

Europe Beyond Access – Provocation by Noa Winter

Transcript

Good morning,

I am a white, queer, intersex person with long dark-brown hair, today I'm wearing all black (as mostly), including my FFP2-mask. As we already talked about perception today, you might now perceive me as vulnerable. I am not. On the contrary, it's the decision of most of you not to wear a mask today that makes me twenty times more vulnerable in this space.

I'm using a cane that is leaning against my chair, and identify as crip, more specifically as disabled, chronically ill, mad and neurodivergent with hearing and sighted privileges.

I was invited to share my thoughts with you in the form of a provocation.

Specifically, a provocation from my perspective both as a disabled artist working primarily as a curator and dramaturg as well as one of the very few disabled people currently inhabiting a leadership position in the German cultural sector.

Since 2015, I have been involved in the German and European disability arts scene.

Right now, I'm co-leading "Making a Difference", a Berlin-based network supporting disabled, Deaf and chronically ill artists.

The project is operating since 2018 and will unfortunately run out of funding already early next year.

At Making a Difference and beyond, the heart of my work is creating empowering spaces for disabled artists and cultural workers.

In doing so, I'm focusing on anti-ableist practices that evolve around disability culture, accessibility, and the leadership of multiply marginalized arts workers.

It is the best job I could ask for, really.

I had the privilege to collaborate on incredible projects

I have found an international community and support network.

I have experienced ground-breaking performances – some of them more exciting, thoughtful, caring, and creative than I could have ever imagined in my life.

But too often my job comes with a heart-breaking downside, and I want to tell you about it: Being a disabled person in a work culture that was never designed for people like me is a constant survival of ableism, discrimination, and barriers.

And what makes it even worse:

Working as a project leader and community organizer, I also have to witness all of this happening to my disabled and Deaf kin and colleagues on a daily basis.

I have witnessed colleagues struggle under working conditions that have worsen their chronic conditions permanently and that have made them feel like an outsider who has no place in the arts.

And I have witnessed and supported colleagues to leave projects or cultural institutions to protect their physical and mental wellbeing.

Like Ben quoted the brilliant Kate Marsh before "Not all of us have the time for you to have a 'journey'".

And I have witnessed – again and again – disabled and Deaf artists not reaching their full potential because they have been too busy navigating inaccessible funding structures, fighting against discrimination and having to organize their own accessibility.

So here are five things that need to change in cultural policy for disabled and Deaf people to be able to reach their full artistic potential (and some of these points you might recognise from Nadja, before):

Number One: Funding needs to go where disabled and Deaf artists are.

Right now, most of the funding is given to institutions instead of artists.

While these institutions are almost always led by nondisabled people, most disabled and Deaf artists are primarily working independently.

Although the conditions in the independent art scene are often precarious, it gives disabled and Deaf artists more space to create self-determined and accessible practices.

But the imbalance of resources between institutions on the one side and artists on the other side makes us dependent on working with these institutions to make a living – under the terms and conditions of the institutions, which makes us vulnerable to discrimination.

To fight this power imbalance, funding needs to go directly to independent artists.

Number Two: Funding needs to be invested in disabled and Deaf leadership and culture.

As long as funding is primarily spent on inclusive projects under non-disabled leadership, Deaf and disabled artists will not be able to thrive.

Funding bodies need to start to question the leadership models of projects and institutions applying for their funding.

If you follow Article 30 of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, cultural funding needs to strengthen disability and Deaf culture.

This includes establishing funding specifically dedicated to disabled and Deaf artists as well as research and development, as Nadja mentioned in her provocation.

Initiatives like Unlimited in the UK and – on a smaller scale – Making a Difference in Germany have proven again and again that leadership, self-determination, and research opportunities are key to the professional development of disabled and Deaf artists.

Number Three: Funding needs to embrace accessibility as a core value.

Due to our limited time, I just want to second everything that Nadja already pointed out about the necessity of access budgets.

But, I want to give you an idea about the inequality created between disabled and nondisabled artists in our world now, a world without access budgets very often:

Access costs make up about 15% of our overall Making a Difference budget.

This means, compared to other projects in the same funding scheme, we have 15% less to spend on the professional development of the already marginalized artists we work with.

But embracing accessibility as a core value also means that the whole funding application and accounting process needs to be accessible to disabled and Deaf artists.

Not being able to access funding independently is one of the major obstacles artists face in developing our careers.

This is especially true for blind, Deaf and neurodivergent artists, who face frequent barriers when trying to access the provided information on funding schemes and communicate with the staff of funding bodies.

Another issue are funding policies that link the eligibility of artists to ableist conditions – such as needing to be an arts school graduate or having to prove a certain amount of yearly income from past artistic projects.

Funding policies need to reflect the lived realities of disabled and Deaf people living and working in an inaccessible world.

Number four: Funding needs to prioritize national disabled and Deaf artists.

This one might be a bit controversial but give me a moment to explain this further:

Over the last few years, disabled artists have become more prominent in the European arts sector, especially in Western Europe.

And this is, of course, a good thing – hopefully we all agree.

But the access to resources has not been equally distributed between different countries as well as international and local artists.

That an increasing number of programmers know about and engage with the work of disabled artists, as the survey Time To Act found Out, unfortunately does not mean that they sufficiently support disabled artists from their own country.

For example, in Germany, most of the resources have been made available to present work by and collaborate with a very small number of disabled artists: namely Claire Cunningham (surprise!) , Dan Daw, Michael Turinsky and, a bit more newly, Chiara Bersani.

And while all of these are brilliant artists and colleagues, you might notice that none of them is living in Germany.

For cultural institutions, working with established international disabled artists, who come with a team of collaborators and producers is often the easy way of including disabled artists in their programme.

It would be much more challenging for them to work with local emerging disabled and Deaf artists, who often have limited access to funding and therefore have not had the opportunity to build sustainable working conditions for themselves and for example hire a producer (like Nadja!).

We cannot overcome the inequality if institutions are not willing to allocate more funding and resources to local artists.

And while international exchange is important and should be continued, international disabled artists often lack the nuanced knowledge and lived experience of barriers and societal challenges for disabled and Deaf people in a country that they are only visiting for work.

This is why funding policies need to invest in the expansion and strengthening of disability and Deaf culture led by local artists to equal the European playing field within the arts.

And, my last point, Number five: Funding needs to aim at diversity within disability.

Because you might have noticed that all the artists I have mentioned before – and probably most of the disabled artists touring Europe you are familiar with – are white with visible physical disabilities.

This often lets us forget that there is diversity within the disability experience:

We miss out on the perspectives and aesthetics of blind, Deaf, chronically ill, invisibly disabled, mad and neurodivergent artists.

We miss out on the perspectives and aesthetics that come from Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, from working class backgrounds, from trans and intersex people and so many more within disability arts. And last but not least, we miss out on disabled and Deaf people working in the arts who are not performing on stage. Because we also exist! We work as curators, producers, set designers, technicians.

This is why we need a change in funding policies that reflect the vast diversity of our experiences, so we can finally all thrive within the arts.

Thank you.