilitate art by artists with disabilities.

Field of action 7

The whole arts and culture field should increase its representation of artists with disabilities in influential positions. This concerns artistic committees, leadership positions, artistic roles, and in all parts of production apparatuses. Artists with disabilities should be commissioned for assignments as leaders of artistic productions – as for example film and stage directors, choreographers, and dramaturges.

Field of action 8

International collaboration and the possibility to travel abroad to study or participate in international networks or projects for artists with disabilities should be maintained and strengthened. Other countries (like Great Britain, Ireland and Canada) have developed knowledge and skills about equity and participation in the arts and culture field which can also contribute to stronger artistic practice among Norwegian artists with disabilities.

Field of action 9

Collaboration in artistic processes as well as in research should be developed as a guiding principle across the arts and culture field, educational institutions and academia. The whole field should transform from *about* to *with*. Artists with disabilities should be given a clear voice in the creation of practices and storytelling in the field.

Field of action 10

There is a need for more research on artists with disabilities in an intersectional perspective. Arts and Culture Norway, as well as research institutions, should stimulate such research. For instance, there is a need for studies that investigate whether male, female, non-binary or trans artists with disabilities, or white and non-white artists with disabilities have the same possibilities to become and work as artists in Norway.