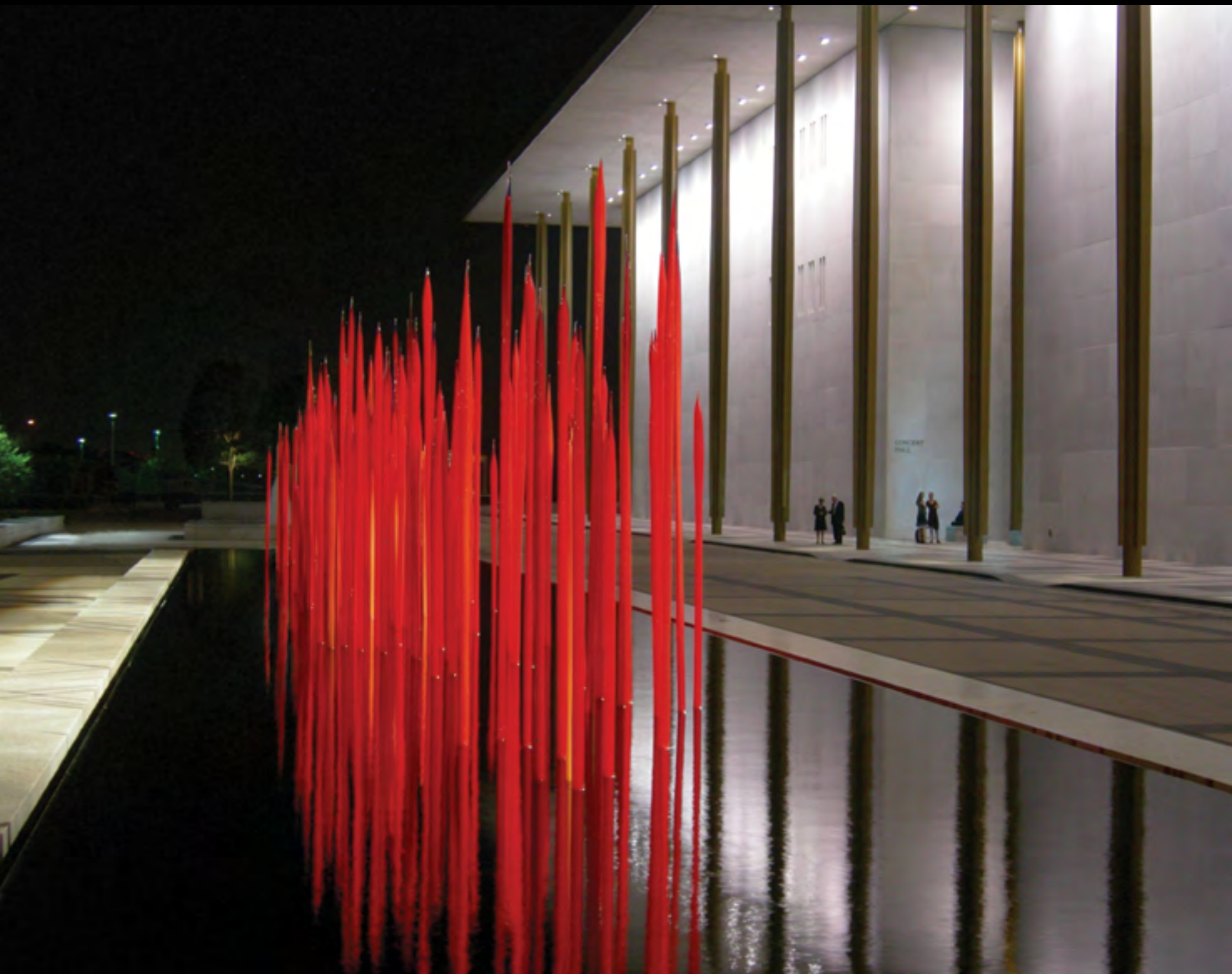




re

A photograph showing a person's hands holding a white, translucent fabric. The hands are positioned at the top left and bottom right, with the fabric draped between them. The background is a solid teal color. The lighting is soft, creating gentle shadows and highlights on the fabric and hands. The overall mood is calm and focused.

flection



What right
do I have to even talk
of color, you demand.

No more right
than you
to tell of Paris,
unless, like me,
you've inhaled
the mingled scent
of cigarettes and hyacinth
drifting along the Seine.

Kathi Wolfe, from "Dreaming of Heaven",
from *Helen Takes the Stage: The Helen Keller Poems*



The Artistic Experience

A vacationer snaps a photograph to remember a landscape. A photographer captures that same scene and calls it art. What is the difference? For the artist, the act of creating is not merely about recording a moment in time, a specific sound, or a singular color. The artist steps back from the tactile act of creation to pose questions that are both intellectual and emotional about aesthetics and the work's overarching meaning. Reflection joins with imagination and action to become the artistic experience.

“What is so thrilling about sculpture is that we make these meanings real—that is, in three dimensions, so that you can bump into them in the dark.”

Mark di Suvero, artist





During the festival, visual art installations at the Kennedy Center showcased the works of artists who have taken different roads on the journey of self-exploration and used a medium to make sense of the questions of their world. Often, these issues are universal, as in Yinka Shonibare, MBE's film work *Odile and Odette* that used symbols to explore colonialism. In the film, two identically dressed dancers of different races performed a synchronized ballet within the confines of a gilt frame, as if they were two sides of a mirror. Their dance used grace and beauty to discuss racial identity.

The renowned American sculptor Mark di Suvero transformed the Kennedy Center's Hall of Nations with his steel sculptures *Morfygon* and *Nextra*. At di Suvero's request, these kinetic sculptures were to be touched by viewers, inviting visitors into his artistic sphere. In an interview with *Sculpture* magazine, di Suvero explained how humans are naturally drawn to shapes and icons, like the geometry of his massive steel sculptures: "What is the meaning of one's life? What is the meaning of a poem? The meaning of music? These things are true to our gut reaction to life and very hard to define," he stated. "What is so thrilling about sculpture is that we make these meanings real—that is, in three dimensions, so that you can bump into them in the dark."





For Hirokazu Fukawa, creating his installation *Adrift in the Sea of Tranquility* was a means of translating his experience of living with his son who has autism into an artistic metaphor. In addition, he adapted the artwork for the festival to be accessible to a wider audience by including a ramp and Braille components. He noted that this experience challenged him as an artist and led to a whole new world of understanding.

“When I worked with Braille, I can’t read it, and that makes me feel that something’s missing. [Yet], working with Braille and in sound elements opens me up to different worlds,” he explained.

Perhaps the most profound example of art as a reflective process could be seen in the found object and yarn sculptures of the late Judith Scott. As a child, Scott’s Down syndrome and deafness were incorrectly diagnosed. In 1950 when she was seven, her parents followed the era’s medical conventions and placed their daughter in an institution where she lived with little stimulation, education, or interaction with the outside world. Thirty-five years later, her twin sister Joyce intervened and Scott was released. She enrolled in the Creative Growth Art Center in California and it was there that she revealed a prolific passion for sculpture. For Scott, who also did not speak, her sculptures were her means of communicating with the world around her.









For the solo performer, the stage is a canvas. In her festival performance of *Still Standing*, Anita Hollander used theater to tell the story of her cancer diagnosis and leg amputation. Likewise, comedians Josh Blue, Brett Leake, and Kathy Buckley used the medium of humor and the stage of the DC Improv to put their lives in the limelight. By doing so, they poked fun at stereotypes related to their disabilities and encouraged others to rethink their preconceived notions.

The artistic experience is informed by the many givens in a creator's world such as race, gender, and age. The deft hand of the playwright John Belluso was visible in the festival performance of his play *Gretty Good Time* co-produced by Theater Alliance at the H Street Playhouse. Belluso, who had a rare bone disorder and used a wheelchair, infused his own experience with disability into his characters. His skilled portrayal of a woman paralyzed with polio and another disfigured in the bombing of Hiroshima drew the attention of VSA in 1998 when Belluso received VSA's Playwright Discovery Award. This program encourages young writers of all abilities to craft a play exploring disability.

Like Belluso, festival participants with and without disabilities channeled singular aspects of their being into their art forms, adding a new layer of richness to visual, performing, and literary arts. "People sometimes ask



“You, the random pedestrian, laugh, cry, smile, frown, hug, hold, spit, push, and pull. I embrace you always. The stories that are told in the gestures of kindness, the fleeting moment of a laugh, the scuttle of an embarrassment, these are my treasure.”

Bill Shannon, interdisciplinary artist

me, do I see myself as a writer with a disability. I don't. I have a bipolar mood disorder," explained the playwright John Austin Connolly, who read his work as part of a performance with Ireland's Fishamble: The New Play Company. "That doesn't really define me, but it does open an additional door for thinking and my writing."

The artist's process of giving meaning to a medium can be an act of self-exploration. Yet the audience has a role to play in the artistic experience as well. As the composer Stephen Sondheim said, "The last collaborator is your audience, and so you've got to wait 'til the last collaborator comes in before you can complete the collaboration. And when the audience comes in, it changes the temperature of what you've written."

61

When Josh Blue, who has cerebral palsy, makes a joke out of a tired stereotype, he invites laughter. When a viewer touches a di Suvero sculpture, the feel of the steel beneath fingertips and the movement of the piece are unique to that person. The sound of a smoky jazz melody sung by Diane Schuur or Melody Gardot might bring one person joy and touch a place that's bittersweet in another. The way art affects its audience becomes a part of the holistic exercise known as the artistic experience.

Conceptual interdisciplinary artist Bill Shannon performed at the Opening Ceremony on stage at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall, yet he's just as





comfortable, perhaps more so, on a street. There he brings his blend of urban-infused dance and statement-oriented performance art to a wide and sometimes unsuspecting audience. Shannon's crutches are integral to his choreography and allow him to combine the reaction of the general public to his disability, what Shannon calls the "projected narrative," with his own moves.

In his artist statement Shannon explains that, "You, the random pedestrian, laugh, cry, smile, frown, hug, hold, spit, push, and pull. I embrace you always. The stories that are told in the gestures of kindness, the fleeting moment of a laugh, the scuttle of an embarrassment, these are my treasure." The audience is part of his experience and he is part of theirs. The artistic experience is a symbiotic relationship that is unending and always changing. This is what makes art exciting, what makes it essential to society.