

Episode #: 3

Executive Producer: Emilia Nielsen

Producers: Emily Blyth and Coco Nielsen

Music: [Prince Shima](#)

Episode Title: Quilting a More Just Future

Guest: Jenna Reid

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Website: EmiliaNielsen.com

Transcript

(References included below)

Jenna Reid (JR): Disabled artists have a lot to offer to the arts world and are not simply looking for programs to fill their time.

[Music: Ascending, bright, twinkly, uplifting, electronic]

Emilia Nielsen (EN): This is *On Being III*, a show about creativity, disability and identity. I'm your host Emilia Nielsen.

[Music grows then fades]

EN: Today I'm excited to share with you a conversation I had with artist, activist, and self-proclaimed "reluctant academic" Jenna Reid. Jenna is the artistic director of Kickstart Disability, an organization out of Vancouver that supports and celebrates artistic excellence among artists with disabilities. Jenna herself is a textile artist, who creates, among other things, large-scale banners that uplift messages for racial justice and radical change. During our conversation we talked about artist residencies – both how much potential they hold, but also how much further we need to go to make them accessible; the sometimes circuitous journey many of us take toward identifying as an "artist," and about Jenna's long-standing personal connection to the craft of quilting. Here's that conversation.

EN: Hi, Jenna, thanks so much for joining us on *On Being III*. I'd like you to start by introducing yourself. And by that I mean introducing yourself and anything that strikes you as important off the top that you want to share with our audience.

JR: Absolutely. So my name is Jenna Reid. My pronouns are she and her. And when I introduce myself, I like to reference the late psychiatric survivor Diana Capponi in saying that I'm a woman who wears many hats. I move through this world as a cis queer woman, a white settler, a psychiatric survivor, and I'm an artist, an arts administrator, an activist, and a somewhat reluctant academic.

EN: I love those many, many hats. I think a life is made more rich, when we embrace many hats. Some of them seem to be placed on our heads, maybe without our initial embrace, or consent, and then the others, we choose, those kinds of social locations and roles that we play. And I

was so excited to read the announcement that you would be taking on the role of artistic director of Kickstart Disability Arts and Culture, an organization and I kind of feel like, a festival, kind of that I that I followed for many years, there's always this sort of celebratory aspect going on with Kickstart. But I had imagined for you, in your particular role, it's a multifaceted thing that you're doing with the organization and be so curious about what you've been up to lately, and kind of how it all started for you with them.

JR: Yeah, I mean, that's a complex question. So I have been with Kickstart for over a year now. And as the Director of Kickstart Disability Arts and Culture, I'm responsible for the creative direction of the organization. So currently, we're a small organization with only two permanent staff, myself and the administrative director, Kait Blake. And it is true that Kickstart initially started as a festival-based organization, and then made some shifts over the years to move out of the festival kind of way of doing things and into a more fulsome programming.

EN: Yeah, so it sounds like Kickstart, like you said, it's this more fulsome thing, what are some of the aspects that make it more than a once a year occasion? What are you doing in that regard?

JR: Yeah, for sure. So now what we do within our programming at Kickstart is we develop things like artistic training and workshops for disabled artists. We develop events and celebrations in collaboration with other artistic and community organizations. We do artistic residencies, we do curatorial work in terms of preparing for exhibits in galleries or artist-run centres, as well as performances and other types of presentation of artistic work.

EN: That sounds like a really big portfolio! That sounds like a lot for you and one other paid staff. That also sounds kinda like how it is in a lot of organizations, arts or otherwise, that have disability, perhaps, at the core of their mandate. I can only imagine taking on this role over the last year, given the global pandemic we are living through and with. What are the kinds of conversations that have come up for you in this leadership position? But I mean, also in the people that you're supporting. Those conversations are always nuanced, right? They're not necessarily the same conversations that other folks might have about access and public spaces and artistic production and all...and all those kinds of things.

JR: Yeah, so there's so much to consider around, kind of, what the pandemic did or how it impacted the work that we do at Kickstart. It allowed us in some ways to slow down and to pay attention to what was meaningful in some of the shifts we were making. So it really was in the pandemic that we were starting to put into place some of this more fulsome programming. And for me, as I took up the role of artistic director, I was really thinking about shifting the programming so that it's not occurring as frequently, but that it might be occurring in a way that has more meaning for our membership. This is complicated, it's a complicated thing to do, you know, to shift how you do programming and what that programming looks like. I do know that it was really important for our membership to have online options throughout the pandemic, and even now – and we're quite a ways into the pandemic – our membership still really wants most, if not all of our events to happen online. We're still doing some stuff where we're starting to

integrate some in person things. But we are trying to take a lot of precautions that really center the most marginalized within our communities and think really carefully around what it means to build in access. Also, with, like, the slowing down of the programming, and the shifting over, I'm starting to think about what it means to make programming that is inclusive and accessible to our membership, is connected and rooted within the politics of our community. But is also not infantilizing or taking shape as say, day programs or programs that are not honouring and valuing that disabled artists have a lot to offer to the arts world and are not simply looking for programs to fill their time.

[Music: Quick, light, percussion, descending keyboard, minor tones, chill]

EN: Yeah, no kidding! Right? Like, I mean, that would be such a normative assumption. I just have to follow up with this artist residency that I read about that you and Syrus Marcus Ware are collaborating on – you'll have to tell me about how that came about. But this seems to be like the antithesis of something to fill your time in the day. I mean, residencies are intense from my experience. They're very full-on because you're usually living on site, eating, sleeping in proximity with others. A friend at the Banff Centre said "We're alone together here," right? We're alone doing our own practice, but we're together in this group. And I'm talking all around this but this is the upcoming residency I believe at Artscape on Gibraltar point, which is on the Toronto islands in Tkaronto. And I love this, it's all caps: TAKE ROOT AMONGST THE STARS, a mad deaf and disabled arts residency. So I guess first maybe, some of our listeners might be a bit unfamiliar even with the concept of a residency. Perhaps we should start there and then we can talk specifically about why a residency specifically for mad, deaf, and disabled artists is important. What's your experience with the concept or the reality of a residency?

JR: Yeah, well, the first time I had access to a residency, it actually was very unfamiliar to me as well, because my own background in the arts does not come from formal training. So residencies to me were completely unknown until I did my first one. And even in that, I would say, based on kind of my own experiences of disability and a few other kinds of intersecting things, I'm not sure that I even fully understood how magical residencies could be in that first experience, not because the residency itself wasn't magical, but I'm not sure that I was ready, as an artist, to really make sense of all the things that it can be. So a residency for artists is a concentrated time to work on your practice. And you could be working on a specific project, a skill or technical or conceptual exploration. It often provides artists with the ability to make in community. So some residencies you are doing the concentrated work on your own, and, but a lot of residencies you do in community. So you're there amongst peers, as well as often mentors. And when you're doing this in a space where you're amongst peers, and mentors, and community, you get the space to get feedback on your work in ways that you don't have option to otherwise. And I really think that it's this kind of community-building element of it, that was so unknown to me. Because it really can be a space where you build relationships that will come up again and again and again, in your art practice, in future years, in ways that you won't even know is possible. So they could come up in future collaborations, whether it be on art projects, or on programming or, you know, all sorts of different things come out of it.

EN: Absolutely. And that's..the true value of a residency extends from beyond what you're going to produce at that residency, and very much extends to the relationships you're going to make. But it sounds like for this residency, to get back to this really, I think, exciting and kind of exceptional residency. I'm like, have I ever seen in the Canadian context, a residency that specifically, like yours, for deaf and disabled artists? And not until very recently have I seen something pitched and directed and created so directly for this diverse community. So tell me how did...how did this come about? Because it certainly didn't come about without work or care, because it would have taken the two of you at least to put, you know, to really, to really prioritize this and to say, to Artscape "We need this. And this, very particularly." So I'm curious about the vision...visioning for this.

JR: Yeah. I mean, I imagine that this answer actually is a little bit less magical than you are anticipating. And this is also part of what it means to think about and grow confidence in your art practice and your art relationships and community. So it really came about because Syrus...Yeah, okay, so Syrus was given the opportunity to pitch some residency ideas to Artscape Gibraltar Point on the island. Because Syrus has a lot of strong relationships there, built out of his long and pretty impressive history within the arts. With that, he had this idea to have a mad, deaf, and disabled residency – amongst a couple of other ideas that he had pitched and are going forward. And from there, he invited me to be a part of it. And that's kind of where it was at. That's kind of how it came about. It's not unusual for him and I to work together. It felt very exciting and important to me to engage my role as the artistic director, because I saw an opportunity there to think about the artists that we work with that Kickstart who often are overlooked or are not necessarily applying to these types of opportunities. Whether it be because it's out of their financial means, it's out of their knowledge in terms of application styles...There's so much about the art world that is just not built for mad and disabled folks. I can relate so much as a person who didn't come into the art world as an artist with that formal training. And yet, for me, the ability to make sense of what is needed in applications or to find grants and stuff, I was able to access through my levels of education and things like that. There's some transferable knowledge. So it mattered to me to think about what does it mean to make this residency accessible, but in a way that really stretches that idea of accessibility. So thinking about what position Kickstart could take. So as the artistic director, I spent some time looking for grants specifically that we as the organization could apply to, which meant that we're able to offer a number of spots for BC-based artists in order to fly out to the residency, as well as to cover their cost of being a part of the residency. And that was just as much an important part of the planning, as it was kind of thinking through why it matters to have a residency like this at all. I would look to my mentors, such as Rachel Gorman, who wrote ages ago about how much we are missing in terms of accessible training, but training that's not just accessible in terms of like, including us into spaces, but instead is really centering the voices of our community in the creation of this space, and the making of the training and workshops and programming to actually be informed by our politics, by our aesthetics, by the things that come out of our cultural movements in our artistic fields.

[Music: Uplifting choral voices, punctuated melodic string instrument, peppy electronic clapping sounds]

EN: Kudos to you with securing the funding for those BC artists. It's foundational, right? I mean, like you say, the socio-economic politics of residencies are central to who is able to attend, let alone apply. And I think that that conversation is one that should be made more public. I can think about artists that I know that either would maybe identify as, as negotiating episodic disability or would identify as disabled artists, talking about the obstacle of a \$100 application fee, and we're struck with the lack of understanding upon organizations – that that would be an obstacle. And if there's a lack of understanding about that, then there's a real lack of understanding about the financial realities that too many disabled people in this country live with, let alone disabled artists. I'm curious if you modified or had a different application process, because we just, I kind of mentioned that, you know, the financial fee can be a big obstacle. But also, like you said, some of these norms within artist communities, whether it's the artist statement, or the project statement, and usually with this really restrictive word count, like it's very, very specific, or even a CV, which, you know, is particular to really academia in so many ways. It's always a little strange that the CV then becomes a kind of crossover to arts communities, but certainly it is. How did you negotiate that kind of formal aspect of the application? Or the portfolio? Or whatever it was, you asked for?

JR: Yeah, so my answer is a little bit of both, and also an opening in this space to think about that this is kind of an iterative process and a living process. So we definitely didn't approach the work in a way where we were thinking, how to make this perfectly accessible. Or in what ways can we change all of this in order to really shake up the application process? Sometimes I have found that when we do that, it can unsettle people even more, because even if the dominant or typical way to apply to something is very inaccessible to us, we're still very used to seeing those questions. So it's probably likely that we might have things kind of started or gathered in a certain way, or places that we could start from. So the questions, or the way of applying was relatively similar to usual applications. So we asked artists about their relationship with disability arts and culture, some of their thoughts around what they might want to work on or create at the residency, and what they might get out of it. And we gave them space to upload a CV as well as supporting documents. But I think that also we're considering, kind of, how is it accessible through all of the stages. So we also were thinking about the accessibility of those of us in the administrative roles. We have a jury of mad and disabled jury members and artists who also have access needs in moving through the application process in terms of jurying the applicants. We were thinking about being available to folks. And so if folks wanted to apply and they had trouble with the form – which we also had trouble with the form... We had initially created a Google form and then recognized that often a form facade can be more accessible because Google form only accepts Google and so we switched it, but that created a lot of confusion. So it was an imperfect practice, which meant that we also received people imperfectly. So if they emailed us their material, we received it that way. If they had a lot of questions about how, how to go about things, or how they might answer a question or work on a particular piece, we tried to be available to support them in that way. But also, admittedly, not everything we did would have been perfectly accessible to all people. Lots of people would have had issues with different types of support material or different, you know, access points on the form or the timeline for submitting. And it's just an ongoing practice of trying to recognize that we know a fair amount

around how to make things accessible and inclusive. And yet, we can never do that perfectly. And in relation with community, we work towards showing up for each other. And also know that that will never be an end goal that is completely answered and done in a way that suits everybody.

[Melancholic, growing electronic crescendos]

EN: So I'd love to talk about this. We haven't really talked about you as an artist. How would you describe yourself right now, like who you are as that artist. Not the artistic director, but as an artist – in terms of your practice and your craft and the things that get you excited right now?

JR: Yeah, I would say that it is within this last couple of years that it really has felt more like a fit for me to call myself an artist. I can certainly remember as I was coming out of my PhD, that I based in a studio-based project, and was supervised by professional artists...like my entire committee had professional arts practices, and yet we're not teaching within fine arts programs. And I remember coming out of the Ph. D thinking, which is not unsimilar to other doctorate candidates, but that I was making...I was kind of making myself into a corner of more and more eligibility, because I was taking up these roles that in some senses gave me a lot of credentialized expertise. So I had a PhD, I focused my PhD on art. And yet there was so much within my practice that was not developed in a way that was legible. And so I didn't feel confident going into the art world, I didn't feel confident in my art practice, I didn't know what to do. And the end of my PhD became so isolating that I was really certain I had made a grave mistake in following that path. But I think that that also is a bit of what comes out of that kind of end burnout stage of finishing such a major project. And now I feel pretty secure in identifying as a practicing artist. I really kind of forefront my textile practice, and that my work is rooted in quilting, in natural dyeing, as well as in political aesthetics. And from there, I also am starting to grow confidence in exploring more practices. And so when I say I have confidence in saying that I'm a practicing artist, that's complex, because I just came back from an intensive residency at the Banff Centre. And I did notice that I probably often would kind of shy away from saying that I felt confident as being an artist, because I was surrounded by really such phenomenal practicing artists from all different areas. And so I did shrink back a little bit. But what I am noticing is that my comfort in calling myself an artist exists more. And that is a little bit in having the ability to make sense of what the art world is, because it really is an institution that has its own culture, its own histories, its own issues going on. And it takes a bit of time to get familiar with that.

EN: No kidding. I mean – norms, language, all of those kinds of things are. And it can be not only confusing, but one can quickly be made to feel inferior, if one doesn't have the right language to describe, say, practice, influences, etc. Oh, there's so much to unpack here. So I read your dissertation, which I think was fantastic. And it seems like so I mean, it seems like such a rich or rich study, it really is. And I can also see how it must have been frustrating, maybe at times to do something that might have been so unlike what your peers were doing. So you did a PhD in critical Disability Studies at York University, but it was a studio-based research-creation project. Which means that you were making and doing and practicing and

experimenting with art, as you researched and theorized and wrote and figured out what you were doing. You weren't just theorizing about the practices of fibre arts, you were working with fibre arts or quilting, or whatever particular modality you were working with at the time. But this is multi-year, it's durational, in kind of a way, right? It's not like a few months, and it's done. It's durational, so it was over these courses of years that you were working on this. But also it was reflexive, like you were reflecting on your role, or your relationship to a bunch of different things, including this title of "artist." And I think it's so interesting. I'm kind of like, wow, thinking about working with a committee that were all professional or working artists in their own right, but not working in a fine arts program. That is very much like myself at present where I'm not in a creative writing program, but that I started as a writer first. From my perspective, though, there's something really exciting when you have someone that wants to work on a arts-based project, research creation – studio or otherwise – that doesn't come up through the norms of art school or BFA or MFA in writing. Partly because there isn't yet any desire to do what everyone else is doing. We're all so susceptible, I think, to artistic trends and what's popular and what we think we should be doing. And what if we do this other people will see our work is important or serious. But there's so many points where some of our best known artists, I'm getting very general here, have resisted that, right? And have really methodically and kind of eccentrically pursued what is important to them. And I think about, for some reason, I keep on thinking about craft in that way. I'm thinking through feminist lens, thinking through kind of queer practice lenses, where there's something about the ephemeral nature of working with fibre that sort of defies the kind of high art expectation of huge canvas and paint – which is also amazing if you do that I'm not by any means dismissing that practice. But I think about, learning from someone like you did, like a family member, you know, that is such an old practice, an old guild practice of, not learning with the Grand Master, maybe exactly but – you know, the master of the guild – but learning from a learned family member. It's so classical, in a sense, to learn in that way. And I'm just curious, if you want to share a bit about your relationship to quilting in those kind of realms, learning the practice, which many of us don't even know how a quilt is made, I think, frankly, maybe sadly.

JR: Yeah, I mean, my relationship to quilting is maybe one of my most favourite relationships, because in the writing of the dissertation, I came to understand how deeply meaningful it was on such a multitude of levels. So I learned to quilt when I was very young. But specifically, I learned to quilt very shortly after my dad passed away. So growing up, my dad was chronically ill, but it wasn't something that we named as such. I didn't recognize how integrated into disability experiences I was so early on, but it really wasn't unusual, say, for me to come home for lunch from school, and hear that my dad was back in the hospital. Yeah, just those types of what are very common experiences being chronically ill, or having a family member who's chronically ill, were all around me since the time I was born. When my dad passed away, I was 12. And I was about a week away from graduating grade eight. So it was a pretty, pretty big time in my life. And I was pretty young. And what happens when you have a parent who passes away when you're young is that all the adults around you kind of freak out as you're freaking out and they're freaking out. And everyone's processing these deep feelings and experiences of grief. And I was a big feeler and I think that that was evident to my mom very early on, because I seem to recall that I was the only one in my family who was kind of shuffled into counselling in relation to

my dad passing away, although I could be wrong about that. But also what happened was in that summer, I got sent to my aunt's house. And my aunt is my dad's only sibling, and she quilts essentially for a living. So she did not do higher education. And she lives in a family structure that doesn't have her out working in a way that she gets remunerated for her work. Quilting is what she does as a passion, but it's also something that she barter with. So I can remember stories when I was young, where she would have a need for say, an adaptive device, and she would make my mom a king size quilt and then my mom would kind of help her out with purchasing the adaptive devices. This was very regular within her practice. So I got sent to my aunt's house, and we spent a concentrated amount of time quilting. She taught me how to make what's known as a sampler quilt, which is, each different block has a different technique that you work on. And all of the fabric I used was fabric that she had made into a quilt for me when I was a kid. But we spent the entire time just fixed in stories and memories. So it was a space where we could connect. And I could hear a lot about my own dad, but also about stories that connected beyond my dad within his family that I didn't have access to, say, either when I was growing up, because I was too young to ask you about it, or I wouldn't have remembered it, or different things like that. But quilting itself really ties me to my family, it ties me to a really important and pivotal time in my life. And it also was a practice that was my first entry point into art that wasn't based in music.

[Music: Upbeat fast-paced keyboard sounds ascending and descending, slow melodic wind instrument, resolves in a calming tone]

EN: How amazing. I mean, you're painting such a vivid picture, and I'm conjuring my own kind of mental image of this space. But what's so...what's coming through so clearly is that time was slowed down as you're working, and that stories are told, and they're not forced, you know, it's not a forced kind of sharing, it's the sharing that happens when you work with someone in that kind of way. I have family members that worked with weaving. So the big looms, and I know that it takes days just to prepare, let alone do the, the actual, the actual weaving – no, it's all part of the weaving. And I can think about both my grandparents crocheting. And when you're under that, you know, the squares for crocheting, you know, “don't move! I've got one here,” everything does slow down, it has this nice relationship to what you were talking about, I think at the beginning of our conversation, around the necessity that the pandemic has placed for some of us this, this force kind of slowing down, and creating perhaps rituals, to sort of mark time, to slow it down to make sense of the day. But when you're making something, you kind of have to do things methodically, you can't really rush the process. As far as I remember. I'm not a very...I'll just say I'm a terrible knitter. But I still enjoy it. And you can't kind of rush it until you get really good. Like my mother who I swear reads a book, eats a sandwich, and knits at the same time. And I think that's how she spent most of her lunch breaks at work doing all three. And you know, could kind of knit a phenomenal amount. But for most of us, there's that kind of forced slowing down and especially learning how to do something correctly so that your whole quilt doesn't unravel. And it sounds like your aunt is pretty deft at figuring out how to get what she needed. But also was really future-thinking in terms of passing these skills to you. You know, which that sometimes is not what we are able to do in families as we're spread across countries and nations and continents, is actually share the skill as well. We get really good at it ourself,

and then it kind of, it passes with us rather than being passed on. So it's very cool that you're...you kind of are remaking this. Are you working on a quilt right now? Or is that the question that everyone asks?

JR: Yeah, so I'm actually not a super prolific quilt producer. I am not a prolific producer in any area of my life, which is very deeply tied to my disability. I'm very slow. I make things slowly. Yeah, it just takes me time. And so I am working on a quilt right now. And it's the first quilt I've worked on in quite a while. And it is a quilt that's connected to my most current art project. And the quilt itself was not initially part of the conceptualization of the project, but was an offering to a community member because I was in the process of writing a grant. It was the first grant I have ever written for my own art practice. And I was interested in exploring the idea, whether or not the grant came in. And a community member that I knew had posted on Facebook that they had a bunch of T shirts that they wanted made into a quilt. And I'm not entirely drawn to t-shirt quilts – they have a particular aesthetic. But there was something very meaningful about the ask. And it was also somebody that I was hopeful to work with in the project anyways. So I had proposed to them, that I make them the quilt, and that that be in place of the case that I might not get the grant so that we might do kind of a bartering. That the project was based in explorations and having conversations with mad and disabled community members who engage in activism in ways that is often erased. And so the initial parts of the project was to simply chat with artists, and then create out of what I was hearing out of those conversations. I wanted to recognize that the knowledge they brought to the conversation was knowledge, that was an expertise, that was labour, that they would offer their time, that it mattered that they showed up, that it mattered to me. But it also mattered that it was space for me to kind of create and make sense of what I was seeing in the world, and seeing through their own engagement and activism. And so we made kind of an agreement that I would include them in the project. And if I didn't get the funding that I would make them the quilt, and I did end up getting the funding, but I decided that we would still go ahead with making the quilt because it meant a great deal to me to have this kind of collaborative and community-based element maintained within this work or with...kind of alongside the project as it was unfolding.

EN: That's fantastic. I imagine some of our listeners would love to be able to see your work. Where would be the best place for them to find you on the internet? Are you an Instagram person or Twitter person? And do you share your work there? Where would be the best place for people to seek out...you?

JR: Yeah, that's a great question. I'm not very great at documenting my work. One of the very cool and fun things with the political fibre work that I do is that it has been documented a lot in media. I mean, I can recall at times in the pandemic, seeing a commercial on TV, and seeing a banner go across the screen because it was part of a news commercial. I don't yet have a website. And I have been saying that is coming for a long time. So I make no promises there. But I do use Instagram probably the most, not solely for my arts practice. But I don't find that my arts practice separates from my life. So if somebody wanted to find me on the internet and wanted to have a small glimpse at what I'm doing in art, they could go to my Instagram, which is [@Fieldnotes By JennaReid](#).

[Music: Ascending, bright, twinkly, uplifting, electronic]

EN: Our guest today was Jenna Reid. No website yet, but you can follow Jenna on instagram [@Fieldnotes_By_JennaReid](#). *On Being III* is researched, recorded and produced on the traditional, unceded and treaty lands of Indigenous peoples across what is now contemporary Canada where each of us on the show is grateful to live and work. Please visit our website to learn more about our relationships with the lands and the peoples who live on them. This show is produced by Emily Blyth and Coco Nielsen, and executive produced by me – Emilia Nielsen. Prince Shima creates all of the music you hear on our show. You can find him on bandcamp [@PinceShima](#). If you liked this episode, check out more at [EmiliaNielsen.com](#) or wherever you listen to podcasts. And if you'd like to get in touch with us, please write to OnBeingIIIPodcast@gmail.com. We'd love to hear from you. And finally, a big thank you to SSHRC, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who funds this work through an Insight Development Grant. To York University's Department of Social Science, where I am a faculty member. And to my students in HESO, the Health and Society Program.

Until next time, let's create, converse, and crip the system together!

[Music rises in crescendo then fades out]

[End of transcript]