



VX LABS

DECOLONISING DISABILITY LAB 2024-25

REPORT

Dr Mandy Precious

Vital Xposure, The Albany, Douglas Way, London, SE8 4AG

T: 0208 123 9945 | M: 07432421825

W: www.vitalxposure.co.uk | E: intouch@vitalxposure.uk

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VX Labs Report: Decolonising Disability

Lab Summary - Summary of Findings

Research Question: **How can disabled artists from the Global Majority be supported to progress their career/bring their whole selves to their career?**

Pre-lab preparation: an important part of the Lab was the preparation, working with and led by 6 artists from the Global Majority with lived experience of disability via interviews. This was also supported by a conversation with 3 industry leaders.

1. Intersectionality Is Essential but Rarely Supported

- Artists expressed that they often feel forced to fragment their identity—either being seen as disabled *or* from the Global Majority, rarely both
- Mainstream disability arts spaces sometimes lack racial awareness; Global Majority spaces sometimes carry stigma around disability
- Participants emphasised the need for spaces that honour *the whole self*, allowing all aspects of identity to coexist.

2. Structural Inequities, Representation and Self-Advocacy Fatigue

- Disabled artists from the Global Majority often carry the extra burden of self-advocacy, especially when their needs are new or evolving
- Many felt unsupported, underpaid, or forced into unpaid emotional labour to explain or justify their existence in artistic spaces
- The challenge of asking for equitable treatment was compounded by cultural and social conditioning
- Artists felt invisible both on and off stage—within arts leadership, storylines, and audience representation
- The lack of visible role models and narratives that reflect their lived experience further entrenches exclusion.

3. The Disability Arts Sector Lack Cultural Nuance

- Artists felt that disability discourse is heavily shaped by White Western Models (especially the Social Model of Disability) which did not reflect their lived experience as Global Majority artists who had grown up elsewhere; to that end there's a need to adapt frameworks to better reflect cross-cultural understandings of disability.

4. Space Design Must Be Intentional and Led by Those It Serves

- For the lab to succeed, it had to be fully led by people from the Global Majority with lived experience of disability
- Artists emphasised the importance of consent, culturally appropriate language, and healing-focused facilitation.

Decolonising Disability Lab findings

1. Intentionality Is Essential

Spaces must be deliberately designed to reflect and support the lived experiences of Global Majority disabled artists. The Lab's structure, from participant selection to facilitation, centred care, cultural relevance, and trauma-informed practices. This intentionality created a rare sense of psychological safety.

2. Intersectionality Requires More Than Representation

Participants deeply valued a space that allowed them to bring their *whole selves* without feeling fragmented. They called out the difference between meaningful inclusion and tokenism.

3. 'Making the Tent Bigger' as a Call to Action

The metaphor of “making the tent bigger” captured the Lab's ethos: to expand spaces rather than gatekeep them. Inclusion should not be rationed but viewed as infinite. It's about systemic generosity, not mere accommodation.

4. Collective Safe Space Empowers Growth

The Lab became a catalyst for artistic confidence and community. The feeling of not being alone in one's experience was transformative:

“It was so refreshing to be in that space where there was so much shared experience, shared emotions and shared joy.”

This resulted in the formation of a collective (“Aggressively Civil”), where artists now continue to support one another professionally and personally.

5. Positionality Matters

Facilitators recognised the importance of each artist's individual and complex positionality—race, disability, class, gender, nationality—allowing them to locate their voices within broader systemic structures. The Lab supported artists in reclaiming their narratives and understanding the cultural forces shaping their identities.

6. The Power of Dreaming Without Limits

The Lab gave artists permission and space to “dream big,” imagine new futures, and see themselves as professionals:

“I learnt so much about myself because for the first time, I could really look at myself and believe in myself as a person from the Global Majority and artist with a disability or super-power.”

7. Self-Advocacy and Collective Access Are Linked

While access riders were practical tools, the deeper shift was conceptual: access was reframed as a *collective responsibility*. The idea of “collective access” challenged individualised models of accommodation and promoted a shared ethic of care and flexibility.

8. Structural Change Must Follow Safe Space

The Lab did not stop at affirmation; it pushed artists to reflect on navigating the wider industry. From redefining access to reshaping artistic narratives, participants gained tools and clarity to advocate for systemic change beyond the Lab.

Concluding finding

Decolonising Disability is ongoing and likely to be so, the Lab provided clear learning around what is needed to be in place to move things forward. The concluding learning is about intentionally creating space and time for the conversation to move forward individually and collectively.

Overview of the VX Labs

Vital Xposure (VX) are a disabled-led touring theatre company that promotes hidden voices with extraordinary stories to tell. For over a decade, VX have made disabled-led radical, political performance championing hidden, marginalised stories.

VX Labs is a cutting-edge three-year research programme supported through Arts Council England. The programme is delivered in partnership with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama as well as regional theatres. It aims to explore disabled-led performance at the cutting edge of access and create the opportunity for learning that has the ability to make change. The research is styled in the Lab space to provide opportunities for disabled artists to push at the boundaries of possibility in a practical, experimental space.

VX Labs recognises that with theatre spaces certain provisions are created that pertain to access with captioning, audio description and signed performance now more common alongside relaxed performances. The Labs programme began with a consultation which identified that these mainstream access provisions are somewhat perfunctory, not embedded and often limited to one performance. Similarly, many of these means of accessing performance are retrofitted meaning that opportunities to be creative with them or use them more effectively to tell a story are often ignored in favour of this easier, cheaper option.

“It’s a bit like retrofitting an old building with a lift – often they’re the shittest, clunkiest, slowest crappiest lifts, aren’t they? And I imagine that’s what it’s like if you try to retro fit BSL, or audio description. It’s not a good experience. Captioning has to be in from the start.” VX Lab consultee

The second key area of exploration for the Labs that emerged through the consultation was a re-visiting of the political, cultural and professional barriers that people continue to be disabled by. In other words, whilst there is a recognition that the Social Model of disability is as Mike Oliver suggests ‘a practical tool, not a theory, an idea or concept.’ (2008) there is a pressing need to push this way of thinking about disabled-led work further,

“I regard the social model as a valuable empirically grounded perspective, which has contributed greatly to changing society’s relationship with disabled people and to its understanding of disability. I argue that the strength of this model stems from the insights it provides, and that its scope does not need to be restricted to immediate practical applications.” Leavitt, JM (2017)

In other words, whilst the social model of disability has resulted in disabled artists becoming more socially and culturally included within many theatres who are broadly willing to make reasonable adjustments – there is still a feeling among those disabled artists who were consulted as part of the VX Labs process, that limitations are set on what they can make theatre about, with whom they can do that, who their audience is and what represents a permissible budget for real, creative access. Finally, whilst there is a considerable push toward early career disabled artists across the industry, many in the middle stages of their career are left floundering with no clear pathway to fulfil their artistic ambition.

Introduction to the Decolonising Disability lab

Why this lab?

This is a very pertinent question and allows for an honest appraisal of the reasoning behind the Lab, the set-up, and the decision making behind it. A component of the original idea for the VX Labs programme, back in 2020, was grounded in a recognition of the unique position of ‘double exceptionality’¹ whereby artists had lived experience of two distinctive ‘characteristics’. This means that they operate at an intersection, in this case being both from the Global Majority² and disabled. VX use the term Global Majority to mean the following,

“It refers to people who are Black, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and or have been racialised as ‘ethnic minorities’. Globally, these groups currently represent approximately eighty per cent (80%) of the world’s population.”

Campbell-Stephens, Rosemary (2020).³

The challenge for Vital Xposure then, and now, is that whilst it is a disabled-led company, none of those who were driving the Lab process were from the Global Majority, and there was a strong recognition that this was problematic. Nonetheless, it felt important to develop a lab that provided space free of those not from the Global Majority – this emerged through the process of interviewing 6 Global Majority artists which shaped the VX delivery week. This pre-lab work ensured that the set-up of the Lab was led by those who consider themselves both disabled and from the Global Majority. The pre-lab work is presented as part of the research process as it was critical to the learning in the Lab. Anonymised sections of

¹ This is a re-imagining of a phrase from education where students are both gifted and talented, and disabled.

² A word on use of language. Global majority currently make up approximately 80% of the world’s population

³ <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/schools/school-of-education/final-leeds-beckett-1102-global-majority.pdf>

the 6 interviews were also sense checked by 3 industry figures who were also from the Global Majority.

The background in figures

As part of the pre-lab research, it was essential to take a deep dive into available data about the number of disabled people and the number of people from the Global Majority who work in the arts – or theatre more specifically.

- **Data about disabled people**

Across the entire arts workforce in 2023 14.7% were disabled⁴. According to Statista (accessed 17th July 2025) approximately 7% of staff in organisations in Arts Council England's National Portfolio (NPOs) are disabled⁵ although this sometimes rises to 9%.

Around 7-11% of those who work in theatre define themselves as disabled whilst around 11% of the NPO workforce is from the Global Majority (Arts Council England, 2020)⁶. In the Stage Directors' 2023 Census⁷ 15.7% of those who were surveyed identified as disabled (compared to 22% of the wider population, of whom 21% are of working age). Of those who identified as disabled in the Stage Directors' Survey, 57% were neurodivergent.

- **Data about people from the Global Majority**

It is more difficult to pinpoint exactly how many people from the Global Majority currently work in theatre because of the way data is gathered: Typically this data comes from NPOs, and latterly (although not recently) from ACE's National Lottery Project Grants However, this does not capture everyone who works in the sector! –

Around 11% of the NPO workforce across all artforms is from the Global Majority (Arts Council England, 2020). NPO data from 2016 suggests that 13.3% of the theatre workforce in England is from the Global Majority⁸. This is deceptive data, given that theatre NPOs are in large urban areas where there are larger Global

⁴ <https://www.thecreativeindustries.co.uk/site-content/uk-creative-industries-jobs-grow-to-2-42m#:~:text=The%20update%20on%20employment%20in,per%20cent%20by%20disabled%20people.>

⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/499217/arts-sector-workforce-diversity-disabled-employees-in-england-uk/> (accessed 17th July 2025)

⁶ https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality_Diversity_and_the_Creative_Case_A_Data_Report__201920.pdf

⁷ <https://stagedirectorsuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SDUKDirectorsCensus2023-2.pdf> (page 14)

⁸ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Analysis%20of%20Theatre%20in%20England%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf>

Majority communities. As we later discovered during recruitment for this Lab the South West, has significantly smaller Global Majority populations. It is therefore unlikely that 13.3% of the theatre workforce in the South West is from the Global Majority. , Given that London has a Global Majority population in excess of 40%⁹ and also accounts for many theatre NPOs where data comes from, a figure of 13.3% is far from a representative number of Global Majority communities across England. In fact, it is a very low number.

In the 2024 Freelancers Make Theatre Work, in their Big Freelancer Survey report approximately 15% of the freelance theatre workforce is from the Global Majority. Similarly to above, this is not clear cut data, as not everyone across the whole survey works in theatre all of the time, and collectively many freelancers supplement their work with other activity (and many report being at breaking point.)¹⁰

- **Data about disabled people from the Global Majority**

Very few statistics exist that report how many people have lived experience of the intersections of disability and ethnicity, or indeed any additional protected characteristic.

‘Disabled people around the world are often defined in terms of their impairment or condition with little thought to the intersection of race and ethnicity or other socially constructed identities and experiences.’ Stienstra, D and Nyerere, L (2016)

Within the arts sector in the UK, we continue to count people in singular boxes of difference without recognising the complexity of individual’s sense of self and identity, and in so doing tend not to recognise the intersections of overlapping discrimination and privilege. Historically, Arts organisations have targeted people from one intersection or another, ignoring the complexity of lived experience. There is a general lack of discussion in the industry impacts such that to be from the Global Majority is to silence other part of individual’s lives, with their disability disappearing, as Artist Participant 4 explains,

“The intersection between being disabled and being from the Global Majority shows us that there is an overlap of oppressive systems and non-inclusivity that does impact the lives of many. This intersection matters because it highlights the challenges faced by individuals who exist at the crossroads of racial and disability-based marginalisation. And with the current proposed mandates from the Labour Government in power and its dismantling of the support for people with disabilities to access support in work, let alone, in the arts...It beggars the question but also

highlights the recognition that the importance of the minimal support that is already there for a majority of white artists to access.” Artist Participant

Ultimately, any data that was available during the research seemed too confusing and fragmented. However, the data that we did find suggested that numbers of disabled people and people from the Global Majority in the arts workforce are much lower than – therefore, not representative – of the population.

In this paper, Artist Participant refers to those who took part in the Lab. Artist Interview refers to those who were interviewed to enable the development of the Lab. Both participants and interviewees were paid to be involved.

Lab set up

The three broad findings from the interviews with the 6 artists with lived experience were:

1. The disabled arts community is not representative of the diversity of the UK's population.
2. Many artists reported feeling they were only able to express themselves as a single lived experience or characteristic when they were infinitely more complex than that.
3. There is growing research around how theories of disability and disabled inclusion are based on Western societal understandings and assumptions.

From this the research question emerged as seemingly simple but surprisingly pertinent.

Research Question: How can disabled artists from the Global Majority be supported to bring their whole self to their career?

Preparation work: Underpinning contribution of artists in advance of the Lab

Each of the 6 artist interviewees were approached via VX's Artistic Lead at the time or through the VX Lab's project manager. Each artist was paid to be part of the process, and the meetings were recorded and subsequently transcribed. These happened during the early summer of 2024.

The questions were sent in advance split and into three very distinct parts. The first part was very much an opportunity to understand the artists' background. The questions were essentially voluntary to answer and the purpose of asking them was to ensure that we were able to speak to artists from a range of backgrounds, practices and experiences so that the invitation to take part in the Lab was formulated from this lived experience.

Part One

1. What is your practice?
2. What is your ethnic/cultural background?
3. What is your disability/how would you describe it?
4. Did you acquire your disability/have your access needs changed over time?
5. How old are you and how long have you been working in the arts for?
6. Are there other parts of your identity which you feel are relevant to consider in this discussion (this could include faith, gender, sexuality, class, etc)

Part Two

The second part of the process was very much in relation to unpicking the lived experience of the individual artists. These questions were:

1. What has your experience been in the industry as a disabled person of your heritage? We'd be interested in hearing about your career journey to date and when you feel your experience has been unusual for reasons of your intersection of heritage and disability.
2. Are there elements of how the industry talks about disability, disabled identities, etc which do not feel inclusive of your own experience or elements of your experience which you feel are not understood or need more attention?
3. What challenges are there stopping the development of more Global Majority disabled artists and/or artists who share your background?
4. What can disabled-led/focused companies do to support developing more Global Majority artists?
5. What can Global Majority-led/focused companies do to support developing more disabled artists?
6. What would it mean to be seen as an intersectional artist?
7. The Lab is a two-week space focused on intersectional disabled artists from Global Majority backgrounds. With no limit on money, what should we be doing?

Part Three

The third part – though not specifically questions – was a range of areas of investigation that were being explored at that time. These were:

1. The disability arts movement has historically been led by White Western individuals and thought. When considering how to create a truly inclusive space we are interested in changes in practice, understanding and language.
2. We are interested in improving conditions for:
 - a. Intersectional disabled artists in mainstream arts provision.
 - b. Intersectional artists in disability arts.
 - c. Disabled artists in Global Majority contexts.
3. We are aware that both disability and Global Majority persons in the UK live under the legacy of eugenics. Eugenics historically unhelpfully collated disability and Global Majorities in opposition to 'normal' Whiteness. This was and is a white supremacist structure. We believe progress has been made in exploring difference and rights, but we also feel there are complicated

legacies still to unpick. These might involve a distrust of Western medicine, a difference in cultural understandings of disability, or a social imposition of 'accepted' language around race and/or disability.

4. We believe that a better future involves collaboration between artists of minority backgrounds to disrupt a limited mainstream. However, that is not a simple process and there can be inter-community prejudices and practices which need to be addressed.
5. We acknowledge that though we are entering with intentions of improving conditions, Vital Xposure is a white-led organisation and does not reflect all experiences of disability. These interviews are therefore part of a process to shape our institutional learning and enable better practice for us, and the wider sector.

Whilst this is a significant list of questions and investigation topics, it sets out comprehensively where the thinking was at that time and is reflective of the then artistic leads thoroughness. Conversations were over 90 minutes, were recorded for the purpose of archiving and research and were transcribed.

Summary of findings from interview process

Findings from the interview process

Intersectionality – most of the 6 artists spoke eloquently about their sense of self and how that operated in specific spaces. All the artists spoke of their intersectionality with passion and commitment to their whole self, they did not in large part, believe that many spaces had accommodated them fully.

“I’ve worked in Deaf-led companies, and I thought, you know, I have all my accessibility needs met. But then there was racism, there was transphobia. Yeah, so they ended up being quite bad experiences... I’ve worked with trans companies and various other things, then their racism come up. You always find there’s some elements of that, you know, intersectional experience that [is] not accepted.” Artist Interview

“I still don’t know, when I experience something, whether it is down to being disabled, or being a woman, or being an immigrant, or being a person of colour, or all of the above. I think that as an intersectional artist, there is recognition that it is impossible to separate those things, those things are bundled together. And that I occupy a margin between the margins, ... I’m often too disabled to be with people of colour; I am too non white to be with disabled people. I’m too disabled to be with women etc.” Artist Interview

All artists discuss this sense of dislocation, of not quite fitting neatly into a 'box'. There was a recognition that groups and companies dedicated to one intersection, or another can quite easily be hyper focused on that to the exclusion of other things. This sometimes manifests in unconscious behaviours that is experienced by the interviewees as alienating. Sometimes this is down to a lack of knowledge of history and battles fought from those outside of their lived experience, with many feeling that the importance and absolute inability to divorce themselves from themselves, necessarily means a level of erasure,

"There were, however, also communal erasures within the mainstream Disability Rights Movement. The movement, including its historical retelling, primarily centred on the organising of white disabled activists; the academic extension of the movement, Disability Studies, similarly centred the experience of white scholars"
Kafai, S (2023) p19

Some of the artists involved in the interview process discussed personal experiences of having to fragment aspects of themselves so they could fit into a particular context and recognised the detrimental impact of this on their experience and themselves. The idea of suppressing individual parts of the self is problematic and often creates an emotional labour on an individual to respond to the fragility of an organisation's lack of understanding or provision. If those individuals draw attention to what is not available to them (their full lived self) or if there is an issue in the space or the way things are delivered, interviewees describe an experience of defensiveness from an organisation or an internalised ableism or racism in individuals in all spaces, including both global-majority-led and disabled-led spaces. An observation from one interviewee was that many individuals 'lack a dialogue of care for themselves.' (Artist Interview)

Working within systems – The challenges of working within existing structures to support their development was highlighted by a number of the artists – this included meta structures like Access to Work, which have been in the news recently (and mentioned above by one of the Lab participants) because of significant challenges of disabled people in securing necessary funds to support working lives.

"We are used to fighting for the right of Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists to create, to lead and to have agency in any room they are in. Devastatingly, it feels like we are now fighting for their right to be in the room in the first place."

Statement from Tourette's Hero, quoted in The Stage, 23rd May, 2025¹¹

¹¹ <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/disabled-artists-warn-that-benefit-cuts-will-exclude-them-from-theatre>

The other key challenge lies with internal company policies, values and training. Experiences were both negative and positive, with a recognition that more can be done,

“I find there is a resistance... to not only understand how having multiple marginalised identities impacts your experience at work...there has been a lot of pressure to mask and to pretend that my experience is the same as someone who is white and disabled, or someone who is Black and not disabled or someone that is queer and not disabled.” Artist Interview

This lack of understanding of ‘multiple marginalised identities’ requires a level of emotional labour from the interviewee quoted here, to be seen and heard and which is a common experience for those involved in trying to establish a career in the arts.

Lack of Representation – this was described in two key ways:

1. A lack of representation in the industry for people who operate at multiple intersections within the stories presented,

“I think I can go in a room with any other disabled person. And we can relate to each other in so many ways. But also, when you add in another aspect of intersectionality...it’s so many more experiences that are quite different, and which I think aren’t represented enough...like I know, as someone who grew up Black, specifically, Black, Jamaican and disabled, I have so many disability experiences which I’ve never seen represented.” Artist Interview

2. A lack of reach in the current output of theatre where people from specific backgrounds are not part of the audience/understanding of theatre, and the arts more broadly,

“I still find it increasingly challenging to have absolutely no support from my family, in my career, not because they don’t love me, and not because they don’t want me happy. But because there is a fundamental incapacity to understand or wrap their heads around what I even do. So, I imagine I can’t be alone in that...And if you yourself can’t conceive of this being a possibility. I can imagine, increasingly, people of Global Majority, especially with disabilities wouldn’t even consider entering the industry, regardless of how much natural raw talent they might have.” Artist Interview

Disability Theory / Disabled focused companies:

1. A lack of recognising the full lived experiences of those from the Global Majority,

“And in disability spaces, I felt more comfortable. And I wish that there was more understanding, but it was just a lack of considering the full experience that was there” Artist Interview

This seems to be born of single-issue movements in the 1960s which are still racing to catch up with the real world where identities are complex. As one artist interview eloquently put it, ‘at certain times the mainstream disability rights movement, especially nowadays, sometimes can have a bit of an identity crisis.’

2. There is a disappointment that the modern disability movement has a clear definition of what sort of person you need to be,

“I feel that there is a sense, especially in the West where if you are disabled, and if you don’t have this sort of fierce self-sufficiency, fierce self-autonomy and fierce independence, that that there is essentially something a bit flawed in your thinking and in the way that you view your disability. And I acknowledge that I probably have a lot of internalised ableism from my upbringing and my culture that I still must unpick.” Artist Interview

3. Questions around the Social Model of Disability especially when individuals are born and sometimes brought up in other countries and have different experiences,

“In disabled spaces ... I take on for example, the social model of disability and that that should be how I perceive my disability because that is the general attitude of the people around me. And I have some question marks about the rejection of the medical model of disability...we have an impairment or a lack of something...I still need to grapple with it because I grew up in a developing country and we just didn’t have access to quality medical care and that lack of care might have compounded their disabilities or maybe how they became disabled in the first place? To conceive of exploring that in my work as an artist is absolutely petrifying. And I’m not the sum total of other people’s expectations of me. I do think that comes from a place of White privilege.”

Artist Interview

Lived experience of disability is not monolithic or unified, particularly if that lived experience is embedded in a country that has fewer medical opportunities. Arendt’s contention of three realms to social life: political, social and private is relevant here. (Arendt 2003: 211). Using this model potentially, the artist in the interview suggests

their public persona doesn't marry with their private persona, and potentially that in their case the social model's political/social focus doesn't marry with their lived experience, specifically because they were brought up in a different country and in a country that potentially made them more disabled because of a lack of medical intervention (which was unavailable). Arguably, people from the Global Majority also have a different lived experience of disability in the UK – as Janine Owens argues, (2014),

“One important nuance in Arendt's conception of power is that of plurality. This emphasises diversity in the lives of human beings, generating the potential of a constructed community through speech and action. Difference within the social model of disability could be revised because Arendt's conception of plurality recognises human diversity.” Owens, J. (2014)

Global Majority Companies and Communities – although those who were interviewed in advance of the Lab were from a number of communities, there was a consistent narrative around critical issues they had encountered when utilising Global Majority focused spaces, namely that there was a level of stigma around disability. This was reinforced by a suggestion from the group of 6 artists that in their experience, some diagnosis, like mental health issues and neurodiversity were under diagnosed in Black-led spaces. A typical comment was,

“There are huge cultural stigmas around disability in all of these communities, and it's as slow as in white disability led companies with the understanding of the intersection of race- Black majority arts companies are not aware of the internalised stigma and internalised ableism that the company members themselves hold, and so without doing that work internally, it's very hard for them to understand the importance and how their company will be enriched by having more disabled people working with them.” Artist Interview

And,

“A lot of people, because of their cultural backgrounds, won't be diagnosed, but will have a wealth of mental health problems or conditions. They'll have depression, anxiety or they'll be undiagnosed autistic, or any of these things. They just won't have the diagnosis, and so there isn't a provision of care in these projects...” Artist Interview

This claim is also backed up by research. The National Institute for Health and Care Research reviewed 66 studies on people from the Global Majority's mental health perceptions and their experiences of mental health services. This review indicated that not only do people from these groups have poorer access to and experiences of

the mental healthcare services.¹² Mental health care systems do not consider ‘racism, migration stress or complex trauma’ and its effect on people. Consequently,

“people from ethnic minority groups have worse mental health, and poorer access to mental healthcare, than White British people. People from ethnic minority groups are more likely to have undiagnosed mental health difficulties and follow involuntary pathways into care. This could be through the criminal justice system, or in crisis situations. Overall, outcomes of mental health care are worse for people from ethnic minority groups.” Bansal, N et al (2022)

Other countries – many of those interviewed pre the Global Majority lab were either born in other countries or have a close connection to them. Two of the people interviewed are very clear that those countries have a poor record on disability justice. One person in particular, who grew up in a developing country, was subject to some very challenging things, including having their cousins ushered out of the room in case they ‘infected’ them. Whilst they acknowledge this as a formative experience, they also feel that they are able to reflect on a very different, more enlightened experience in the UK. In comparison, one person interviewed was brought up in a European country that had no or little expectation of ‘disabled specific’ roles in theatre but made few if any concession to make a role accessible deeming it impossible to deliver. The learning here recognises again, that experience is very specific to individuals who carry pride in the country and culture of their birth but feel a level of conflict with the treatment they received, which measures up poorly to their experience in the UK but has nonetheless shaped those individuals. This also supports the view of a non-monolithic approach to disability.

The two key aspects of the interviews in relation to the Global Majority Lab focused specifically on what was needed to make the Lab successful. Self-advocacy or structures to enable that were very powerfully expressed by those involved in the conversations.

Self-Advocacy - There was learning very much around the expectation of access riders, and access broadly and how individuals were placed in the position of expert for their own condition which was often changing and sometimes newly diagnosed. Some specific needs emerged and evolved whilst undertaking projects, which required a level of self-advocacy that some interviewees felt was challenging to live, report, and ask for additional support.

¹² <https://evidence.nihr.ac.uk/alert/how-can-mental-healthcare-services-meet-needs-people-from-ethnically-diverse-groups/>

One interviewee eloquently made the case for the challenges of advocating for their rate of pay and doing that in relation to the ‘cumulative impact of my identifiers...making the gap broader.’

They add,

“They espouse that they want to pioneer to be more equitable, but it doesn’t translate into financial conversations and that’s harsh for me, that I found the power dynamics and spaces of work have been resistant to it.” Artist Interview

The argument that they are subject to multiple ‘different onslaught of violence’ and the labour that involves is not reflected in payment. They also argue that in order to do their job as a Black, trans and disabled person they have to in fact do multiple ‘jobs’ to survive the space. The challenge is then that recompense does not meet their expectation, and they are effectively priced out of work. They say: that they are then labelled as a challenge and consequently feel that they don’t belong and are then trapped in a vicious circle. The institutions/companies, many of whom have limited budgets to deliver projects, are put in an untenable position whereby they have to effectively exploit people OR work with people who have fewer access needs.

Most of the interviewees are less confident about advocacy, and struggle to ask for what they need,

“At Drama School I kept being told by a lot of my disabled friends that ‘oh no, you know, you should talk to them about it, you should make a fuss about it...But I personally struggle with it. Because I do think that comes from a place of privilege. Because as a person of colour, as a foreigner, I don’t feel that I am entitled to expecting institutions to cater for me at all. And it’s something that I am still wrestling with.”

These two sides of the coin – asking and being knocked back – and not asking, because it feels hard to ask for a number of reasons were common throughout all of the interviews and became, consequently, the bedrock of the Lab. What does self-advocacy mean? What does it mean to you?

Lab Focus – the answers to this question absolutely shaped the development of the Lab:

1. Ideas around consent – when you give it, what it means to give it.
2. “Something that focuses on being able to express every part of ourselves without worry that it is too much.”
3. The creation of a space where there is an explicit understanding that “this is for that intersectional experience of those two identities.”

4. Space to explore art forms that originate in the communities represented in the space.
5. Something that equips those taking part with the best processes to support their journey as artists be that access riders, or a clearly defined way of stepping forward into their ambition.
6. Someone who can hold the space that takes seriously the grievances that are historic, but something that gives a healing wellbeing aspect to the people within the space.
7. Some element that allows participants to step into the industry confidently – what are the next steps? How do we take them?
8. A supportive facilitation framework that is both supportive and healing – using language that feels more culturally informed.

Sense Checking Interview Findings

The views of the 6 individual artists interviewed were shared with Global Majority Arts leaders from the industry, for their insights.

This conversation was held by VX's Artistic Lead at the time (Autumn 2024) with Pooja Ghai, Artistic Director / CEO, Tamasha Theatre, Lara Jonah, VX Trustee, and Maria Oshodi, Artistic Director / CEO, Extant Theatre. The general consensus was that the interviews represented a very in depth and comprehensive view of the industry and the individual perspectives, and areas of consensus enabled a well-informed starting point, and approach.

Delivery of the Lab

Geography – the South West

The Lab was scheduled to be in the South West of England, and Bristol Old Vic were keen to host. It was deliberate to place the lab in the South West, in part to satisfy the ambitions of the Labs to reach all parts of the country. The South West is amongst the least ethnically diverse parts of England with 6.9%¹³ (UK Census, 2021) of the population from the Global Majority. The Black-led theatre and performing arts provision for those from the Global Majority within the region has been problematic in the past although investment from Arts Council England provided some recognition through its support of companies like Beyond Face. Nonetheless, the South West is amongst the largest geographical regions ranging from Gloucestershire through to and including Cornwall, and then round to Hampshire, and with the exception of Bristol, very few large urban spaces. This can mean that

¹³ Figure from the 2021 Census - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census>

those artists in the region from the Global Majority can experience isolation, with those who have the additional lived experience of disability this isolation is compounded.

Recognition of VX's lack of GM leadership

The bare minimum starting point from the artist interviews was that the space needed to be entirely Global Majority led. This recognises that the gaze of a White researcher in the room was also problematic. VX could not, in good conscience, reinforce the idea that (Global Majority) "lives have no meaning and no depth without the white gaze". (Tony Morrison). It is also entirely questionable whether the same researcher writing up this research is any more able to break off the shackles of her own whiteness, to centre the learning uncovered in the space. The Lab that took place week of 10th of March 2025 acknowledges how problematic it is to have an entirely Global Majority space written up by a white researcher. It is also true to say that all that happened within the space is reported and written about and is one step removed, which is also problematic. That being said,

"People of colour need their own spaces. Black people need their own spaces. We need places in which we can gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes and marginalization that permeate every other societal space we occupy. We need spaces where we can be our authentic selves without white people's judgment and insecurity muzzling that expression. We need spaces where we can simply be."

Blackwell, K (2018)

There is an awareness of the dynamic of power structures at play in writing up this research. To counter that, the voices of the 6 individuals who took part in the week are centred, alongside the 6 artists who informed the process¹⁴. Analysis of what Artist Participants say is maximised to avoid stripping away the sense of their lived experience. Learning is drawn out through summary. Throughout there is a recognition that there is a discomfort for the white researcher writing up the paper and in moving pieces into place, but there is also the recognition that it is easy to call out systems of oppression rather than one's individual place in the process,

"Intellectualizing systems of privilege and power is much easier to do in academia than examining one's role within it." Le Bourdon, M (2022)

The researcher's position as a white woman with privilege in this process needs acknowledgement. Acknowledging this privileged position, is also to acknowledge that hierarchies of privilege and oppression exist and that there is history, and that 'my presence and actions within the field has contributed, both directly and

¹⁴ This paper is also being read by those who took part in it, as well as VX's Artist Panel which is made up of a wide cross section of folk.

indirectly, to the entrenchment of colonial dynamics.’ Le Bourdon, M (2022) even whilst never stepping into the research space.

“...becoming aware of our positionalities requires the willingness to encounter discomfort and the courage to reflect this in the words we write down as academic contributions... having such an awareness (about the self) is an essential step towards reconceptualizing research as a ‘co-construction’ of knowledge as well as conducting research ‘with’, rather than ‘on’ or ‘about’ a group or area of interest.”

Bilgen A., Nasir A, Schoneberg, J (2021)

The role of reflexivity in the writing of the paper: the writing of this paper has to acknowledge that we have been shaped by dominant narratives, that both VX and the researcher operate within a theatre and cultural sector that is still dominated by white, colonial practices, however much we might wish it otherwise. The reflexive approach is therefore to examine the discomfort of both not being in the room and having to make sense of what is said with a contextual experience dislocated from the space, and that this position is influenced by individual histories.

To that end, there is a large quantity of unfiltered observations and thoughts that are not critically examined but simply recorded – so that those who took part in the process of the Decolonising Disability lab are able to speak for themselves without an unhelpful layer of researcher reflection overlaid,

“...my experience can never be compared to the historical and contemporary macro and micro exclusions of marginalised and former colonised communities experience on a daily basis. To even try to compare again looks to a white colonial gaze to understand the experience of those impacted by oppressive systems of power. By trying to conflate others experience with my own, I am occupying spaces of those directly affected. My failure to understand that here, demonstrates my failure to acknowledge my own privilege.” Le Bourdon, M (2022)

It is also true to say that many people in the room invited the researcher into the space, but this felt inappropriate. This was also countered by having a student researcher from the Global Majority in the space, Qile He, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama researcher, who downloaded thoughts, reflections and observations on a daily basis across the delivery period.

Bringing the Team Together

It took time to translate the 6 interviewees thoughts into affirmative action, and longer still to find the right team to manage and facilitate the space. We are grateful to Maria Oshodi, Artistic Director / CEO of Extant Theatre for her connectivity with Zuleika Lebow, artist, writer and educator and tutor on MA Applied Imagination at

Central Saint Martins, who we met with and who was attuned to our idea of being both generous and open within the space to allow the artists to go at their own pace, as well as having a lived understanding of the context and history of those in the Lab space. Zuleika was accustomed to working with Annabel Crowley Teaching, Learning and Attainment Co-ordinator at Central Saint Martins, who came on board to facilitate a generous reflective space at the top end of the week.

Following discussions the decision was made that additional facilitation was required to support artistic practice, specifically around the performance arts which neither Zuleika nor Annabel felt equipped to deliver. Harris Albar, current General Manager at Tamasha then joined the facilitation team. Harris' expertise lay in facilitating an open conversation about next artistic steps, with a clear lens of understanding how theatre can be used as a decolonising tool.¹⁵ Given the level of self-reflection and potential vulnerability in the space, we were able to bring wellbeing support in the shape of Koko Brown for the final two days a London born, Sheffield based theatre artist and wellbeing/access practitioner.

Complexity of experience

The recruitment process was successful (February – March 2025), and we recruited 6 artists. 13 artists applied, two of whom were not from the Global Majority. In addition, two artists were also not in the formative part of their career. That meant the 6 artists were drawn from the 9 remaining. All the artist matched the criteria, but the panel sought a balance of individuals across age, artistic process as well as responding to the artists statements. The artists were from a variety of backgrounds and with varying needs. They were selected, again mindful of the power structures at play, with one of our Artist Panel from the Global Majority and the researcher. The call out was explicit about who the week was for and the purpose of the week. The callout was distributed across many networks. The call out is at Appendix 1.

How the research was conducted

The lab was conducted over 4 days in Bristol. 5 of the 6 artists came from the South West, with one from London. We accommodated 3 of the artists, with 3 travelling to the venue each day. Aside from London, the artists came from Cornwall, Somerset, Dorset, Bath and Bristol.

The first two days of the research welcomed the artists into the space, creating an environment of safety and openness. In a generous space artists and facilitators worked through a series of processes to support clarity in terms of access and wellbeing, in order to focus in a more razor-sharp way on the individual's art. This

¹⁵ Harris explores theatre as a decolonising tool here, <https://tamasha.org.uk/blog/team-tamasha/theatre-and-decolonisation/>

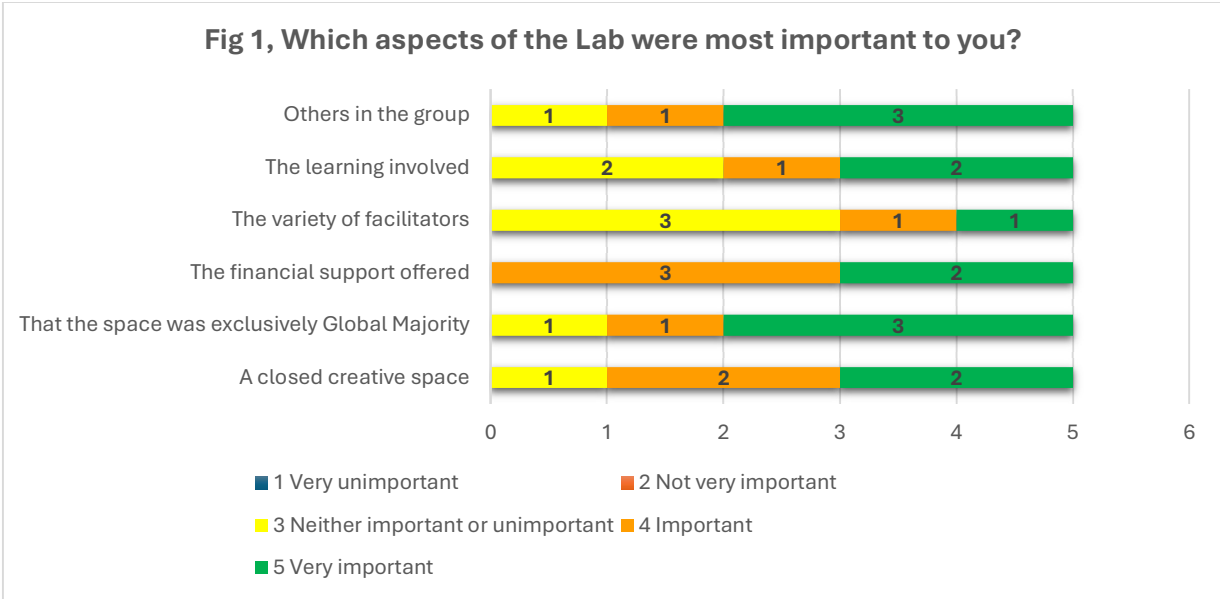
included processes of ‘unpacking’ of experiences of being both Global Majority and Disabled. This was followed by an opportunity to ‘fly’ or dream big. The second day focused on landing, making the journey of development tangible. One artist said of the first two day, “I’m going to take that workshop with me for the rest of my life.”

The final two days of the Lab Focused on developing artistic practice. This offered the artists the opportunity to kick-start their artistic output through the lens of day 1 and day 2 and also opened up a conversation about how to connect effectively with the industry moving forward.

Summary of findings Decolonising Disability Lab

Predominantly, the reflections on the Lab take the shape of observations from the student researcher Qile He, from The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and surveys from 5 out of 6 participants. This was supported by a follow-up interview process.

Quantifiable Data: Only one aspect of the reflection process was quantifiable and threw up varied results – this was a series of questions about aspects of the week’s workshops that the artists were asked to rate: this included the value of the closed space, the exclusivity of the space as Global Majority, the financial support, facilitators, the learning and others in the group. See Fig 1. below.



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¹⁶ None of the artists choose the options of Very unimportant, or Not very important. In each area 3 artists choosing a response represents 60% of the cohort, 2 artists responding represents 40% of the cohort, whilst 1 person choosing represents 20% of the cohort.

The two answers that jump out as most important to the artists involved was the value of having an exclusively Global Majority space, and the other people in the group. Both of these answers seem to echo the value of having a space where those involved have a lived or shared experience, suggested by the interviewees. Because the space was facilitated to support artists to explore themselves in context, without blame or repercussion the space was safe.

“The conversations we had in pairs or groups were amazing and I learnt so much from every participant that was part of the Lab. I am really going to seek out those spaces in Bristol (GM focused) and attend events and artist gatherings with the Global Majority.” Artist Participant

Financial support also evidently motivated people’s participation but not at the exclusion of other things: payment for participation felt critical. The variety of facilitators seems to be least important for the participants and allows for an interesting comparator with others in the group: facilitation is valuable but the make-up of the group, with like-minded people seems to trump that. A closed creative space is of high value to most people, with one person valuing the closed nature of the group in the mid-range. This individual, of the 5 who answered, got least from the process overall, although still positive about the opportunity awarded a 4 to only the financial support element of the week, with the rest being 3 or of mid-scale value.

Generally, the different aspects of the process were highly valued by most participants.

Making the Tent Bigger: Representation vs Tokenism

The key takeaway for those involved was as varied as the individuals who took part in the week with some thematics finding resonance across the group. The axis between identity and art was mentioned by three of the five interviewees, in differing ways,

“That you don't have to create art that is explicitly about your lived experience - especially if/when trauma mining. It can draw on your lived experience but not be directly related to it. Nor does it have to be about you”. Artist participant

“We want to be involved in important aspects of the arts that don't necessarily depend on our identities, while still having the autonomy to honour our identities in ways that are authentic to us if and when we choose to do so. Representation is

important but an obligation to be ambassadors of our identities in order to be given a seat at the table amounts to tokenisation, not representation.” Artist participant

“The creative exercises that helped visualise your desires and the post-reflection chats were also incredibly insightful. I also really emotionally connected with the Lineage writing exercise. This helped put into words the complex duality of our existence as disabled poc”. Artist participant

The group involved in the process were highly skilled artists attuned to their sense of self and lived experience but the space allowed reflection on what this means in practice – in reflecting on who they were as artists, the cohort was able to re-engage with who they are as artists within and beyond the boundaries often forced onto them, ‘We need to be not just invited to have a seat at the table every so often, when we’re desired, but to be able to be in the room all of the time. One of the facilitators used the metaphor of a tent: it was the idea that we’re all sat in the tent, and you don’t refuse to let people in. You make the tent bigger.’ The clarity of re-defining and re-clarifying the received wisdom or the limitations: inclusion is sometimes experienced as a ‘bare minimum’ rather than an openness. In this context, the systemic barriers are both real and limiting and infiltrate everyone’s thinking with slippage often evident – the takeaway and value of the space is to be reminded to open up, throw off the shackles of being defined by other people/systems.

“Reassurance was a word that we were saying constantly throughout the week. Connection was also such a massive one, because it so rare to be in a room full of other artists, and then you add the artists that are all disabled, and then you add the fact that it was all artists from the Global Majority: all those different layers of community. I’ve never been in a room like that before...I cherished that and how important intersectionality is. It was so refreshing to be in that space where there was so much shared experience, shared emotions and shared joy.” Artist Participant

The freedom to say that and openly discuss that allowed those who took part in the Decolonising Disability Lab, the opportunity to push forward not only their own expectations but pushback on the expectations of others.

The Value of Collective safe space

Another key takeaway was the development of a collective safe space where there was a shared sense of purpose and endeavour. This provided a platform for the group to build powerful alliances, and a stronger sense of their community. It became a space for a light touch social justice, providing the group with momentum

to advocate for themselves and each other, and challenge existing power structures. Because the facilitation centred kindness and was trauma informed it engendered a sense of safety, it allowed the group to connect quickly and deeply:

“A safe space intends to move out of the control of the dominant group and allow physical and/or figurative room for identity development, social support, emotional connection, and sense of community, and facilitate development of critical consciousness” Wallin-Ruschman et al (2016)

The critical decision to make the space exclusively for those from the Global Majority, with the facilitators also having lived experience of disability was critical in the creation of the ‘safe space.’

“Thank you so much for creating such an intentional and affirming space with the VX Lab. It was an incredibly valuable experience for me, and I deeply appreciate the care and thoughtfulness that went into the structure, facilitation, and accessibility of the sessions. One of the most impactful aspects of the Lab was the sense of collective care and shared experience. I found it deeply affirming to be in a space where the intersections of disability and decolonisation were not just acknowledged but centred in a meaningful way.” Artist Participant

This evolved into a sort of confident and caring activism,

“The key takeaways from the VX Lab were the creation of a new community of like-minded, creatives working together in a safe space and learning from each other. I loved that we were able to share ideas, share our visions and aspirations, laugh and dance together led by trauma informed facilitators. We have created a collective called Aggressively Civil (We are Not a Gang) and we check in with each other and share information and hype each other up.” Artist Participant

Not only did this approach help those involved ‘reframe their own practice’ - it has also endured:

“Furthermore, with the learning that we had, it spurred me and the other artists to access, participate and be selected to be part of the most amazing opportunities and I honestly believe that this wouldn't have happened, if it wasn't for the empowerment that we received during that residency.” Artist Participant

The residency – although short – kick-started careers, provided a momentum to take a chance with the support of peers who literally and metaphorically have your back. (see appendix 2)

Space to dream

Three key pieces of personal learning emerge from Decolonising Disability Lab. The first is around confidence which emerges in a number of ways. Some artists gained confidence in taking themselves seriously as a ‘professional’ creative, but this was not intangible – the week allowed artists to draw on themselves holistically and dream big:

“I feel like I gained confidence in regarding myself as a professional creative and allowing myself to dream big for the future.” Artist Participant

“Being able to have the space to think freely, dream big, aspire with intention and write it down. I learnt so much about myself because for the first time, I could really look at myself and believe in myself as a person from the Global Majority and artist with a disability or super-power.” Artist Participant

This stems from having the space and time to reflect, and the facilitated space to line up activity that allows deep thinking. The key element was also that the week was not outcome driven in terms of creating a piece or product (although this was touched on) – if focused on bringing the ‘whole self’ ably delivered by Zuleika and Annabel’s approach of ‘unpacking’, ‘flying’ ‘landing’ and ‘applying’. The deliberateness of this process enabled each aspect of the process to build on the last.

Positionality and Intersectionality in the Cultural Sector

Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality highlights how forms of oppression intersect – i.e. that the lived experience of being from say the Global Majority and disabled would ensure that an individual is subject to potential oppression on at least two dimensions, the one, potentially, compounding the other. An individual’s experience of these intersections is not monolithic and is dependent on their positionality as an individual which shapes their personal experiences. Positionality includes class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, values, views, nationhood, for example. Positionality recognises the complexity of identity individually and collectively. The concepts of intersectionality and positionality work in tandem so that whilst some generalisations can be made – as in this paper, for example – about the lived experience of being from the Global Majority and disabled collectively, lives are lived individually. And as this applies in life, so too does it apply in the lived experience of individuals within the Lab and their experience in the cultural sector.

“It is essential to explore intersectionality of different categories of disadvantage in order to understand intersection inequalities in the arts and cultural sector... it is misleading to assume a universal gay male advantage or gender equality in the sector because the categories of gender and sexuality are complicated by class and race bias as well as potential exclusion on the basis of disability and religion or belief.” Tatli, A., & Özbilgin, M. p.255 (2012)

The facilitators’ work across the week never lost sight of the fact of the context of the participant artists’ lives within the cultural sector, recognising that in spite of significant work in recent years, the sector is still working to be fully representative, with inclusivity often counted in singular terms and little if no attention paid to the complexity of people’s lives. To that end, the Lab gave a window of opportunity for the artist participants to locate themselves within the sector, and for those who needed it, to find their place, and as an Artist Participant eloquently said ‘a gap in the industry that I can plant my feet in.’

“It gave me a starting point in how to be present as an artist with a disability from the Global Majority. It imposed questions that made me challenge my thinking as an artist as well as the importance of recognising my potential, my place within the creative/arts industry, that there is a gap in this industry that I can plant my feet in. I could really look at myself and believe in myself as a person from the Global Majority and artist with a disability or super-power.” Artist participant

“I also gained a deeper understanding of my own history and identity and how they are shaped through colonial structures and accessibility narratives.... The Lab helped me reflect on how I position myself within the arts sector and how I can advocate for my access needs with confidence.” Artist participant

The focus on themselves, their history, their identify, and how that has been shaped by systems has been very helpful to at least one of the artists since they left the Lab – ensuring that they are able to self-advocate, and articulate who they are, and what they need as an artist and a human being,

“It made me feel confident in myself and my practice. Every time I have applied for a grant or funding, I have always returned to my notes from the Lab to inspire me or get me to think outside the box. And so far, I have got 2 out of 3 grants that I applied for after this lab took place.” Artist Participant

Collective Access

Many artists within the cohort felt the burden of self-advocacy and the continued labour of refining their access rider – although having support and guidance on that was also useful to participants,

“On a practical level, I also learned about access riders and how they can be used as a tool for self-advocacy.” Artist Participant

“Helping me start to write an access rider was very helpful as it is something that comes up at every show I perform.” at Artist Participant

Throughout the process access and accessibility were front and centre of the Lab but it reached deeper than that:

“Although the building and space were accessible, and other more specific adjustments were made throughout, to me it was the prevailing attitude of openness toward adjusting while respecting our autonomy as adults that made it a uniquely supportive space. It was encouraged that we send an access rider or access requirements before the workshops, which gave me the impression that the organisers understand the importance of accessibility and have a willingness to support accessibility. Having the option to take unscheduled breaks at any point or make use of the separate quiet room helped make it productive.” Artist Participant

But pushing the idea of access within the space was also seen as significant among the artists, and tying access needs to a deeper awareness of the systemic barriers that disabled artists encounter was also of critical importance, extending access as a collective practice – that everyone has a part to play but that Global Majority people and specifically those who are also disabled, bring something with them that goes beyond the simplistic ‘normative’ way of being. In that sense, this was true accessibility,

“One of the key principles of disability justice is collective access, which entails collaboratively exploring creative and flexible ways for making spaces accessible to people with a variety of disabilities and other marginalized identities....”

Hailey (2024)

Collective access is underpinned by a second principle, namely ‘collective liberation’ which asks the question,

“how do we move together?” as people with mixed abilities, class statuses, and experiences of race, gender, and sexual orientation.” (Sins Invalid, 2017)

In other words, moving together, as a collective, no ‘body’ can be left behind (Sins Invalid accessed 13th June 2025)¹⁷ In that sense, the Lab created its own collective access approach which has subsequently sustained individuals within the group,

“around the importance of collective access and how access is not just an individual responsibility but a shared practice- it’s something we create and sustain together.”

Artist Participant

This was married with support to navigate the industry, and the idea of what reasonable adjustments meant in this context effectively raising the stakes: as one artist says, this wasn’t clunky. It was thoughtful and centred. The understanding of access as a holistic practice with a focus of complex lived experience was cherished,

“it was invaluable to be in a space where conversations around race and disability were deeply intertwined. The facilitators brought nuanced perspectives that challenged and expanded my thinking, and I would have loved even more time for deep-dive discussions into specific themes, particularly with case studies of decolonial approaches in practice.” Artist Participant

Ultimately, a space that allowed everyone a voice emerged, and going full circle recognised the value of a space for those with a sense not only of shared history, but of shared purpose,

“It allowed for open and honest conversation around racism, tokenism, microaggressions etc that are difficult to have even in other marginalised spaces as they are often mostly white spaces.” Artist participant

This openness allowed artists to flourish.

Conclusion

The Decolonising Disability Lab was an intentional, transformative space that centred the voices, experiences, and aspirations of disabled artists from the Global Majority. Rooted in intersectionality and designed around collective access, it provided an affirming and healing environment where artists could explore their full identities, reflect on their positionality in the cultural sector, and reclaim space as both creatives and individuals.

The Lab demonstrated the urgent need for sector-wide change—where inclusion is not tokenistic or outcome-driven, but grounded in genuine understanding,

¹⁷ <https://sinsinvalid.org/10-principles-of-disability-justice>

equitable structures, and a commitment to dismantling colonial legacies. The deep emotional, cultural, and professional labour carried by artists who exist at multiple axis of marginalisation was acknowledged, supported, and met with community-building, safety, and solidarity.

Participants emerged more confident, connected, and creatively empowered. The Lab catalysed new opportunities, collaborations, and a sustained peer support network, underscoring the value of decolonised, intersectional frameworks in practice—not just as theory. The Lab was short, and of course, not perfect – and for at least one artist it was not practical enough although it was never intended to be. One artist, through an additional interview offered thoughtful and practical ways that the Lab could be extended, and these included follow-ups, mentorship or paid peer support circles, mini or seed commissions.

Ultimately, the Lab offers a model for the wider arts sector: access must be collective, spaces must be intentionally inclusive, and leadership must reflect the lived experience of those it aims to support. True progress lies in expanding the "tent"—not simply by making room at the table, but by radically reimagining who builds the table, who sits there, and how we define belonging.

Some recommendations for the sector

1. Create Intentionally Designed, Intersectional Spaces

- Ensure spaces are led by individuals with lived experience of the identities represented—particularly Global Majority disabled artists.
- Create opportunities for artists to bring their *whole selves* without being forced to perform their identity, allowing artists to define when and how their lived experience informs their work.
- Resource these spaces adequately—emotionally, structurally, and financially.

2. Adopt Collective Access as a Standard Practice

- Recognise access not as an individual burden but as a **shared, evolving practice** that everyone is responsible for.
- Budget realistically and flexibly for access needs; don't penalise or exclude artists because their access needs are perceived as too “costly.”
- Offer training on access riders and self-advocacy tools, particularly for emerging artists.

3. Decolonise the Dominant Disability Framework

- Acknowledge and address how colonial legacies and medical trauma shape different communities' relationships to disability.
- Expand beyond white Western-centric models like the Social Model of Disability.

4. Acknowledge and Address Emotional Labour

- Pay artists for consultation (particularly for those whose lived experience is relevant and central to any process/project) and for community-building—not just performance or outputs.
- Be aware of the hidden cost of self-advocacy and avoid overloading artists with administrative or explanatory burdens.
- Create systems of care where artists can rest, retreat, and return.

5. Reflect Power Structures Within Your Organisation

- Diversify leadership and decision-making roles, not just front-facing artists.
- Reflect on who holds institutional power and who is invited to shape policy and programming.
- Build reflexive practices where organisations examine their own positionality and actively unlearn colonial dynamics.

6. Expand the Tent

- Inclusion should not be rationed—design systems and funding models that assume abundance, not scarcity.
- Embrace a mindset of *expansion*, not gatekeeping: Who else needs to be in the room? What needs to change for them to thrive?

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Vital Xposure Team

www.vitalxposure.co.uk | intouch@vitalxposure.co.uk



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Appendices

Appendix 1: Copy of Call out

This is an opportunity for disabled artists from the Global Majority* who are at a formative part in their career (full details attached) and live in the South West of the UK. Artists can be working in any creative discipline. This is a paid opportunity, and we will cover travel and accommodation, where required. There will be access provisions throughout the Lab. Attached is a full description of the process and participation details for this Lab as well as a very short application form for the Decolonising Disability Lab. Closing date 12th February 2025. This Lab is collaboration with Bristol Old Vic and takes place in their spaces between 10th and 14th March 2025. The application form is also below on a google link. The Lab is led exclusively by artists from the Global Majority.

The Decolonising Disability Lab is the second Lab in Vital Xposure's new, cutting-edge three-year research programme supported through Arts Council England. The programme is delivered in partnership with Central School of Speech and Drama and explores new work from artists at the forefront of disabled-led performance.

Vital Xposure (VX) are a disabled-led touring theatre company that promotes voices with extraordinary stories to tell. VX make radical, political performance that champions hidden stories and marginalised voices.

Any further details, please get in touch.

***Note about the use of terms Global Majority and Disabled**

We are aware that terms describing protected characteristics or lived experiences that are linked to barriers to society are nebulous and problematic. This Lab has been developed in collaboration with numerous disabled artists from the Global Majority who have offered their time and insight. In addition to definitions used in law, we believe that every person has a unique experience and the right to choose their own terminology.

We are using Global Majority to refer to artists who may be of Black, Asian, East Asian, Middle Eastern or Mixed heritage.

We define disability under the social model to cover a broad scope of identities. This includes Deaf, chronically ill and neurodivergent individuals.

Appendix 2: What happened next?

2 of the Lab artists were selected to be 15 artists from the whole of the South West of England to participate in a 6 week fully funded Culture Biz Connect Incubator. The two artists are currently working on creating performances as part of the end of the programme showcase in September 2025.

1 artist is also flying off to Oslo to perform and also host an internationally renowned LGBTQI+ festival and they also recently had the courage to get up on stage on an open mic night and perform in Bristol.

CultureBiz Connect — Black South West Network

1 artist says: 'I am in the process of leaving my 25-year career that I dedicated to improving the lives of children and young people and through the Lab and the above incubator programme, I am writing, devising and producing my one woman show *Sugar Cane and Concrete*, that will be shown at the showcase in September. I will also be inviting those "gatekeeping producers" of theatres nationally to come and see the show, with a view to develop it and/or tour it. I have also been asked to be interviewed as a disabled artist from the Global Majority for a radio show on Ujima Radio, Bristol's no1 multi award winning radio station and will also be doing a Takeover show and co-presenting from August onwards, 3 times a month. As well as this there are some exciting media projects in their current inception or research and development status.

Another artist (Jasmine Thien) has been Shortlisted for the Charlie Hartill Award 2025, and she has performances in London and will also be showing her one woman show *I dream in Colour* at the Underbelly as part of Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2025. All of us from the Lab will be going to reunite and see her in London.

Underbelly

Another artist has been selected and awarded a fully funded MA in Fine Art at the Ryal College of Art from September 2025 and has been part of conversations in local events on shining a light on the arts scene in Plymouth.

Another has been awarded a Somerset Art Works Creative Pathways Bursary and will be exhibiting her work in September 2025. [Somerset Art Works | Introducing our 2025 Creative Pathways Bursary Artists 🦋 We're so excited to be working with emerging artists Caitlin Dawkes, Oliver... | Instagram](#)

Another has a few comedy shows coming up in the summer.

The artists have formed a collective: 'We are meeting up for the first time in July to see Jasmine's show in London and it will be an amazing opportunity to come together, share, reflect, pause, celebrate each other and continue the promise that we made to each other - That we have built an amazing growing community that will be each other biggest and best cheerleaders as we move forward in our creative practice.'

Appendix 3: Artist interviews

Interviews with artists: <https://vitalxposure.co.uk/vx-labs-decolonising-disability-artists-interviews/>