

**Colin Hambrook Dennis Queen**

Disability and…Activism: Dennis Queen and Colin Hambrook

**This month Colin Hambrook, editor of Disability Arts Online, chats with musician and grassroots activist, Dennis Queen on Disability and activism.  This podcast contains strong language.**

Intro music

Colin: So Dennis Queen, it's great to meet up with you again. We're here at SICK! Festival at the Lowry in Manchester, and we've had a really good couple of days. We're going to talk, for the podcast, about disability and activism.

Music ends.

Colin: When did you first get involved in disability activism? What was your very first action that you took part in?

Dennis Queen: I think I started as kind of a bit of a personal activist, so challenging the disablism that was going on around us in our lives. Through that, I wanted to make contact with other disabled people, initially in relation my child's impairments, actually. So I wanted to meet other people with similar impairments in order to get their advice, because I could see the advice I was getting from professionals and the other parents that I was being kind of steered to was a bad idea.

Dennis Queen: So through that and meeting other people with similar impairments to my child, I then very luckily bumped into an activist from the Disabled People's Movement, who's involved in that impairment specific community. She told me about the social model, which was obviously a massive awakening, as it is for a lot of disabled people, like a light going on, and suddenly making sense of my whole life and my child's life and a lot of other stuff that was going on.

Dennis Queen: I joined Manchester Coalition of Disabled People, and through that involvement with the Coalition I started a little bit of training to learn about the social model. So obviously then I was becoming involved in an activist organization, but my first kind of ... what I feel was really getting involved in a campaign probably was a street protest. It was after seeing ... I met people from DAN on a ... I've seen DAN on the wall-

Colin: Direct Action Network, yeah.

Dennis Queen: Yeah, the disabled people's Direct Action Network, which was kind of going up till 2008, in a small way at least, less than it was in the '90s. And I was fascinated with this picture of DAN. I could see it was a picture of what they call now a kettle. I always call it a corral by accident. But it was a picture of police surrounding disabled activists. And the only thing you could see of the disabled activists on one particular picture was things like people's white canes and wheels of wheelchairs in between the feet of the police. And this was, to me, an absolutely fascinating image, this idea that disabled people who are usually seen as so harmless could be seen as so threatening that they would need to be in this situation. I couldn't get it out of my mind.

Dennis Queen: I'd had a lot of anger in my about the prejudice and discrimination that we'd been facing as a family. But at the same time, I thought DAN was this really special group that no one can join, and you have to be some whatever, I don't know, some special in-crowd. It's a thing that a lot of people worry about.

Dennis Queen: And I then met DANners at an arts event. So I went to, I think, the Independence Festival in Manchester, which would have been in the late '90s. It'd be '98, maybe, something like that. And DAN were there, and they had a stall. So I kind of took myself up to the stall a bit anxious, and sort of looked at T-shirts and things. And everyone started chatting to me, and I was just like, "Oh my God, DAN's so cool. How do you get involved? Can anyone join in?" Obviously as I know now, every campaigning organization is all hands to the pump, so they're like, "Yes, please do get involved. No, there's no special qualification."

Dennis Queen: Then I went on my first action in 1999, and that was a protest in Newcastle, mostly about institutionalization, so [crosstalk 00:04:15] nursing homes and other institutions where we get locked away.

Colin: Yes. I went to some of the actions in Newcastle a bit later than that. It was early 2000.

Dennis Queen: Ah, yeah. Those actions in Newcastle were great because we always had The Fugitives with us back then when they were still together. They're such a great band, and their songs are so kind of challenging and fun to sing. It was amazing kind of parading through Newcastle with them.

Dennis Queen: So I actually first met most of the DANners outside an occupation. They were all inside, nearly everyone was inside, and the few that were still outside holding up the front of house were going ... I arrived day two. So day one they ended up on an overnight occupation. Most of DAN was inside. Some were outside doing front of house, and they'd gone home to bed in the evening. So I then met them in the morning while we were waiting to see what happened next and if the activists were going to come out. So I kind of got to meet DAN while I was lying on the ground upside down from them, kind of with chalk drawn around me being dead. I can't remember why. We were talking about deaths in nursing homes, so there was a number of us lying on the ground. So I kind of met everyone lying on my back going, "Hi. I said I'd try and get here," and that was really good fun.

Colin: Yeah, yeah. I mean, for me, the point of going on actions like that is very much about disabled people's voices being heard and changing people's minds, although I have to say in my own head I'm never that sure about how successful we were at changing people's minds. What do you think about that?

Dennis Queen: In DAN itself?

Colin: In making a point, in making a fuss, and challenging the institutions.

Dennis Queen: I think it's difficult. I think often we have been restricted to simply making a point. I think that's really kind of the crux of it. I think there's a lot more to it for me and at least some other activists. So I think there's more to it than whether our action achieves the massive change we were after, always. So whilst that is great, and when we can get directly involved in negotiations and make actual change, which we have also done, that's really good and really important, I think there's a lot more to it than that. For us, it's also about that personal experience of activists being there, and I think-

Colin: And being part of the community.

Dennis Queen: Yeah, being part of the community, but also I think the key is really what you first said just now, which is we're fighting back. For a lot of people, that's the first time we've really sat down and challenged a powerful institution. So there are lots of other ways. We do it in activism, but for those of us who like something a bit more in your face, I think it's incredibly empowering. I hate using that word because it's got so many funny connotations. I don't think we can really talk about empowering other people, but ourselves.

Dennis Queen: I found it, especially in the first few years of activism, it really helped build me up as a person. It helped me understand that I had power too, that I can fight back. It helped me fight back in my own life as well. So I often think that when people say, "Do actions work? Do they achieve things," I'm like, "Well, I think they all achieve something." I don't think there's any bad action. I think there's always something gained from it, even if it's just by the people personally involved, but also the people who see us.

Dennis Queen: For example, when we were outside Scope sticking "Fuck off, Scope" stickers all over them with the Direct Action Network, as an example, it is challenging. So whilst Scope didn't change, Scope still haven't given over their organization to disabled people or closed all their institutions or their segregated education support or any of this stuff, at least the people around at that time get to see something different. And for the first time it challenges their belief that ... in this particular case I'm talking about campaigning against large charities that aren't controlled by us ... that maybe that what these charities are saying and doing isn't the only story, that maybe there's something else going on. And whilst "F off, Scope" isn't the politest way to say it, it certainly makes them stop and go, "Whoa, what is going on here?"

Dennis Queen: Because I think the hardest thing about campaigning about charity is that most of the people who pay in to charity are doing it for all the right reasons. They want things to be good for disabled people. They want our lives to be better. They've heard we're suffering, and they don't want us to suffer. Unfortunately they've just been given what I think is the wrong way to fix it. And actually those people I tend to appeal to and just say, "Just accept us in your lives. Welcome us in your workplace. Treat us equally when you see us. Don't pay the pound to Scope." But at the end of the day, even if it's only those few people in that local area who get to notice, I think every person does matter, because at least half of those people are going home to lives that include disabled people of all kinds, and they might have seen something today that helps them realize that we can fight back.

Dennis Queen: I think the fighting back thing is absolutely crucial. And I think whatever way we learn to do it, whether that's through protesting or through arts or through other kinds of activism and getting involved in other campaigns or through helping run organizations that are controlled by disabled people, all of these and lots of other ways, I think they all help us learn about fighting back.

Dennis Queen: That's not always been ... To me, the crux of everything I do is about disabled people fighting back. If there was one phrase that I wanted to know that that was the thing that I was doing and about, that would be it, fight back, fight back in your own life, and if and when you're stable, help other people fight back.

Colin: It's about agency, isn't it?

Dennis Queen: Mmm (affirmative).

Colin: And I think in that way there is also an element of empowering people, of giving disabled people a chance to realize that they have agency and that they can work to change things for the better in their own lives and in other people's lives. We're much stronger as a collective than we are as individuals.

Dennis Queen: That aspect of it's always really powerful. I think almost in anything I get involved in that's organized by us for us, it's that feeling of being part of a community. It's like coming away a bit more whole. I think when you've been doing it a long time like me and you have now ... because we're growing up, aren't we darling, compared to when we first met. I was such a baby activist then. But I think it's less of a contrast for us.

Dennis Queen: I know in the first years, sometimes going home I would cry, or the next day I would cry, because you'd get to feel so powerful on a protest. You finally realize that you can make a difference. And then sometimes you're going back home to quite a difficult life, or immediately the next day being treated like crap and being treated like you have no power, and feeling like you've got no power. That can be really hard. I think the contrast is less now, with the sort of down side, that kind of little drop that some of us get afterwards. So that's nice actually. The longer you're involved, you get less drop. But I think we still get that same feeling of power from being together.

Dennis Queen: I think it's really important, again, and the word I hate to use, inspiring, but being around each other inspires us to look within ourselves at the things that we struggle with and how could we make them better. So seeing other people ... because we never have role models. There's never, or very rarely, any decent role models anywhere. So when we're together everyone is everyone else's role model, and we all learn from each other. Especially as well, I think it's really important that the work we do is for people with all kinds of backgrounds, people with all kinds of impairments, because we get so much more insight from being around people with different experiences as well, because through that we recognize then what is our common ground, what is the stuff that's hurting all of us.

Colin: Yeah, we recognize the barriers because we have varying impairments.

Musical interlude. [Advert break for One Under. Full details here](https://graeae.org/our-work/one-under/).

Colin: Being a wheelchair user and having brain damage and mental health issues from that are very different things, but there are similarities in the way that society disables us and devalues our life and pushes us into the background.

Dennis Queen: Yeah, and excludes us and hides us, locks us away. So I think the big thing as well, the common ground on those particular issues often is, for me as well, is again just institutionalization or the constant threat of it may be happening as well. Very difficult to live with, I think. But if we didn't get those opportunities to be together, we don't realize that we have those common issues.

Dennis Queen: So you'll have disabled wheelchair users maybe with certain impairments in one side going, "Oh no, people might lock us away. They don't do that to anyone else." And on the same side we might have people in the mental health system who've been locked away and saying, "No one does this to anyone else." I think it's so important that we recognize that these two things come from exactly the same place. We're just being sorted by impairment. It's the same thing for the same reason. There is no difference apart from what I think are minor details.

Dennis Queen: And again, it helps as well, I think, us to make the jumps to other movements too. So we see this kind of pipeline to institutionalization for a lot of disabled people. A lot of people with all kinds of different impairments, that's a threat for. But also we have that in common with people of color who are dealing with a pipeline to, often, prison and other institutions, and who also will be more likely to be institutionalized as disabled people. If you're a person of color, you're more likely to end up with the police called instead of an ambulance when you need help. The experience of being from these two different marginalized communities kind of compounds it. So I think all this learning, it helps us understand each other, but then also, I think, understand other movements and find common ground with them.

Dennis Queen: I'd like to see a lot more coworking going on about that, you know, people starting to see the link between things like being a refugee, about seeking asylum, about being put in detention camps, about prison, about other institutions, like nursing homes and mental health institutions and so on, because again they're all part of the same process. It's like a different brand. It's like when you buy washing powder and you're overwhelmed because there's so many ways to institutionalize so many people. You're like, "Oh my God. These look almost the same. They've just got different names on." To me, that's what it's like.

Dennis Queen: I think it's very important we recognize that, because everything is always individualized to us as disabled people. We're always told our problems are because of us, that because of our impairments we can't get in and we can't get involved. We can't be part of everything because of these impairments. And to recognize that it's part of a massive social system that is involved with capitalism and eugenics, both of these things together, is why we're all in this situation. I think it's got to be of massive benefit to us individually, but also from a kind of campaigning point of view. If we don't understand that ...

Dennis Queen: People still go around ... We had this yesterday: "We wouldn't abort fetuses just because they're LGBT." Well, yes, we damn well would. And yes, we damn well would because the child's of color, if we thought we could get away with it. Other communities face the same issues too, and they come from exactly the same place. The eugenics that we face as working class people, the eugenics we face as disabled people, the eugenics that people of color face, they're all part of the same deal. I am ranting, but I do think this is really important.

Colin: It's a good rant. It is important. Disabled activism has changed a lot in the last 20 years, and I think Disabled People Against the Cuts has kind of led the way in a new brand, if you like, of disability activism. When did you first start getting involved in DPAC?

Dennis Queen: So DPAC I think was, if I'm correct ... sorry. I think we started in kind of 2009, 2010. So DPAC started kind of just as DAN finished. I wasn't involved in the setting up. I was very busy at that time, but I probably would have got involved if I'd been around. I got involved a couple of years in, with DPAC. And yes, we've got a slightly different style of protesting, and we've got a particular focus on particular issues. Although saying that, we stretch that as far as possible anyway, so what we include and what that defines is kind of up to us, especially because we have lots of local chapters.

Dennis Queen: So in Manchester Disabled People Against Cuts, which I'm most involved in, as well as sometimes the national stuff, we will interpret our kind of remit as we like. So for example, Autistic activists came to us recently and said, "We want to do a campaign. It's about what happened at Mendip House," which had a massive scandal in the press because people were being harmed in the institution, which was an institution for people with autism and learning difficulties. If it had been DAN we'd have just been like, "Yup, that's part of our free all people campaign, but we're on that," whereas we're DPAC. So I was kind of like, "Yeah, we really want to do that," when we all got together at our meeting, "but does it fit our remit?" And everyone was like, "Yeah, it fits our remit. Whatever fits our remit as we like." Okay, fine. Well, that's good. So then we all went and joined in.

Dennis Queen: So yeah, we say we're Against the Cuts, but really we're against things that the cuts are caused by, so that doesn't mean we'll exclude things that are not strictly about the cuts. And also obviously the cuts themselves, we could say, affect how care is being delivered in the institutions as well. It's also causing us to be institutionalized more. So to me that's still part of our campaign. But yeah, mainly we campaign at government against the cuts themselves.

Colin: Right, yeah.

Colin: In some senses to be a disabled person is to be an activist, because we're so much at the bottom rung of the ladder and-

Dennis Queen: Yeah, we have to fight for everything or die. It really is. It's like fight or die.

Dennis Queen: It is hard though, isn't it? It is fucking hard sometimes.

Colin: It's a constant struggle because we can't just be people.

Dennis Queen: No. Sometimes you just want to melt away, don't you? You really wish you could. The other day a thing happened. I'm always telling people how glad I am to be alive, how my life gets better every day, but even I have moments when I'm like ... People usually say to me, "Oh, you're so happy every time I see you." I'm happy because I'm out. I'm happy because I've got my electric wheelchair. I can get about now. My life is better. But then the other day I twice in a row couldn't get a taxi to take me off a rank. Normally I would just shake it off. I'd go for the third taxi. I might be getting more impatient by then, but just some days you just don't feel like it, do you? I kind of was like, "Okay, I can't do this." I wheeled round the corner and had a cigarette and texted my friend and went, "I don't know what to do. I just want to go home."

Dennis Queen: Yeah, I think we all have moments when we're just like, "I just can't do this all the time," because it's humiliating as well. You got to fight for every single thing, when there's people stood by watching me fail to get both these taxis. And you could see they knew that I was just being lied to. You can see them going, "Oh no." I don't know, normally I might chat to them about it and try another taxi and try and ... you know? But just this one day ... sometimes you get bloody sick of it. And it's no wonder that so many of us do have times that we might not feel like we want to go on anymore. But if people just stop treating us the way they do, I think a lot of us would feel that way a lot less.

Colin: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Dennis Queen: So you also wanted to talk about Peterloo, didn't you?

Colin: Yeah, yeah, because I love that story that you told. Was it Jeremy Deller, I think who was commissioned to erect this statue-

Dennis Queen: This erection. Let's call it an erection. This monument, yeah.

Colin: ... to remember the Peterloo Massacre. Was it 100 years or 150 years? I can't remember.

Dennis Queen: We just celebrated the bicentenary, 200 years since the massacre. It's very interesting, this, because while it's not ... I usually stick to campaigning about issues that I think are really crucial to our lives, not things that I think are sticking plasters. Ordinarily I wouldn't be that interested in a monument. But I do think this monument is really important, and hopefully it'll be apparent why when I tell you more about it.

Dennis Queen: I didn't know who Jeremy Deller was before this monument was made, but I hear he makes politically motivated art. So he designed what is a lovely monument, as long as stairs are okay for you. So the concept of what the monument is, which I'd like to talk about first because I think it's ingenious, and this is why I'm involved in campaigning about it ... When he was given the brief to design a monument, he was asked not to make something figurative, so not something that was a statue of people being slaughtered, because we have one of those in Preston already to the Peterloo Massacre. So we don't want to just replicate previous ideas.

Dennis Queen: What he came up, the concept that he came up with as an artistic concept, is absolute brilliance. So his concept was this monument could be a platform. This monument could be a platform that the people of Greater Manchester and beyond can use to rally on, to speak from, because the key thing about the Peterloo Massacre was about how ... one of the key things at least, as well as slaughtering the crowd on the day when people were gathered to hear political activists speak about politics and their right to involvement in democracy, the speakers were cut down on the platform. They were slaughtered, cut to pieces with sabers by the army who had been sent in by the local judge and the council.

Dennis Queen: So the monument then being a platform that people can speak from is so powerful. It is a powerful idea in itself. In relation to the story that it's about, it's extremely powerful because it's like a kind of reparation to kind of say, "Look, Manchester, we did this thing. We acknowledge we did this thing and it was bad, and the only thing we can do now is help you participate in local democracy." I think that is a bloody brilliant idea. I just love the idea.

Dennis Queen: The only problem with the idea was how that was realized is a monument of steps. It's a circular ... It's discs of steps that get smaller towards the top. I always call it Peterloo Tower, just for fun. It's not really called Peterloo Tower. It actually kind of looks a bit like a plinth, but the idea is instead of having a statue on top or an object, like with the Fourth Plinth, that what goes on top of it is people. We rally from it. But also in between the rallies we use it as something that the public can inhabit. That was part of his phrase. The idea of the monument is that the public should inhabit it. It's not just to be looked at.

Dennis Queen: So that was great, except for the fact that a tower of steps. There's no Braille map, because there's a lot of markings on it. Things are directional. They point towards certain places. There are many names on it, engraved on the sides of the steps. There are symbols on the top of the steps. There's no Braille key to it or raised map anywhere. It's steps, so everyone who can't use steps can't use it, which keeps being minimized to "Wheelchairs can't go up it," which is really not the case. This is about much more than wheelchair users. It affects a lot people with mobility impairments, a lot of people with visual impairments, and so on. They were told while it was being designed that steps might not be a great idea. But unfortunately, as is often the case, people don't listen to just a few disabled people.

Dennis Queen: So by the time the wider campaign was going, they had not told us they were already paying builders and that we couldn't stop it. So we tried to campaign for them not to build it and not to carry it on as it got taller and taller, because we went back every week. We still go back every Thursday for a vigil, and we will until we know what's happening. The stage we're at now is that council have agreed to make it accessible. They're saying fully accessible. They offered us seven possible solutions, then a month later they told us only one of them was possible, which we said, "But that one is not a good idea." So we've asked them to look at more.

Dennis Queen: So that's where we're at at the moment. We haven't found an actual solution. They're now saying they won't rush forward to just another cock up, because they've spent £1 million on this, that they will make sure they design it properly. So we don't know when it will be ready, but we are still holding out in hope for a solution. But we'll see what happens there because that's still going.

Colin: One of the things that really impresses me about you is the fact that you're very eloquent, but the way that you join the dots in so many things, and you're involved in so many different strands of activism. There's the activism as an artist; there's the activism as a disabled activist, but also your trans activism.

Dennis Queen: Yeah. I also get involved a little bit sometimes in climate activism, and also have been known to support at the back on the Black Lives Matter campaign as well. I love Black Lives Matter. Yeah, I like being involved in a few different ... I'm kind of a bit of a jack of all trades. A lot of people specialize. I'm not really very specialized, and I'm not trained in anything. So I kind of just pick up where I think it's useful. I drop in and out.

Dennis Queen: I love doing the arts, and I like making that connection, because, for me, the art I do is absolutely 100% connected to my activism, and it's all about fighting back. And where I can, I make tools and pass those on, because I think music and poetry as well are both the same, really, in the sense that they help give people political ideas in an easy to swallow sound bite. It's like having a nice, sweet breakfast cereal. It's easier for a lot of us to learn that way than maybe from an academic text, which other people also learn really well from. So I think having a selection of ways we can learn helps all of us. And I always learn a lot from arts. I pick up ideas from that. Then I will go and ask questions and find out more as well. Because it's just brief doesn't make it not useful. It just means that that brief idea might take you further to more detailed information.

Dennis Queen: And it does all connect together, everything from the grassroots all the way up to, as we were talking about before, kind of that top layer in academia. I think it's really important that we're engaged on all levels, because without a bit of everything ... I hear a lot of people say there's this one way or that one way, and this is the way we should do it. I think actually what we need is lots of ways, because everyone's different. Different things speak to different people. And a lot of my art ...

Dennis Queen: One thing though I think I don't do and probably should do more, and I want to try and engage with more, is that I've tended to stick within what I know some other artists I won't name, just because it'll sound bad, would say is kind of ... I stay a bit in the ghetto of disability art. My arts work tends to be aimed at disabled people, not anybody else. I really couldn't care less if anybody else notices it or likes it. They're not supposed to care. That I should probably expand a bit more, which is possibly why I find it so exciting working on a non-disability project for a change, just recently with the Peterloo thing.

Colin: You say how much you love the Black Lives Matter's campaign. It's always been a real concern of mine that Disability Arts, as a movement, has been so deathly white, and the struggle to include diaspora has been difficult. I'd love for Disability Arts to be more connected with the Black Lives Matters.

Dennis Queen: Me too, yeah.

Colin: What's been your experience of those campaigns?

Dennis Queen: A bit like DAN, I love Black Lives Matter because it reminds me of being ... They do have kind of DAN-style tactics. They don't mess around. They just do it, and they will break the law, and they will be strong, and they will say strong things. I think it's really important that we support them.

Dennis Queen: I really only have been involved a little bit, kind of on a local level mainly, although I've been other places, with, you know, things like when I heard the young women were setting up a group, I was like, "Have you got access to a printer, because I've got a great laser printer? I can print you 1,000 leaflets." They're like, "That'd help, yeah." So just little bits of help like that, and then just being there at the back, not exactly holding people's coats but just showing some solidarity, you know? I don't think it would be good if they were swamped with white people trying to show solidarity necessarily, so if there was a lot then perhaps I would just leave it. But I think it is important that at least some of us kind of turn up and go, "You know, this is right."

Dennis Queen: We need radical activism in all movements. I think that's why I think Black Lives Matter is a very important campaign, and I think also, again, because it's focused on stuff I think is really, really important, just stuff about the guts of our lives and guts of people's lives in general, because the stuff Black Lives Matter talk about is about that edge, about the threats to people's lives just because of being someone of color.

Dennis Queen: I think back to the arts question, I think that's really important. This one of the reasons why I wanted to get involved in joining in with the Disability Arts Online committee, because I think it's really important that multiply marginalized disabled artists have got a strong presence in the arts world. I think we've got a way to go on some fronts, especially for people of color.

Colin: A huge way to go, yeah.

Dennis Queen: Yeah. And we need to work out the answer to that. I certainly don't know it, because I don't think any white artist is going to come along going, "Hey, I know the answer," because that's just not how it works. What we've got to do is be getting the people in who can do that, and I think-

Colin: It's got to be a conversation, hasn't it? It's got to be about collective getting together and putting stuff on the table. And recognizing the different levels of privilege I think is really important.

Colin: ... closing this up now. Dennis Queen, it's been fabulous talking to you. It's been a brilliant discussion, and the conversations that we've had as a group with SICK! Festival has been really very inspiring. The next challenge, I think, is to how we continue these conversations and how we broaden them out, how we include more people of color, and more people with learning difficulties into the mix.

Dennis Queen: I really agree. And thank you for having me. It's always awesome to talk to you. I do love a good ramble, darling.

Colin: Yeah, it's been great. Thank you.

Musical break

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