



July 1, 2022

Communities

Augmented by web3

# How web3 is empowering a disability movement

Disability

Equality

From beds and behind screen readers, with nothing more than an internet connection. Mariquita Philippa de Boissière speaks to the disabled leaders who are setting new standards in web3, explores how blockchain can usher in new heights in accessibility, charts the evolution of disability justice from web2 to web3.

*Photography by Malicious Sheep, a disability justice activist from Canada.*

As hoodies and newly-doxed faces flew into New York for NFT NYC last month, a far smaller group of sharp-suited delegates and the representatives of well-connected NGOs flew out after attending the United Nation's conference on disability rights. While officials gear up to continue discussions back home, disabled people from across borders and time zones continue to tackle the issues that affect them, collectively, across the blockchain.

Nonetheless, this did not discourage representatives from 185 countries coming together to further an agenda of inclusion for disabled people, formally known as the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. But with an implicit emphasis on independence and individualism, set against a backdrop of austerity politics that has pervaded much of the world since the annual conference was established in 2008, the UN process has been criticised for its limited success in improving the material conditions and levels of access for the hundreds of millions of people around the world chronically impacted across a range of physical, mental, sensorial, or psychiatric conditions.

### Between liberated zones and encoded ableism

Malicious Sheep, a Canadian non-binary artist and disability justice activist, has no intention of waiting through years of UN conventions for change, or "trying fruitlessly to reform systems of power which uphold, enforce, and maintain prejudicial oppression." Instead, they perceive, in web3, "a more effective avenue for change," one that provides a model which "institutions will follow in time."

Disability justice first emerged as a framework in 2005, within the context of web2 and its emerging shift towards user-generated content and social media. Patty Berne, one of the early founders, cites the emergence of new online "liberated zones" as a catalyst for an new upsurge of activism, but, writing in 2015, they note that disability justice is still an emerging concept. "In many ways, disability justice is a nascent framework that some call a movement, still identifying the 'we'"



*Photography by Malicious Sheep*

While this new iteration of the internet represented important gains for the disabled community, it also created new barriers. TheUberhuman, who describes himself as "possibly the only deaf founder in web3", notes the reluctance of news and social media platforms to incorporate live captioning as a major and long-standing barrier to access. "In web2 we moved to this video era of social media, and it took 10 years to give us captions. On YouTube, I still have to wait eighteen hours for a breaking news video to be captioned. By the time I get to see it, it's old news."

TheUberhuman argues that the proprietary nature of web2 was instrumental in the internet's failure to live up to Tim Berners-Lee's founding vision of universal access. His project, **DeafHandzNFT**, aims to bridge the gap between hearing and deaf communities by encouraging hearing communities to engage with sign language, whilst engaging the disabled community in a venture to co-develop the AI tools to digitise and translate sign language in real-time.

Examining the promise of web2 internet-based digital technology to open up the world to people with disabilities, Katie Ellis (University of Western Australia) and Mike Kent (University of Brighton, UK) argue that the concentration of power within the walled gardens of Big Tech companies, such as Apple and Microsoft, led to deviations from accessibility standards. "Digital technology is often constructed in the same social world that people with disability are routinely disabled by." Consequently, they add, "there exists a false perception amongst designers that accessibility represents a restriction on creativity." In practice, a universal design approach can aim for accessibility across the broadest range of needs and characteristics, and when it is, it can be

beneficial even for users without disabilities. For Ellis and Kent, despite the difficulties, "technology is the last best hope for accessibility."

“As a disabled person,

that's made a huge difference. It's just mind-blowing."

*Synkitty, on the opportunities for disabled artists in crypto art*

Indeed, fifteen years on, we have a new configuration of the internet: one that runs on open-source code, is both decentralised and permissionless, and is sparking a new wave of online organising and social innovation that is rooted in community. With this, can web3 address the accessibility shortcomings that were common across web2?

Synkitty, a disabled Australian mixed-media artist, has been responding precisely to this question. Drawing upon both personal and collective experiences of disability, She has led the production of best practices guidelines in a web3 context, building upon the Accessibility Guidelines produced by the World Wide Web Consortium. Malicious Sheep, a fellow contributor, explains that the guidelines contemplate accessibility across web3 "from exchange to wallet to marketplace," and are a landmark contribution towards ensuring a truly inclusive web3.

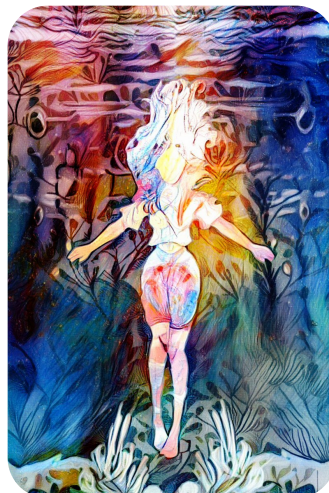


*One of Synkitty's artworks from her collection, Nature*

"In web2 we moved to this video era of social media, and it took 10 years to give us captions. On YouTube, I still have to wait eighteen hours for a breaking news video to be captioned. By the time I get to see it, it's old news."

*TheUberhuman, on the internet's failure to live up to its accessibility goals*

What is perhaps even more striking is how access to unmediated, borderless, peer-to-peer networks is creating access to resources and facilitating collaboration on levels previously unseen both between and within historically marginalised communities. Teia, a community-owned NFT platform "for experimentation, trading ideas, and works of creativity," offered Synkitty the opportunity to bypass the barriers she faced from traditional galleries as a disabled artist. For the first time, she was able to connect directly with collectors. "As a disabled person, that's made a huge difference. It's just mind-blowing. There are often extra healthcare bills we have to cover; many of us need carers. Without financial independence, people can get trapped in a cycle of abuse with untrustworthy or inexperienced carers and no way out. It's all too common."



*Breaking Free (Dysphoria), by Bobby Kumar*

For transgender artist of colour Bobby Kumar, NFTs represent the means to overcome the financial exclusion that keeps many disabled, queer, trans, and BIPOC people in poverty; "I was not initially a fan of it, actually. I'm still not exactly a fan of it, but I needed the money and I wanted a way to show off my art to the rest of the world." Bobby, who began experimenting with AI art in response to a degenerative condition, soon realised that through NFTs, she had the opportunity to support local communities often faced with social discrimination. Their Eden Project collection was created to support Unit 2, a safe space for trans and two-spirit communities in Toronto.

TheUberhuman is clear about the broader implications of these shifts. "Web3 has the capacity to really disrupt society as we know it." On one hand, he foresees how "accessibility is going to be a new competitive edge for businesses," creating

large revenue streams for businesses who build tools and interfaces that serve deaf and otherwise disabled communities. The idea is that with videos stored on the blockchain, serving them to

consumers will be a myriad of mini YouTube's, some of which will be built around user experiences tailored to disabled communities, rather than on behemoth that believes it has bigger fish to fry. He also anticipates an altered socio-political chemistry, driven by a spectrum of neurodivergent approaches to problem-solving. He explains that "web3 has given me an opportunity to really step into my identity as a deaf person and own it in a way that I hadn't before. It has allowed me to bring people into the world that I live in and suddenly it's like, 'oh, I don't have to keep up with you, you have to keep up with me!"

The extent to which disability justice, which sees itself as an explicitly anti-capitalist movement, can find expression within web3 remains to be seen. To some, web3 has already rushed too far in the direction of financialisation, but the vision for the movement articulated by Mia Mingus, another early founder of the movement, chimes with the disabled-led transformations already seeded on the blockchain. In 2010, she imagined a world "where our organising and activism is less segregated, where our movements and communities are accessible and don't participate in the isolation of disabled communities. I imagine places where we fight for whole and connected people, families and communities."

What could society look like as the multiple barriers that enforce segregation are dismantled or coded out of existence? Malicious Sheep argues that "our disabilities and neurodivergencies are part of who we are, but it is not all we are – it is simply brought to the foreground of our existence because of barriers and prejudice. Our survival depends on it. The antonym to disable is not able, it is *enable*. We are disabled by society, the onus is not on us. Anyone at any time could become disabled, so it is in our collective interest to unpack our internalised and externalised ableism to move forward into web3."



Written by  
**Mariquita de Boissière**

July 1,  
2022

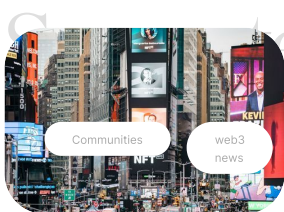
Communities

Augmented by  
web3

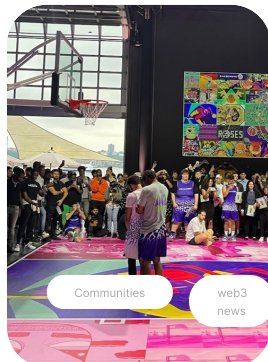
Disability

Equality

Malicious Sheep, TheUberhuman, Bobby Kumar, and Synkitty.



**CLOSING  
THOUGHTS  
AT NFT.NYC:**



Suggested Articles

See all



**KICK-OFF  
AT  
NFT.NYC:**

# COVERAGE FROM THE GROUND (3/3)

Closing thoughts from Randy Ginsburg on NFT.NYC: why the community is what makes web3 special, why the space needs more mature voices, and why he'll see you there next year.

RANDY GINSBURG

JUNE 27, 2022

# IN FULL SWING AT NFT.NYC: COVERAGE FROM THE GROUND (2/3)

Randy Ginsburg reports from an ever-bustling New York city swarmed with web3 panels, parties, and other events. Today's diary explores all angles on IP in web3, plus a historic basketball tournament held by the Krause House.

RANDY GINSBURG

JUNE 22, 2022

# COVERAGE FROM THE GROUND (1/3)

Culture3 had boots on the ground to capture NFT.NYC and witness how the world's biggest NFT conference was holding up in the bear market. Answer? Pretty good.

RANDY GINSBURG

JUNE 20, 2022

## TODAY'S INFLUENCE

“Web3 automatically generates a different type of engagement from the end user. Rather than just being a consumer of that platform, they become a lot more engaged and invested into what they're doing there” — Lord Truffington

Stay up to date with the Culture3 community

Enter your email

Submit

Copyright © 2022 Culture3. All rights reserved.

Artists, builders and communities are redefining the future as we know it. Culture3 tells their stories about fulfilling the cultural promise of the internet. We elevate diverse and eclectic voices to exhibit the creative vitality of web3 artistry, the innovative and genuine use cases being developed by web3 builders, and the meaningful communities augmented by and built on web3.

[Collections](#)

[Artistry](#)

[Builders](#)

[Communities](#)

[Culture3](#)

[Story](#)

[Contribute](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Terms](#)

[Community](#)

[Twitter](#)

[early@culture3.com](mailto:early@culture3.com)