



in



clusion




We all have so many stories to bear  
Cry, laugh, sing, and despair;  
how will our children learn and compare  
if we're too timid to dare  
to raise the flare  
share that we care.

Tell your story.

Steven Brown, from "Surprised to be Standing"



## Not “Separate But Equal”



When the Australian band Rudely Interrupted took over the stage at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, attendees heard raw, unapologetic rock music echoing through the hall. Enthralled by the band’s magnetic music and engaging on-stage presence, the audience quickly filled the seats only to abandon them to dance in place. Like the charismatic musicians, people wanted to rock.

Rudely Interrupted is an indie rock band whose members share a variety of intellectual and physical disabilities. The group has toured the world, and their album, “Tragedy of the Commons,” was reviewed by the likes of the *Village Voice* and the *London Times*. “It’s a great honor to show the world what I’m capable of musically, and that disability presents no barrier when it comes to musical talent,” stated Rory Burnside, lead singer and guitarist, in a television interview.



“It’s a great honor to show the world what I’m capable of musically, and that disability presents no barrier when it comes to musical talent.”

Rory Burnside, musician

PREVIOUS PAGE:  
Rudely Interrupted

ABOVE: Rory Burnside, Marcus Stone, Rudely Interrupted

RIGHT, FROM TOP: Marleena Coulston Barber; Blessing Offor; Aria Stiles; Forró No Escuro; MO2 Productions; AXIS Dance Company



Rudely Interrupted's joining together of different abilities and talents to create a unique rock sound is emblematic of the success of inclusion. Their music touches its audience not because of or in spite of disability; it resonates through the universal timbre of music.

The artists of the 2010 International VSA Festival demonstrated the power of artistry in all people and the heights arts can reach in an inclusive society, from elementary school students to award-winning artists.

The writer Maya Angelou said, "We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color." Disability, a part of the fabric of humankind, has evolved into one of many ways the world is made more interesting and dynamic through diversity. If art is a means of communicating the human experience in its many forms, then the more voices that tell their stories, the richer the cultural landscape.

The 2010 festival represented a moment in history when art and artists were lauded for their artistic achievements, not labeled as "separate" or "different." This embrace of art for its own sake, regardless of the artist's personal story, represents the progress made through inclusive practices.

The word inclusion means more than accepting a person with a disability, "mainstreaming" a student,





“Music is powerful in that no matter what your background is, what languages you speak, what your perspectives are, you will react and respond to it.”

Catherine Branch, musician





or creating an environment where people with specific needs are given access. It is a state of being and perceiving the world wherein all people have the right to participate in and bring their unique personalities to bear on a joyful and respectful society.

The festival was the celebratory interpretation of VSA's core mission: that everyone, regardless of ability or disability, is entitled to equal access to the arts and arts education. VSA works to promote access on the stage, in museums and galleries, in concert halls, through street performances, on the page, and in classrooms. Many of VSA's efforts in support of inclusive classrooms and opportunities for artists are rooted in the early days of the organization when there was an acute need for artists with disabilities to have a voice. Today, opportunities to present at top venues like The Armory Show in New York City (a leading international fine art fair), or on stage at the Kennedy Center exemplify VSA's vision for the new century.

19


The first VSA festival took place in Washington, D.C., in 1979. While it has evolved over the years, the festival remains an opportunity for VSA's mission to shine as the artists and educators demonstrate the success of inclusion.

For choreographer Tamar Rogoff, performer Gregg Mozgala was the catalyst for her dance-theater piece *Diagnosis of a Faun*, which was commissioned









by VSA and performed during the festival at the Kennedy Center. “[Tamar and I] were talking about my perceptions of myself, and for a long time, it was that I thought of myself in two halves. My upper body was much more developed, and I could rely on it more than my legs due to my cerebral palsy,” says Mozgala. “This sparked in Tamar this idea of the faun. It’s really wonderful to play this fantastic character who’s in control of everything and everyone on the stage.”

*Diagnosis of a Faun* was a powerful performance because it capitalized on its dancers’ different body types and abilities. Similarly, performances by troupes such as the UK’s Blue Eyed Soul Dance Company, Portugal’s CIM–Integrated Multidisciplinary Company, and Greece’s Dagipoli Dance Company illustrated the levels of innovation achieved when dancers with and without disabilities create together. In these performances, wheelchairs are integrated into dance, dancers reinvent movement, and choreography literally soars through the air.

The concept of including all people is being embraced by society more than ever. VSA is a vehicle for this movement, to bring systemic change. It is why VSA promotes programming that spans all generations, like the family-focused Start with the Arts Festival. In the skylit atrium of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, children and their families created art, explored its value, and worked side by side with people of all abilities.



The day-long event was filled with hands-on workshops led by VSA’s Teaching Artist Fellows.

The Start with the Arts Festival is named after VSA’s signature educational resource that integrates arts into early-childhood learning. The Teaching Artist Fellowship offers professional teaching artists with disabilities coaching and educational resources that help refine their classroom practices. By bringing these two programs together, VSA puts the principles behind inclusion into practice.

Throughout the festival day, tables bustled with creative activity as children made one-of-a-kind tote bags featuring custom collages under the tutelage of Marquette Bell Johnson, who uses a wheelchair, or sketched a cartoon with Richard Jenkins, who is Deaf. On stage, performers such as the mixed-ability jazz-pop trio Lake Rise Place kept up a festive vibe with live music. An inclusive environment was created where art-making, performance, and arts education were presented in a thoughtful and fun way. And the gluey fingers, wonderfully colorful pieces, great music, and entertaining performances proved inclusion works.

The universality of art allows it to transcend ethnicity, gender, age, and disability. When those limitations fall away, the concept of “separate but equal,” is dispelled and the important exercise that art prompts—to ask thoughtful questions, seek answers, and foster a deeper

Children participating in Start with the Arts Family Day (TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT, MIDDLE RIGHT); Perlán Theater Group, *The Lion and the Mouse* (TOP RIGHT); Jose, age 9, *Tamales*, from Arte Postale (MIDDLE LEFT); Lake Rise Place (BOTTOM RIGHT)



understanding of the self and of others—takes place. In exploring the University of California Riverside/California Museum of Photography’s *Sight Unseen*, the first major exhibition of work by photographers who are blind or have low vision, the question evolved from “How can someone with limited vision take a photograph?” to considerations about the nature of vision, different perceptions of subject matter, scene, light, and the diversity of seeing.

As flutist Catherine Branch says about her classical performance, *Music of Difference*, “Music is powerful in that no matter what your background is, what languages you speak, what your perspectives are, you will react and respond to it... [It’s important] to help people who don’t have an experience of disability to know what it’s like so that misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and stereotyping doesn’t happen.”

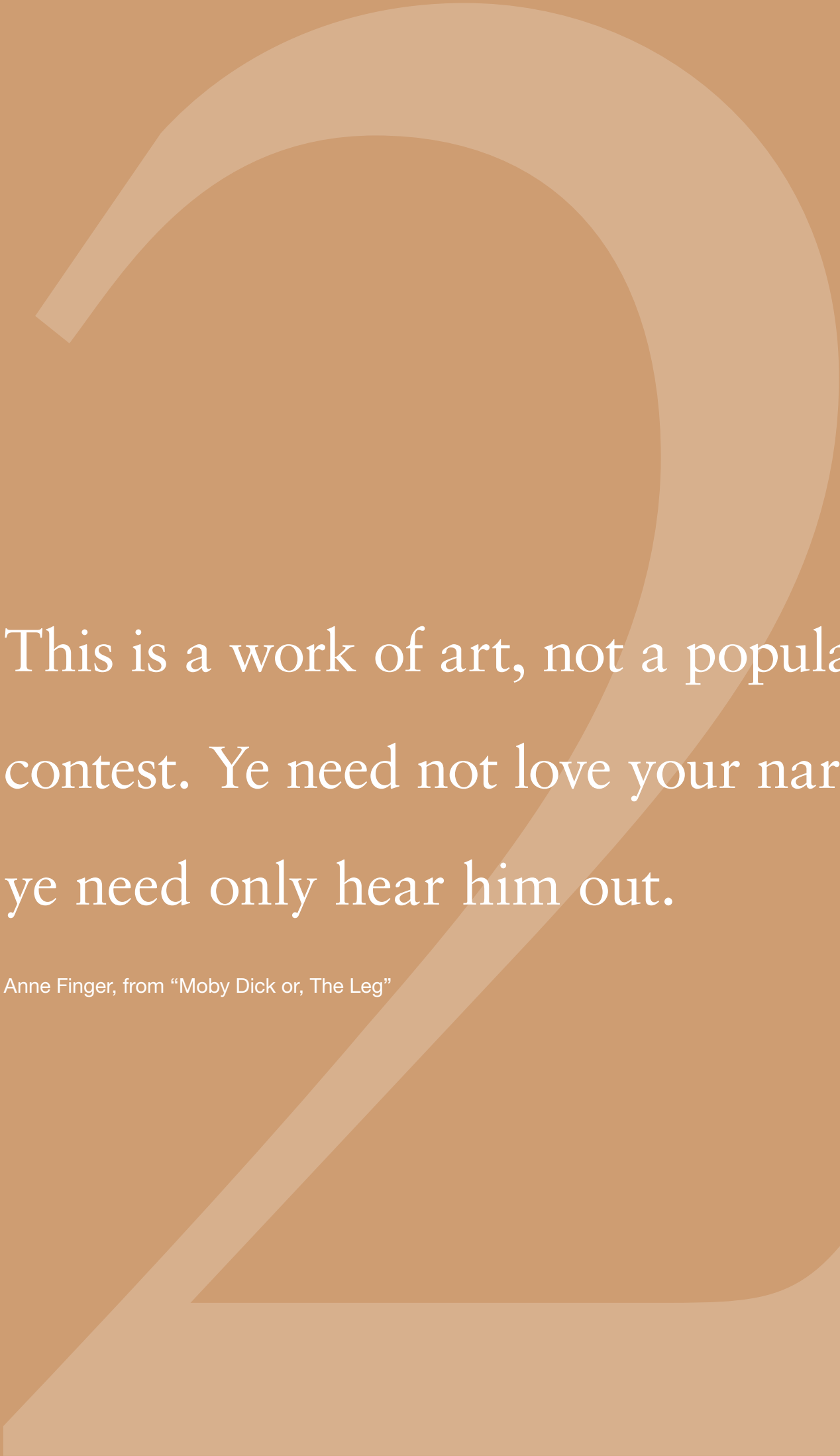
# collab



# Oration







This is a work of art, not a popularity  
contest. Ye need not love your narrator;  
ye need only hear him out.

31

Anne Finger, from "Moby Dick or, The Leg"



## The Power of Collaboration

On stage at the Kennedy Center Tai Lihua was as slim as a flame and just as bright in her gilded costume. Although she looked solitary, as the music began the hands of dancers in a practically invisible line created a golden fan behind Lihua as the China Disabled People's Performing Art Troupe performed the Thousand Hand Dance at the festival's Opening Ceremony. Lihua's face remained the embodiment of serenity as she and fellow dancers executed a dance reliant on flawless synchronization and harmony.

33

Much of the experience of creating and engaging in art relates to collaboration. In an interview with *China Daily*, Lihua, who like other members of the troupe is Deaf, explained the process that makes the performance possible. Four instructors signal the rhythm of the music from the corners of the stage. In rehearsals, the instructors turn up the music so the dancers can feel its vibration through speakers. By performance time, the music is a part of their shared being.





“I can better concentrate when I do things,” Lihua has said of being Deaf. “No matter how chaotic the outside world is, my world is as still as water.”

Physical grace like Lihua’s can bring celebrity to some. However, it is her work as part of the troupe that has brought her and the other dancers recognition. Often the “artist” is personified, perhaps even celebrated, as an individual. Art is perceived as a singular creation. Yet the world would be bereft of much fine art were it not for the coming together of artists to share the creative process, exchange ideas, capitalize on strengths, and build works that are greater than the sum of their parts. These creations represent the individual while celebrating the whole.

35

The 2010 International VSA Festival was a unique opportunity to highlight collaborative practice at its highest level and challenge conventional perceptions. Not only did artists work with others within their own genre or across artistic fields, the range of disabilities represented through the festival infused the art with an added dynamism, an energy that sprang from the physical and emotional honesty of the works. By showcasing artists who represent many genres and disabilities working collaboratively, artists and audience members had the opportunity to examine their perception of how art is created and the many ways “artist” and “artwork” can be defined.





The Moving Company is a dance troupe from Massachusetts that features performers with physical and intellectual disabilities. While each performer brings a specific ability, the power of shared experience is a catalyst for the choreography of each work. “I think the idea of it was to set the stage for democracy,” said Dawn Lane, the Moving Company’s choreographer, “to explore through movement the possibilities that everyone shared.”

Through the festival VSA highlighted its education programs, which have collaboration at their heart. An exhibition at the U.S. Department of Education, for example, featured works from VSA’s Arte Postale program. Arte Postale is an international visual arts exchange, in which students in more than 30 classrooms create pieces of art that are shared with a partner classroom in another country. The project teaches children about other cultures and provides them with a broader viewpoint on their own lives as they choose the images and experiences to share in their art. Visitors to the festival exhibition enjoyed a colorful glimpse into the minds of children and how they see the world around them.

Through its partnership with CVS Caremark, VSA conducts a nationwide call for youth art, a sampling of which was also on display during the festival in the




“I believe that art can change the world.  
You have to get people to see things and art is a  
really powerful way to change perceptions.”

Ann Colby Stocking, actor, *Gretty Good Time*

TOP: Artes Muy Especiales  
Youth Dance Company,  
VSA Guatemala; MIDDLE:  
Prudence Mabhena;  
Jack, age 6, *My Florida  
Flamingo*, from *State of the  
Art*; The Moving Company;  
BELOW LEFT: Karen Peterson  
and Dancers; BELOW  
RIGHT: Uganda Deaf Silent  
Theatre, *The Magic Seeds*;  
Narimichi Kawabata

THIS PAGE: Daniel Eichner,  
Ann Colby Stocking,  
*Gretty Good Time*





“At my school we are all different  
but we are all deaf and blind.  
We work together.”

Keona, a 12-year-old artist from South Carolina



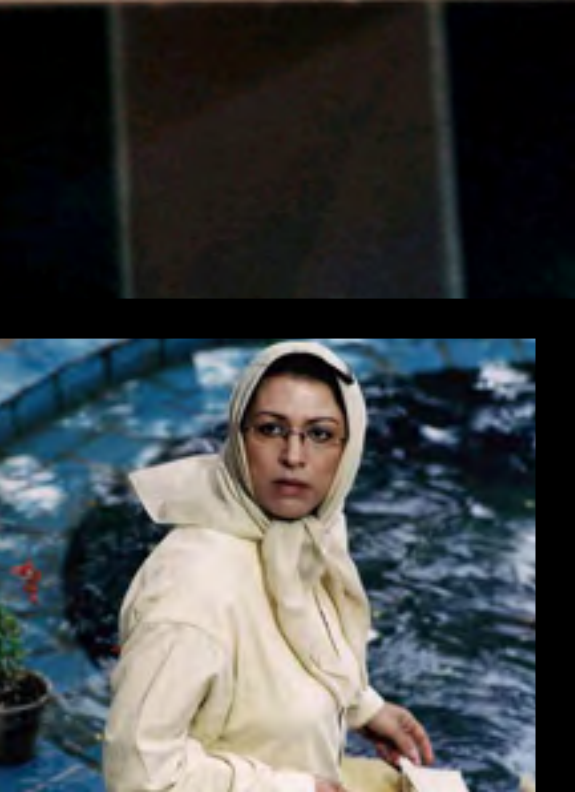
*State of the Art* exhibition. Visitors to Washington’s Union Station, a busy transit hub, could pause for a moment and reflect on the insights captured by young artists.

Keona, a 12-year-old artist from South Carolina whose mixed-media artwork was selected as part of the exhibition, expressed her perspective on inclusion when she described her piece, entitled “Diversity”:

“South Carolina is my home. Many different people live here. We are all different but we can all be friends. At my school we are all different but we are all deaf and blind. We work together.”

The specific word “collaboration” emerged in the mid-19th century, but as a creative practice it is as old as art itself. The cultural landscape would be less vibrant without chamber ensembles, dance troupes, rock bands, and theater companies. The festival abounded with examples of dynamic ensembles: the independent talents of pianist Matt Savage, a jazz prodigy, were enhanced by the addition of two other performers who created the trio that performed at the Kennedy Center Terrace Theater. Saxophonist Quamon Fowler is a former recipient of the VSA International Young Soloists Award that recognizes outstanding young musicians with disabilities and supports their career aspirations. Yet Fowler wasn’t playing solo at the festival: He was part of his own quartet, which





filled the Shakespeare Theatre Company's Lansburgh Theatre with its jazz riffs. Mixing dance, gesture, and sign language, the Uganda Deaf Silent Theatre engaged its audience by retelling a traditional folk tale, *The Magic Seeds*, raising awareness about the lives of people who are Deaf as much through their vivid ensemble work as the story itself.

Art as a collaborative act is not just a benefit to the artist or the work itself; these shared efforts affect an audience's experience and mold emerging artists as well. In order to spark a dialogue on the arts and disability, some festival performances invited audience members to interact with the artists, such as the "talk back" after *Diagnosis of a Faun*. The International Disability Film Festival held at the American Film Institute's (AFI) Silver Theatre during the festival, not only showcased collaborative works, but in the case of *See What I'm Saying: The Deaf Entertainers Documentary*, the audience discussed the film with director-producer Hilari Scarl after the screening.

Beyond the festival, VSA replicates this experience for emerging filmmakers with its apprenticeship at the renowned AFI-Discovery Channel Silverdocs Documentary Festival. This apprenticeship provides aspiring filmmakers with disabilities the opportunity to network with and learn from industry professionals.





These collaborations with professionals at the top of their field help change the industry's perceptions about artists with disabilities. The seeds of change sowed by a new generation of artists perhaps offer even greater promise. VSA partners, such as Volkswagen Group of America, Inc., provide vital support to emerging artists at a critical time in their lives: when many are deciding whether to pursue the arts as a career. These awards validate and can help finance that life-defining choice. These relationships profoundly impact both the artist and audience in ways that can only encourage new dialogue and spur the creative process.