

## **Art-Work: Beyond a cycle of dependence**

Patrick is one of Misiconi Dance Company's<sup>1</sup> dancers, who often features in the company's public performances. Due to the complicated Dutch disability benefits system, on funding and financial documents, he is considered a 'client' and Misiconi a 'care organisation'. This means that there is no way he can properly receive his full paycheck. For his performances, he has to be contracted through a volunteer agreement, rather than a freelance contract, which only covers out-of-pocket expenses. This is the reality for many artists and performers with disability; they are in a constant struggle for professional respect.

In a society like the Netherlands, where being in paid employment is important to a sense of citizenship, not being able to work for a decent wage can lead to people feeling and being seen as if they are not a full citizen. This is also true for people with disability, who experience disabling social environments on a daily basis. However, the *Wajong*, one of the major Dutch disability benefits systems for people who have been assessed as having no or little *arbeidsvermogen* (the capacity to work) – many of whom with a developmental disability – creates a financial disincentive for them to engage in paid work. Under the system, the more one earns through paid employment, the less *Wajong* payment they receive. The combination of the two hovers around 70-90 per cent of the national minimum wage, irrespective of the wage they earn<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, once they are on a short-term contract, people face difficulties getting back on the *Wajong* at the level they were previously on, because they are now assessed as having a higher *arbeidsvermogen*. This is why some parents or caretakers end up deciding for a *Wajong* recipient not to work, a decision that is made sometimes in consultation with, but most often on behalf of the recipient, despite their willingness to work (and parents and caretakers' wish for them to do so). This system traps the recipients into dependence.

*Arbeidsvermogen* is medically assessed in terms of productivity. It is an expression of the conventional understanding of the economy, where the bodily capacity equates to the ability to produce something tangible, measurable, and consumable. It is an understanding of capacity that is tied to the normative body (what we as society think a 'normal body' *should* be like, in relation to physiological, neurological, mental, and behavioural aspects). A similar idea about the bodily capacity has traditionally been applied in the arts and creative sector; for far too long, the sector as a whole has almost exclusively worked with non-disabled,

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<sup>1</sup> Misiconi Dance Company is the only integrated dance company in the Netherlands. The company conducts national and international performances and a talent development program, and teaches community dance classes in Rotterdam. It also coordinates and conducts public events, lectures, and workshops.

<sup>2</sup> See this webpage for the details (in Dutch).

<https://perspectief.uvv.nl/forum/s/inkomstenverrekening-bij-werken-naast-oude-wajong-0>

normative bodies. There is a deep-rooted reluctance in the art scene towards exploring the creative potential of people with disability, and inclusive arts is often seen as a charitable practice or part of a therapy, rather than a professional occupation and practice. There is no doubt that being able to express themselves gives disabled artists a sense of independence, autonomy and satisfaction. However, we also need to think about inclusive arts not only for its benefits to the performers, but also in terms of their artistic merit based on how their performances can resonate with, affect, move, and challenge the audience, and on inclusive art's potential to bring about social change.

Patrick was recently involved in a project developed by Misiconi. In the project, his performance explored ways through which diverse bodies can connect, collaborate and inter-depend. With the use of props and the physical setup, Patrick and non-disabled performers challenged the audience to see objects, people, and relations among them with 'new eyes'. The resonance of his performance has been obvious: the project has been positively received by the audience, and it has since been presented in various formats and settings, including a music video for successful Dutch dance music producers, and a collaborative performance piece with other non-disabled, multidisciplinary artists at the Amsterdam Dance Event and MusedumNight – two of the biggest cultural events in Amsterdam.

Bodily diversity in arts ignites artistic expression and creativity by showing and celebrating all bodies and their capacity to express, and challenging preconceived notions of the body. The arts sector has always provided a fertile ground for controversial expressions to emerge that challenge conventional ideas and values. Like any forms of arts, inclusive arts is *work* that goes beyond a form of self expression, because it can disrupt taken-for-granted ideas. It resists distorted and stereotypical representations of people with disability, marked by senses of pity, abnormality, and burden, often seen in the mainstream media. It can show disabled bodies not as 'lacking', but as differently-abled bodies whose potential capacity is constrained by disabling social and physical environments. It allows us to see them in terms of what they are capable of doing beyond that framed in the conventional economics, which is based on the circulation of money, and treats human capital only in terms of its financial values. Inclusive arts can be provocative. And that is the point of arts; its thought-provoking expressions can lead to an articulation of alternatives to the status quo. Disabled artists and performers deserve recognition and appreciation, and their work needs to be financially rewarded for their efforts, and social and political contributions. However, for the arts sector to be able to provide a meaningful platform for people to express bodily diversity, support from the government and the wider arts community is needed. The disability benefits system needs to offer more flexibility, so that disabled artists and performers are not financially penalised for working. Government support should also be provided to foster creative exploration among artists within the arts sector. This needs to be done from an amateur to professional level to create more

collaborative and accessible environment, where people with a diverse range of bodies - whatever the medical definitions may be - can work together in doing 'serious business', that is arts.