Decolonising Disability
Short Guide

How can disabled artists from the Global Majority be supported to bring their whole selves to their career?

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Quickfire Guide

Lived experience placed in leading and decision-making roles

Spaces need to be led by artists from the Global Majority, providing safety, confidence, space for creation and collaboration.

Access is everyone's responsibility: Collective Access

Access shouldn't sit solely with the individual artist having to explain, request and advocate for what they need. It's everyone's shared responsibility.

People should be allowed bring their whole selves into the process

It is vital to recognise intersectionality: Multi-layered and rich identities mean that individuals cannot separate their lived experiences of disability or race

Shift from Western-centric models of thinking and operating

We need to acknowledge that Disability frameworks are rooted in western perspectives which can exclude the lived realities and cultural experiences of disabled artists from the Global Majority

Respect people's time and pay everyone fairly

One of the barriers for disabled artists from the Global Majority is the unpaid emotional labour from self-advocacy and asking for access. Pay should reflect this and cover their consultation time as professionals

True progress lies in expanding the tent.

This is not simply by making room at the table, but by radically reimagining who builds the table, who sits there, and how we define belonging.



VX Lab – Decolonising Disability, 2025

Group photo of participating artists

Introduction

About the VX Labs

VX Labs is Vital Xposure's cutting-edge research programme supported through Arts Council England. The programme is delivered in partnership with sector peers and regional theatres.

VX Labs aim 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, safe, experimental space without the pressure for concrete outputs at the end.

About this guide

This short guide is based on the **VX Lab – Decolonising Disability** which took place in spring 2025 at Bristol Old Vic.

We worked with six disabled artists from the Global Majority to create a space for them to unpack their process of making work through a series of workshops. The Lab was delivered in partnership with Bristol Old Vic.

A detailed report about the process and research findings is available on Vital Xposure's website.

About the VX Lab – Decolonising Disability

Since early conversations with peers and partners, there was recognition of the unique position of *double exceptionality* whereby artists had lived experience of two distinctive characteristics. This meant they operate at an intersection, in this case being both from the Global Majority and disabled. Being at this intersection comes with even more barriers and experiences of exclusion.

Why we wanted to deliver this Lab:

"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. It is impossible to separate those things. I occupy a margin between the margins."

VX Lab Interviewed artist

It felt important to untangle what these experiences of *double exclusion* mean and how to address them.

What Are The Barriers?

Intersectionality is essential but rarely supported

Artists often feel forced to fragment their identity, either being seen as disabled or from the Global Majority, but rarely both.

- Disability arts spaces often lack racial awareness
- Global Majority spaces often carry stigma around disability

There is a need for spaces that honour the whole self, allowing all aspects of identity to coexist.

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 feel forced to unpaid emotional labour to justify their existence in artistic spaces.

At the same time, they feel invisible both on and off stage: within arts leadership, storylines, and audience representation.

- The challenge of asking for equitable treatment is often compounded by cultural and social conditioning

The disability arts sector lacks cultural nuance

Artists felt that disability discourse is heavily shaped by White Western Models (especially the Social Model of Disability) which does not reflect their lived experience as Global Majority artists who had grown up elsewhere.

- We need to adapt frameworks to better reflect cross-cultural understandings of disability.

Space design is not always suitable for those it serves

Sometimes artistic spaces and processes assumed to tackle exclusion are created without input or decision-making by people they are aimed at serving.

Artists with lived experiences continue to be excluded, underserved and ultimately marginalised as artists and individuals.

- Design of artistic spaces must involve and be led by people with lived experiences
- Agreeing consent and using culturally appropriate language are essential to feel professionally and emotionally safe in an artistic space.

How To Break Down Barriers?

Decolonising Disability, as a process, is ongoing, there is plenty of work to do.

This guide can be used by both artists and creatives, and organisations and producers.

For artists and creatives: Whether you are at an early or later, pivotal, sensitive or crucial, moment in your professional career, or experiencing a creative block, you can start making a change in your practice or find different ways to talk about barriers you experience.

"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."

VX Lab Participating Artist

For organisations and producers: Whether you are supporting artists in their development or presenting work to audiences, you can start thinking differently about your plan, structure and budget for your work, and whom you should involve. This guide can also help you better support your staff, freelancers and volunteers who may be experiencing similar barriers.

"We can't keep retrofitting access or asking artists to fragment who they are. Disabled Global Majority artists are leading the way in showing us what inclusion really looks like, expansive, generous, and transformative."

Josh Elliott, Artistic Director of Vital Xposure

"Bristol Old Vic was delighted to host and collaborate on VX's Decolonising Disability Lab. Its recommendations provide essential reading for anybody interested in interrogating the way in which we work inclusively in addressing intersectional inequities across the industry."

Ben Atterbury, Literary Manager, Bristol Old Vic

What Steps Can You Take?

Create intentionally designed, intersectional spaces

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

“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.”

VX Lab Participating Artist

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, for emerging artists and your staff.

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

VX Lab Participating Artist

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.

Acknowledge and address emotional labour

- Pay artists for consultation, input on the design of artistic spaces and for community-building, not just for 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.

"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."

VX Lab Participating Artist

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.

Expand the Tent

- Avoid rationing inclusion: make sure to 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?

The Process Of Decolonising Disability

The VX Lab demonstrated the urgent need for sector-wide change: inclusion not as a tokenistic or outcome-driven approach, but grounded in genuine understanding, equitable structures, and a commitment to dismantling colonial legacies.

It offered 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.

The concluding learning is about purposely creating space and time for the conversation to move forward individually and collectively.

“Thank you so much for creating such an intentional and affirming space with the VX Lab. 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.”

VX Lab Participating Artist

The Research Report around the Lab’s process and learning highlighted areas that we always need to bear in mind in this process:

Intentionality is essential

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

Intersectionality requires more than representation

Spaces that allow individuals to bring their *whole selves* without feeling fragmented are valued and therefore needed. Knowing the difference between meaningful inclusion and tokenism are also important for true representation.

'Making the tent bigger' should be a call to action

The metaphor of ‘making the tent bigger’ should be embed in the work ethos. In other words, this statement encourages people to expand spaces rather than gatekeep them. In this way, inclusion is not rationed but viewed as infinite.

This is about systemic generosity, not mere accommodation.

Collective safe space empowers growth

Sometimes the feeling of not being alone in one's experience can be transformative. The VX Lab became a catalyst for artistic confidence and community. This resulted in the formation of a collective ("Aggressively Civil"), where artists now continue to support one another professionally and personally.

> **"It was so refreshing to be in that space where there was so much shared experience, shared emotions and shared joy."**
>
> **VX Lab Participating Artist**

Positionality matters

Positionality acknowledges that individuals' self-identification and perception of society are shaped by a range of factors or experiences, such class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, values, views, nationhood, for example. It recognises the complexity of identity individually and collectively.

On the other hand, intersectionality recognises how forms of oppression overlap. For instance, lived experience of being from the Global Majority and disabled would subject an individual to potential oppression on at least two dimensions.

The concepts of *intersectionality* and *positionality* work in tandem. Whilst some generalisations can be made about a specific lived collectively, lives are lived individually and personal identities are unique and multi-layered.

Self-advocacy and collective access are linked

Access riders are useful, practical tools that individual artists can share to make employers and collaborators aware of their access requirements. They are a form of self-advocacy, where artists pro-actively clarify what they need to do their work and what may be a barrier to them.

A different way to approach access is by reframing it as a collective responsibility. This is a deep conceptual shift that has been emerging in creative spaces.

- The idea of "collective access" challenged individualised models of accommodation and promoted a shared ethic of care and flexibility.

Useful Data

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 not representative of the population:

- 14.7% of the arts workforce are disabled (DCMS, 2025)
- 9% of staff in organisations in Arts Council England's National Portfolio are disabled (Arts Council England, 2025
- 7 - 11% of those who work in theatre define themselves as disabled (Arts Council England, 2020)
- 11% of the NPO workforce is from the Global Majority (Arts Council England, 2020)
- 15% of the freelance theatre workforce is from the Global Majority. (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2024)

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 any additional protected characteristic.

The UK's arts sector continues to count people in singular boxes of difference without recognising the complexity of individual's sense of self and identity.

However, this has perpetuated a gap in recognising the intersections of overlapping discrimination and privilege.

As a result, arts organisations have historically targeted people from one or another category, ignoring the complexity of lived experience.

"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."

VX Lab Participating Artist

Acknowledgments

This short guide captures the key learning from our VX Labs – Decolonising Disability.

It could be applied by artists and organisations to truly bring change that artists crave for and that the sector needs to remain a relevant and stimulating component of society's fabric.

The full research report is available via the website: www.vitalxposure.co.uk

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Find Out More

VX Labs webpage

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