

Welcome!

I'm really happy to welcome you at this discussion on the interface between art and activism.

Edu, if you could start...

My name is Edu O.

I'm a Brazilian artist, and professor at the Federal University of Bahia.

I am a dancer, a man, cisgender, with gray beard and bald, and I'm a wheelchair user.

I'm Katarzyna Żeglicka, I'm an artist, a performer and theater pedagogue from Poland.

I have short hair. I wear glasses. I'm wearing purple jumper and trousers.

My name is Diana Niepce.

I'm based in Lisbon, Portugal.

I'm a white cis woman.

I have middle...

short, long, I don't know... brown hair, and I'm quite thin.

Hello. I'm Chiara. I come from Italy.

I am a dancer, choreographer and activist.

I'm a cisgender woman.

I'm on a wheelchair. I'm very short.

And I wear a blue cardigan and a blue skirt.

Okay, thank you.

My name is Filip Pawlak,

and I will have the pleasure to moderate this session.

And I'm a white, cis male guy with a left shorter hand.

Alright, so let's start.

Thank you for being here.

I would like to start our conversation with this really simple question.

When do you consider yourself as an artist?

And when do you consider yourselves as an activist?

Is there a line dividing these two?

I've always been an artist

because I grew up as a dancer, performer and choreographer.

So it's a very simple moment that I found myself as an activist.

It was when I actually found myself in a wheelchair because...

I was not always disabled, so...

this is the moment I understood that my work...

mixes this advocacy and also...

this moment of fighting and activism that is so needed

in the world and in my country.

I feel like I can draw a line from being an activist and being an artist.

I can no longer think of it in such a simple way

as if it was like a transition from being an activist into an artist.

I feel like there's not a single line connecting these two things.

It's more like a bunch of intertwined, intersecting lines.

I feel like this is very strongly connected to how accessible it is

to be an activist in Poland,

and it also feels like it's about going in circles around the topic

before getting inside and actually becoming an artist.

And it feels like when I'm searching for, or when I'm struggling for

the very basic things that actually enable me to work as an artist.

I mean the most basic things like the accessible dancing hall

or funds to actually pursue an artistic project.

And basically, this is what I see as pure activism.

It's only when these basic resources are there...

This is when I can move into pure artistic work,

and only then can I make an informed decision of what my artistic goal is.

I agree that it is a complex issue and it has tentacles.

And, first of all, we need to decide what it means to be an activist.

And sometimes I think that perhaps...

when one is an activist, one needs to put one's own interest

as an artist slightly below.

Because it is necessary to fight for a common cause.

It's important to make a distinction between being an artist with disability and being an activist because they are not necessarily the same.

So someone who is a disabled artist is not necessarily an activist.

And I think this can cause confusion.

And at times I think disabled artists have been given a political authority that they may not have claimed,

that they may not necessarily embody.

I think there is a difference on whether I fight to have

my changing room properly equipped for where I'm going to perform

or whether I'm going to fight to ensure that all the change in rooms are equipped

for all the artists.

That is when I understood that it is important to...

put activism at the center of my work.

And that is when I began to barter some of the privileges,

which I had because things were going well for me.

And so when you begin to understand that you can barter some of your privileges in order to have a more articulate discussion

on what is going on and what can be shared.

I've always understood myself as an artist

and the idea of me being an activist, came more like a hot potato

that I had to peel myself as I developed my artistic practice.

It was that way that I understood that public policies had to be adapted and bend to what we need as artists.

Because Chiara said, I understand that those policies

need to think of the collective

and not of the individual.

It needs to approach the problems that are happening

with the entire community that needs accessibility

and for us, what happens is that just our simple presence,

our mere presence in a performance space

allows people to look at us as someone that should be fighting for equal opportunities or spaces, in a way that sometimes it's not necessarily what we want to do. And I understand that as a way of working on the micropolitics and the politics of the individual against the macro-system. It's important for us to understand ourselves as individuals in our fight, but also to understand the politics that surround us as artists... are collective.

I see that even in my academic research, in my work in academia, I see that my research...

I did a master's on public policies for people with disabilities that understanding those policies was very important for us to understand their own artistic practice.

I think as people with disabilities, we are requiring... the equal position in society.

But also being an artist for me is also about being an activist of a better future.

Fighting for your basic rights, the human rights, because you want to work on something more, on something better for the future or something more fragile.

I understand what you say, but I don't agree, because I think that when the artist, who is not a person with disability is going on stage, they're not asked to be an activist themselves, to represent a cause themselves unless they pertain to a specific group.

And why should we, when we perform, be the flag bearers of a fight?

If you're trying to just perform when you wear the artistic hat, like you said, and it ends up allowing us to take a position where we are fragile.

To be charged of that need, but sometimes it's something that we don't know how to do, or as Diana said, we don't want to do it.

So, it's something that's not necessarily our scope as artists.

I would like to add a little bit about the Polish context that I'm active in.

Because as artists with disabilities, we often find ourselves... in kind of like a stalemate, because when it comes to human rights.

Even if we try to...

in our artistic practice, vouch for human rights, we smash our heads at doors that are locked because if we try to approach public institutions, which have by now been taken over by the right-wing government...

All these institutions are mostly led by people who don't really care about human rights,

and we have nowhere to go with the struggle.

We are all aware that we represent a political body on stage.

We are always the least represented...

Disabled artists have less representation.

In my work, I try separate very well...

when I'm doing advocacy and when I'm doing artistic practice, even if my artistic practice, or even if my pieces have these insights of marginalised bodies or oppression of society or questioning the norms.

It's not actually activism. I'm not trying to do that.

But they have a political statement there.

The first moment I understood that I was also being an activist was the moment I realised that I go to the stage and I'm bringing the voice of the less visible persons.

To have a voice and to have a moment that they can change things.

So...

Yeah, this is it.

I have one comment about the last thing you said...

with this consciousness that we are also the political voice
that maybe we, as artists with disabilities,
could more hear the audience

because it's also the feedback from the people with disabilities
And not only with disabilities, but especially with them...

It's really important for them to see us on the stage.

And I remember what strong political thoughts I have in my mind
when for the first time somebody with my disability on the stage.

That was not only in artistic way, but politically,
that was really something for me.

I think...

it's interesting to make a distinction between the political body
and the activist,

because when I put my body on the stage, I can see that something happens
in the people who watch in the public.

I think there may be misunderstandings,

and I speak from the point of view of an Italian disabled woman,
who every day deals with the approach of the catholic church.

The catholic church has had absolute domain up to now
in terms of taking care of all the associations that deal with disability,
and especially to do with medical and physical care,
and we do need to go through that route.

As an activist, I found that whenever I wanted to put voice to...

what I was doing, my power was deactivated,
and value was taken away from my voice, my raid, my fury,
and I was placed back into the aspirational...

So I think the important passage for me is when we stop being the exception,
and that is when we can have more political importance.

Because whilst we are a small movement with four or five people,
and we are the exception.

It is easy to relegate us and to take importance
and to just show us as the examples rather than...

One concrete example I would like to bring...

Diana was talking about strategies for access or other.

I found that when I started asking for things, not as a single artist,
not as Chiara Bersani,

but as a movement or as part of a bigger organisation.

For example, in my case as Al Di Qua Artist.

When this requests were made as a collective,

I found that the base was beginning to tremble,

that things were beginning to happen more...

because there is a different reaction if the request is made from a movement
rather than from a person.

It's the ending ending of our discussion.

I want to ask all of you about the second thing you mentioned.

The strategies that we are dealing with this art/activism tension.

What strategies we are doing in our artistic way,

in our artistic practices to sometimes separate or merge them.

When I'm thinking about strategies,

I'm reflecting a lot on the activities that we pursued

back when I have co-founded and co-run a feminist organisation,

for the rights of women with disabilities

called Venus de Milo Zone.

It was when we were dealing a lot with the topic of violence,

especially domestic violence against women with disabilities.

And the thing that was hugely important for me was our mutual collective care.

I think the most important and hardest lesson I've learned throughout

is that if we pursue activism without this mutual collective care for each
other,

then sooner or later, it's going to break down.

Like in our case, the Venus de Milo Zone, after five years of...

hardcore activism has become burned out and dissolved.

It brings you this state of exhaustion

when you are all the time fighting...

for something that other artists don't need to do.
And when someone is very tired of doing it,
another person needs to do it.
So another person needs to step forward.
And this is the thing, when you are alone doing it.
This is the moment I understood that we are all the time...
in this violated state of existing...
with a lot of humiliations.
So this assets also...
I'm not deaf, but I try to bring sign language.
I also try to think how it is for a person that is blind.
What my work can... not change all the venues,
but also can trigger other artists to think like that,
when I work only as interpreter or performer.
So I try to raise this awareness of a safe place.
Someone talked about "safe" and this was an important word for me,
because I tried to work in all the layers of my work this idea of safeness,
but also in this very intimate way.
So this is kind of a provocation, when you work everything
in a very intimate way.
So my work is also about exposing...
and this is very interesting for me,
the word "intimacy".
What I started to do was...
there are no other creators with disability in Portugal...
or there are, but they don't have access or visibility.
I try to create these programmes of formation...
of experimental kind of work.
So it's not the protocol of Academy that most of the time doesn't work
because it's very old fashioned.
So I try to bring these kind of new practices.
That also are very safe for a blind, for a deaf, for...

I'm all the time actually very obsessive about this.
And this new generation of creators also will...
make that we are not alone. And this is very important as a community.
Also, in terms of investigation, I keep working on how the outside of norm
bodies or non-normative bodies or disabled artists can bring
a lot of layers through their work that also shift society.
So even in my pieces, I all the times fight with the venues...
Okay, let's break the toilet for disabled artists.
Or let's put sign language, let's put audio description.
And these are very expensive resources in Portugal.
So this is usually a very big fight
because the budgets go to another level.
But I try to find what resources I can do if I ask a favor
or if there is a service that have Braille
to do the synopsis for free.
Where is this?
You can research this in the countries,
because usually there is some kind of support in these areas.
Also other thing that I really like to work is through literature.
So I work in very intimate articles or...
that brings also my inner sarcasm. I'm a very sarcastic person.
But also raise this awareness. How do I see the world?
In a very unique perspective.
I think these are the strategies I usually use,
but most of the times I think like...
when we are collaborating, we are trying to create a common dialogue
between artists and venues,
and this is the moment you can trigger everything.
There are two roads.
There's a road of the legal activism that takes on institutions
and does it in a systematic way.
I don't connect myself to that because I do something different.

What I pursue is an activism that wants to sustain things from inside.
And the idea of boycotting the system from inside
through informal anarchic and crazy measures that...
subvert the system.

But when this becomes powerful enough, the system can no longer ignore it,
and things have to change.

I am a great advocate of the politics that comes from below,
and because people with disability have become hungry and angry.

And the important thing is to work from underneath.

From inside and also connect with people.

That is, as we said earlier, one of the most important things,
and also to create alliances between ourselves,

but also with people who have temporary,
not disabled or temporarily, don't have a disability.

Just in the sense that everyone sooner or later encounters this.

And enable to enable them to enter our movement
and to involve them so that we can become stronger
and more tentacular and wider.

I want to bring a concrete example of what I'm saying.

I'm working with Giulia Traversi, who's my manager and curator,
and we are trying to do some work
that sustains the whole group of people that we are involved with.
For example, when we go to a festival...

The festival always asks for a show where I am present on stage.

If we propose something where I am not present on stage,
they're no longer interested. They no longer want the show.

It was very funny because she was full of tattoos
and I'm not, so, it was very funny.

I don't know...

Maybe because they think people with disability are the same.

I don't know.

This experiment was very important for me.

I thought it was very strong and we are thinking about using this
and maybe because we now have a small privilege,
thanks to the position that we have slowly conquered
as international, well known artists
and perhaps we can use our position in order to create work for other artists.
So for example,
we can do some performances where I disappear
and other bodies can appear instead.
And this enables other artists to be present, to work,
to have salaries.
And to have contracts and to become visible.
I think there are many other artists with disabilities that are not seen.
So a question for Diana,
in Portugal you say there's only you, but is it only you?
Perhaps there are many other people who are not being seen,
because we want to show that there are many of us.
So they want my body essentially.
And so we have created a strategy.
We've had an issue where we proposed my performance,
but instead of myself on stage,
I was replaced by another artist dancer who has the same disability as myself,
and so instead of me, she was dancing.
And some people didn't actually realise that there was a switch,
that it wasn't me, it was someone else.
Thank you for all your thoughts about your strategies
and how you are finding yourselves between art and activism.
In and out.
And yeah. Thank you.
Thank you.
That's all. Thanks.
Great.
It looks like we all have a lot more things to say.

That's a normal thing...

But thank you.