Starting from Zero:
Subversive Strategies for Dealing with Adversity

by Berlinklusion - Network for Accessibility in Arts and Culture GbR

Starting from Zero is a creative research project investigating disabled artists and cultural workers access to culture as both consumers and producers, what challenges they have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what strategies for resilience and adaptation they have developed.

Why We Did It

Taking a Moment to Reflect

In comparison to other countries such as Great Britain, Australia, Canada and the U.S.A, there is a distinct lack of information about how artists and cultural workers with disabilities engage in the arts as both producers and consumers of arts and culture in Germany. Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the existing inequalities for people with disabilities in the arts, but has also pushed the mainstream arts and cultural sector to start embedding access provisions into arts programming, the very access that people with disabilities have been calling for for years, on a scale like never before. With society in lockdown and not able to physically attend museums, theatres, galleries, cinema and other cultural institutions, producers and consumers of culture alike are reflecting on how accessible these institutions are and should be. Questions that dominate this discourse include: Who do cultural institutions serve? How do they operate as gatekeepers to the consumption of, and participation in, arts and culture? And, what will happen to all of the access provisions being developed now, after the pandemic is over?

For people with disabilities working in arts and culture, this moment of reflection and looking forward to a slow re-opening of the cultural sector, presents a unique opportunity to examine and share what we've experienced and learnt over the past year.

For us too in Germany, it is an opportunity to challenge the arts and cultural sector to press the restart button to include our voices. If we're starting from zero, what kind of future do we want to build? How do we rebuild it and for whom? This creative research project offers the time and headspace to answer these questions. Like any period of transition, such as moving house, we

need to consider what useful things we already have that can be kept and what unnecessary things we can throw away.

We envisage the results of this creative research project to be useful to arts and cultural institutions interested in taking a truly inclusive approach in their post-pandemic programming, but also for artists and cultural workers with disabilities working in a(n often ableist) cultural sector, to have their voices heard, to find support in exchanging strategies for resilience and adaptation with each other.

Our Project Design

Our project began with desk research, then invited participants to respond via an online survey or a creative post-card project. We then conducted group interviews. After collecting our data, we analysed the results and created two art works in response: a poster campaign which was displayed throughout the city of Berlin and a video work displayed on our website and social media channels.

Our Project Goals and Approach

Our goals for the project were:

- To find out what challenges German cultural workers (individual artists and arts workers working within and independently of institutions) with disabilities have faced in accessing arts and culture (as producers, consumers and audience) over the past year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To find out what methods or strategies for resilience or adaptation they have developed within their practices for dealing with these challenges and thus accessing arts and culture.

Our Results and Creative Response

About the Participants

A total of 28 arts workers with disabilities based in Germany responded via the online survey, and a further 12 were interviewed.

For the online survey, the majority responded in German, with some using simple language and English. Some responses were incomplete suggesting that there may have been some issues with the accessibility (length, question comprehension, or technical barriers).

For the interviews, we reached out to a large number of different arts organisations working with people with learning disabilities or cognitive impairments. We had a very limited response which we put down to the difficult nature of meeting in person during the pandemic for the organisations and individuals involved (e.g. people with learning disabilities are often at high risk of COVID-19 and many programs they attend have been cancelled or moved online). While the option of meeting online was available, together with the participants, we decided to meet in person, adhering to COVID hygiene regulations. We felt it was important to remove the barrier that online formats present this particular group of people and wanted to ensure that participants could fully understand and respond to the interview, especially as they are often excluded from discussions around arts and culture. The participants came from two inclusive theatre and visual arts organisations and the interviews were held in easy language.

The majority of respondents from both the survey and interviews identify as artists, and a third identify as both artists and cultural workers.

The area of art that most interested respondents was Theatre, and several added more specific forms of performance art like Long Duration Live Art, as well as digital formats that we hadn't considered (such as Media Art, XR Art and Video Art).

What they Said

The Impact of COVID-19

Overwhelmingly, participants stated that their access to culture decreased as a result of the pandemic, and no one said it stayed the same - so COVID did have some impact. The majority also responded that cultural institutions have not become more accessible as a result of the pandemic.

Generally, there was a range of very emotive responses exploring mostly negative, but some positive experiences of living through the COVID pandemic as an artist or cultural worker with a disability. While some respondents noted they felt more included in arts and culture as participants to arts events, or that they had better access to support such as funding, many others noted the negative impact of COVID such as requiring more unpaid labour to present work, a lack of access to professional or personal support, and a lack of recognition of their position as marginalised within society and the arts.

Barriers to Arts and Culture

Of the barriers to arts and culture that participants felt had been removed, around half of participants noted that digitalization of cultural events has removed some barriers to access, while half noted that no barriers had been removed.

Of the barriers that existed before the pandemic, a wide range of different kinds of barriers were reported with some participants responding that barriers remained the same before and during the pandemic. For example, notable were infrastructural or institutional barriers to participating as an artist professionally; experiences of the artworld were unfamiliar, unfriendly or unwelcoming; digital events were not completely accessible; physical access was even more limited; and arts organizations failed to communicate in an accessible way.

Of the new barriers that had emerged since the pandemic started, the majority of participants noted online formats as presenting new barriers to culture. Participants also specifically mentioned the wider COVID pandemic conditions, including medical system measures. Participants also mentioned that less physical exchange with other people emerged for them as a new barrier.

The Emergence of New Spaces, Practices and Strategies

When asked if participants knew of any new, successful or exciting spaces that emerged during the pandemic, despite the above mentioned barriers, the majority of respondents mentioned digital spaces. Elaborating on this, some respondents noted that these are more successful when the aesthetics of the artistic content were taken into account and digital platforms were used aesthetically, while others responded that digital spaces were more successful at engaging in discourse, rather than engaging participants fully in the presentation of artistic content. Less than half of respondents noted that they found no new, successful or exciting spaces.

In terms of how these spaces are accessed, half the respondents were able to access these new spaces only partially, while some have no access at all. A wide range of support is still needed to make these new cultural spaces more accessible. Of note, respondents called for the reduction of costs to cultural activities; more sensitization of cultural organizations or a more welcoming environment; more accessible design of online platforms; more accessible communication channels; and more opportunities to present artistic work.

The majority of respondents developed new strategies or artistic practices as a result of the pandemic. Respondents noted both personal and professional strategies affected their ability

to produce or consume arts and culture. Of the respondents who commented on what new artistic practices they created, all mentioned making use of digital spaces, either for converting the format of live art to digital art, or for finding new audiences through online digital presentation platforms. Respondents noted personal strategies such as applying for financial grants, supporting other artists and self-care.

Of the variety of access support that respondents noted as useful for them, the ability to work from home was the access provision that received the most responses, followed by an individualized pace/flexible viewing times, online conferences and flexible working conditions and hours.

The Potential and Failure of Digital Spaces

When participants were asked what was missing from digital spaces, nearly all respondents noted that they lack human interaction. The majority also noted that feelings or emotions were missing (some specifically mentioned loneliness), while others mentioned a lack of sensorial interaction (touch, smells, sound), a lack of collective participation and a lack of control over the conditions.

In terms of what participants thought were successful ways to implement access digitally, the majority of respondents mentioned online access provisions that enable autonomous control of the conditions when participating. Other respondents also mentioned that the personalization of access was helpful.

Towards a More Accessible Future of the Arts

To conclude our survey and interviews, we asked participants what their ideal, more accessible vision of the arts would be. We asked, what they would keep, what they would add, and what they would throw away.

We received a range of different responses regarding what should be kept as a result of the pandemic. The majority of responses called for the continuation of the availability of digital spaces for producing and consuming culture, particularly for hybrid events, but that these should be made even more accessible than they currently are. For example:

"Protected spaces" such as .B mosaic or RambaZamba.

"Working from home, hybrid events, international exchange, digital mediation services, extended barrier-free accessibility."

"The attention and mindfulness for other people and their exclusion and marginalization in public space."

"The Digital Form of Music – Co-operations"

"Online discussions, working meetings, seminars, courses, lectures, talks, etc. Maybe some digital forms of artistic expressions and some hybrid forms."

"Diverse cultural offerings."

In terms of what should be added, we received a range of different responses from the very practical, such as more accessible digital cultural offers, training, professional development and access support opportunities for artists with disabilities of all ages, to broader demands such as dismantling ableist structures in the arts. For example:

"Accessibility as an integral part of the project."

"Digital art being offered digitally."

"Facilitated access to events."

"Increase the funding models for people from marginalized sections of the population and in the sense of greater accessibility generally. "

Of what should be thrown away, we received a mixture of responses ranging from very concrete examples of what can be thrown away, such as digital formats that aren't accessible enough, to ableist attitudes about disabled artists and arts workers that need to be removed. For example:

"Hybrid events."

"Online Meetings."

"Patriarchal view of art and culture."

"Filming and streaming a theater piece, a live performance or similar without a digital concept."

"An overly complicated technological approach."

"Almost everything."

Our Creative Response

Our goal was to provide a creative platform for sharing a "Tool-Kit" of strategies – what to keep, what to add and what to throw away - for dealing with adversity. This goal was motivated by our belief that in asking for and sharing disabled arts workers experiences, we would help foster a sense of solidarity and support within the disability arts community in Germany. What was of paramount importance of us was to amplify the voices of arts workers with disabilities and create public artworks that would capture the array of different experiences and demands for the future. We did so by creating two artworks derived from the participants' responses: a poster series displayed around the city of Berlin, and an online disseminated audio-video work.

When we examined the responses, we received we discovered common reoccurring themes in the responses in terms of the challenges people were facing, how much impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on them in both negative and positive ways, and what a more accessible future of the arts looks like to them. We selected a number of compelling quotes or paraphrased multiple responses into single sentences, that we felt spoke to these common experiences or demands, then created a series of five images through photography and collage that visualise them symbolically. For example, the way a digital event can evoke two extreme situations: being able to participate in cultural events from home while simultaneously leaving participants lonely and devoid of physical contact, which we represented as a see-saw. We ended up with 5 posters, displaying these quotes in text and symbolic imagery in both English and German language versions. Over 300 posters will be displayed in mid-March in over 40 locations around Berlin in order to increase awareness and invite a broader public into the conversation.

The audio-video piece names the specific barriers, access demands and tool-kit strategies for the future. It features more direct quotes from the research and presents them in an accessible way by incorporating access measures (such as the use of sound to describe the visual, and vice versa) into its design and presentation. Created in German, with a written transcript in English, the work aims to bring to life the many voices that contributed to this research.