

## Starting from Zero:

Subversive Strategies  
for Dealing with Adversity



Berlinklusion | Network for Accessibility in Arts and Culture GbR

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**Starting from Zero was a creative research project that investigated 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

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the existing inequalities for people with disabilities in the arts, but has also pushed the mainstream arts and culture sector to start embedding access provisions into arts programming, the very access that people with disabilities have been calling 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 and participation in arts and culture? And, what will happen to all of the access provision 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 since 2020.

### Taking Stock of Germany's Disability Arts Scene

Our project sits within wider global discussions about the COVID-19 pandemic, how it negatively affects disabled people working in the arts, but also how it can be a catalyst for positive change. Organisations such as Tangled + Disability and Bodies in Translation in Canada started to document disabled arts workers' stories of struggle, but also visions of hope for a more accessible future through their podcast series<sup>1</sup>. Daniel Jaramillo's text about the Australian Disability arts scene highlighted the ways in which time slowed down and offered pause for reflection on what mattered most, but also illustrated the personal challenges many artists faced such as a drop in income and the solidarity and support artists created for each other<sup>2</sup>. Geographically closer, the recently published "Time to Act" Report from the British Council, surveyed the Europe wide impact of COVID-19 on disabled performing artists and audiences. In particular, it highlights

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1 <https://bodiesintranslation.ca/crip-times-a-podcast-series/>

2 <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/opinions-analysis/how-artists-with-disability-are-coping-with-covid-19-260374-2367332/>

the risk that COVID-19 will magnify existing barriers and will limit opportunities for both disabled artists and audiences<sup>3</sup>. Their report calls for disability to be included in public responses when addressing the crisis as a matter of human rights and economic sustainability for the sector. Our research project builds on that of the British Council's by looking at Germany's disability arts scene beyond the performing arts, and by asking specific questions about what disabled people want for the future of the arts.

Several artworks and projects responding to the COVID-19 pandemic that offer glimpses of what the future of the arts could be, have sprouted up all over the world. From Alethea Rockwell's Embodied Sensations project in the US<sup>4</sup> to Pelenakeke Brown's Rotations workshop series organized and led by disabled artists that offered online spaces for care and creativity during some of the most challenging times<sup>5</sup>. Calls from arts practitioners in the UK also have also pleaded for the emergence of increased access across the arts not to be treated as simply a temporary solution, but rather to become a permanent part of programming of all future events. "Barriers to viewing art are being removed, and by learning from the more accessible working structures that have emerged during the pandemic – namely working from home becoming widespread – we could feasibly see a rise in the proportion of Disabled People within the arts workforce. If harnessed, these adjustments and advances could lead to a newly accessible art world."<sup>6</sup>

For us in Germany, we have also seen how the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected disabled arts workers, particularly regarding the life threatening risk the virus poses, the ableism towards disabled people and the work-arounds they have found to continue to work in the arts<sup>7</sup>. The pandemic presents opportunities to challenge the arts and cultural sector to press the restart button but do so by including disabled voices. Well known institutions such as HKW have already used their platforms to give voice to German disabled arts workers

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3 <https://www.disabilityartsinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/TIMETO2.pdf>

4 <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/540>

5 <https://wordgathering.com/vol15/issue4/disability-futures/brown/>

6 <https://corridor8.co.uk/article/emerging-accessibility-post-viral-programming-and-disabled-audiences/>

7 <https://www.zeit.de/zeit-magazin/2020/53/sehbehinderung-corona-abstand-hygiene-museum-ruecksicht>

<https://www.hoerspielundfeature.de/inklusive-kunst-in-zeiten-von-corona-ein-schritt-vor-zwei-100.html>

through their cultural education program<sup>8</sup> or through online exhibitions featuring disabled artists<sup>9</sup>. Independent practitioners such as our own Dirk Sorge have created projects such as Echo, a project capturing the opinions of 8 artists with and without disabilities about COVID-19 and isolation.<sup>10</sup>

Building on this important and necessary work to capture the all too often overlooked experiences of disabled arts workers in Germany, and considering that the pandemic clearly demonstrates a chance to reimagine and rebuild the future we wanted to ask: 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.

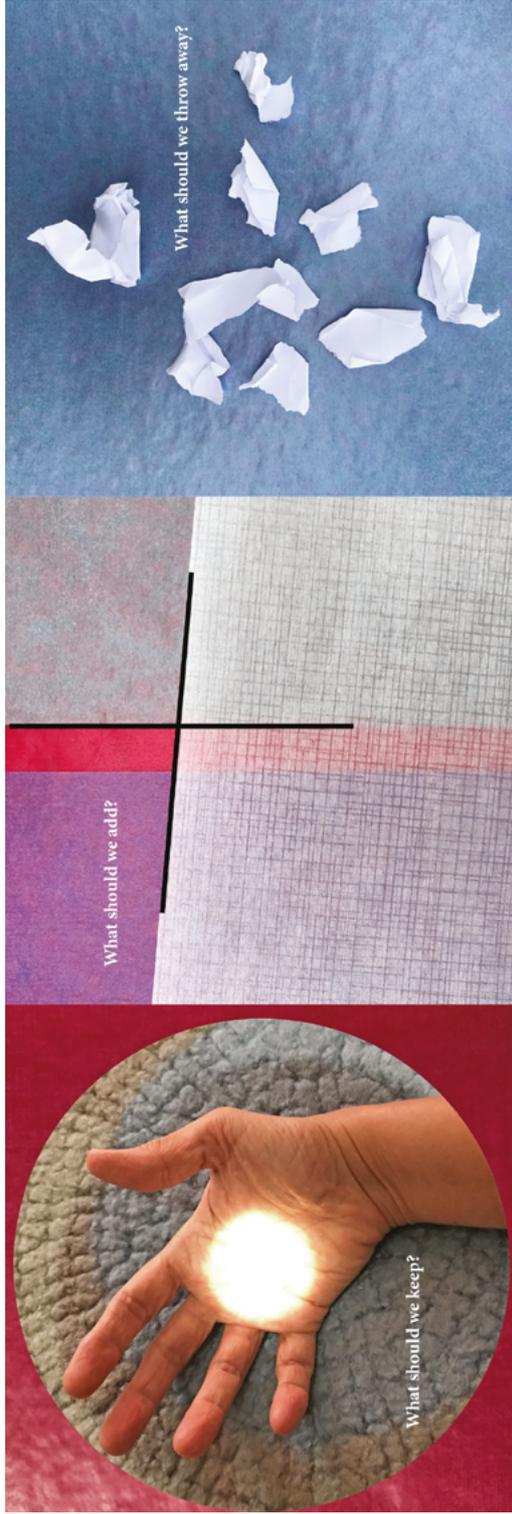
We envisage the results of this creative research project to be useful to arts and cultural institutions interested in taking a truly inclusive approach in their post-pandemic programming, but also for artists and cultural workers with disabilities working in a(n often ableist) cultural sector, to have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

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8 [https://www.hkw.de/de/programm/kulturelle\\_bildung/kiwit/onlinetools\\_fuer\\_inklusive\\_kunst\\_und\\_kulturvermittlung.php](https://www.hkw.de/de/programm/kulturelle_bildung/kiwit/onlinetools_fuer_inklusive_kunst_und_kulturvermittlung.php)

9 [https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/veranstaltung/p\\_169075.php](https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/veranstaltung/p_169075.php)

10 <https://www.echo-stimmen.de/>



Feel free to draw, paint or collage your answer to the questions  
 "What should we keep",  
 "What should we add"  
 "What should we throw away"  
 on this card.

To return it so it may be shared as part of our survey

**Mail it by post to:**

Starting from Zero  
 Krossener Str. 24  
 10245 Berlin

**Scan or photograph and email to:**

Kontakt@StartingFromZero.de

PLEASE NOTE: we might show your response publicly in the form of a poster, exhibition or on our media channels as part of an awareness campaign in Germany and abroad. By sharing your response with us, you consent to this usage.

Online survey and more info:

[www.StartingFromZero.de](http://www.StartingFromZero.de)

What should we keep?

What should we add?

What should we throw away?

**Starting from Zero**

is a creative research project investigating disabled artists and cultural workers' access to culture throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

What cultural shifts have you noticed as a result of the pandemic?

Has your access to culture increased? Or diminished?

Do you feel more or less visible?

If we are starting from zero, what kind of future do we want to build?

How can we use what we have experienced during the pandemic to inform and expand the collective potential of culture?

**What should we keep?**

**What should we add?**

**What should we throw away?**

Together, we would like to create:

**A Post Pandemic Tool Kit**

## 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. Below is a more detailed description of how we carried out our project and what challenges we faced.

## 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 and consumers/art publics) 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.

Because there is already a distinct lack of data on participation of disabled cultural workers and publics access to arts and culture, we have made efforts to gain data in an accessible way. We have thus designed the collection of data in a way that doesn't solely rely on written or digital formats to widen the responses from a variety of people with disabilities engaging in arts and culture. Access provision has been planned into every aspect of the project. For example, we have budgeted for translations of the survey and interviews and through reaching out to our existing network of multipliers we will be able to connect with hard to reach groups that may not use the standard channels of communication in arts and culture in Germany (such as people who work in Sheltered Workshops, have limited access to the internet, can't use online forms or online conference platforms or who are non-native German speakers e.g. disabled refugees/asylum seekers, or those with an intersectional experience of disability, such as LGBTQI+ Trans people with disabilities or disabled people of colour.)

## Preliminary Research

Initial research was conducted to determine what current statistics and discourse exists on this topic, particularly within a German-speaking context. This included reviewing:

- Research reports
- Essays and blogs written by disabled cultural workers
- Discursive events dealing with this topic
- Artworks dealing with this topic

## Online Survey

An accessible questionnaire was designed and distributed to cultural workers and artists with disabilities to find out:

- How have they coped during the COVID-19 pandemic
- How have they been included in/excluded from arts and culture during this time, and did their level of access increase or decrease as a result of the pandemic?
- How have they found sources of inspiration for their work during this time?
- Has their definition of culture changed as a result of the pandemic?

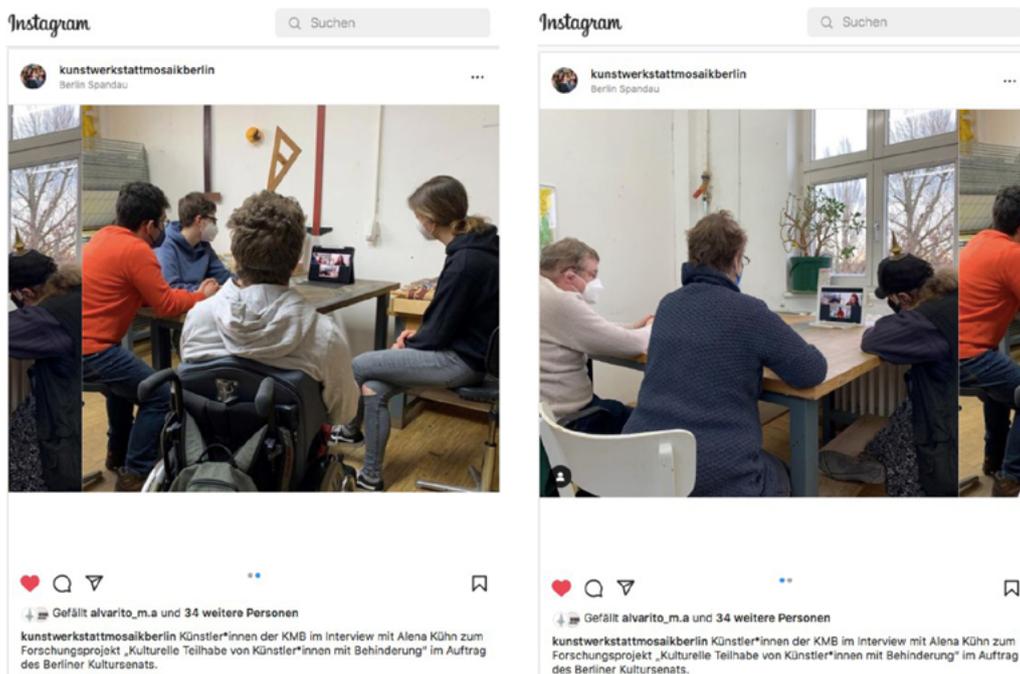
## Follow-up group Interviews

Two offline follow-up group interviews with cultural workers and artists with disabilities gave more insight to the initial results gained by the questionnaire. While 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 presents this particular group of people and 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.

## Free-Form Responses

In addition to the online survey and interviews, we also invited participants to create free form responses. We created an online and downloadable and printable pdf with the questions “What do you most want to keep? What do you want to throw away? What is something new you want to add?” and accompanying images, that participants could respond to through drawing, painting, collage, writing video, sound, photography etc. Participants were given a variety of formats for sending us their responses such as via the website, via email, or via post (with the option of requesting an already printed pdf and stamped envelope).





**Nichts tun**

**ist tödlich**

## **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).

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 theater, 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, nearly all 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 having 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 organisations 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 exiting 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

organisations 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 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 (included responses that specifically mentioning 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 of their digital environment.

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:

“Work 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 cooperations”

“Protected spaces” such as Mosaic or Ramba Zamba.

“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 more 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.”

“Easier access to events.”

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

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.”

“A patriarchal view of art and culture.”

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

“Over-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 these them symbolically. For example, the way a digital event can evoke two extreme situations of being able to participate in cultural events from home but simultaneously leaving participants lonely and devoid of physical contact, was represented by 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 were displayed in mid-March in 40 locations around Berlin in order to increase awareness and invite a broader public into the conversation.



**“All the lip service: Isn’t a person with a disability also normal?”**



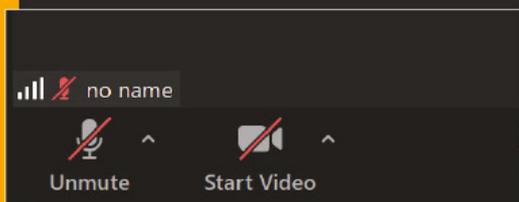
## **Starting from Zero**

A creative research project by Berlinklusion investigating disabled artists and cultural workers' access to culture throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. [www.StartingFromZero.de](http://www.StartingFromZero.de)



“As an autistic person, I’m happy about the adjustable volume ...

no name



... and the off button.”



## Starting from Zero

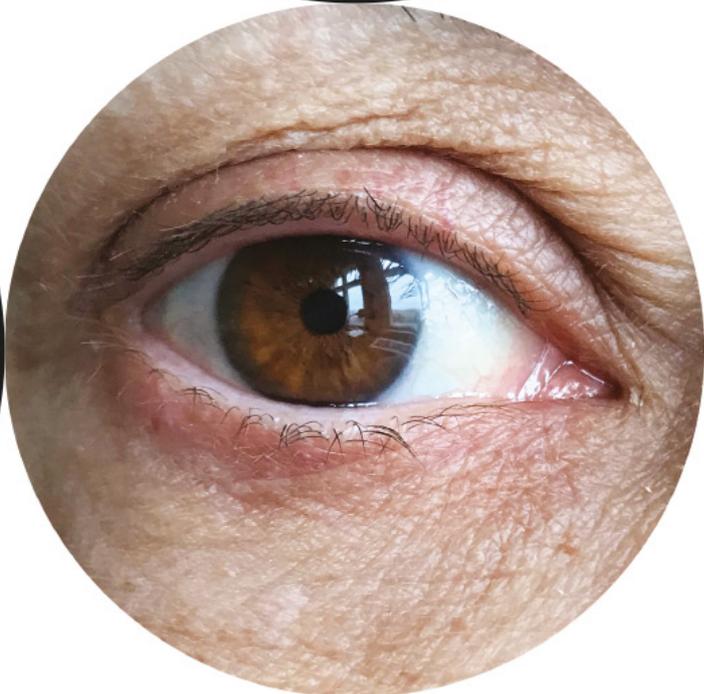
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“The other senses

are omitted.”



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“I can work from home”

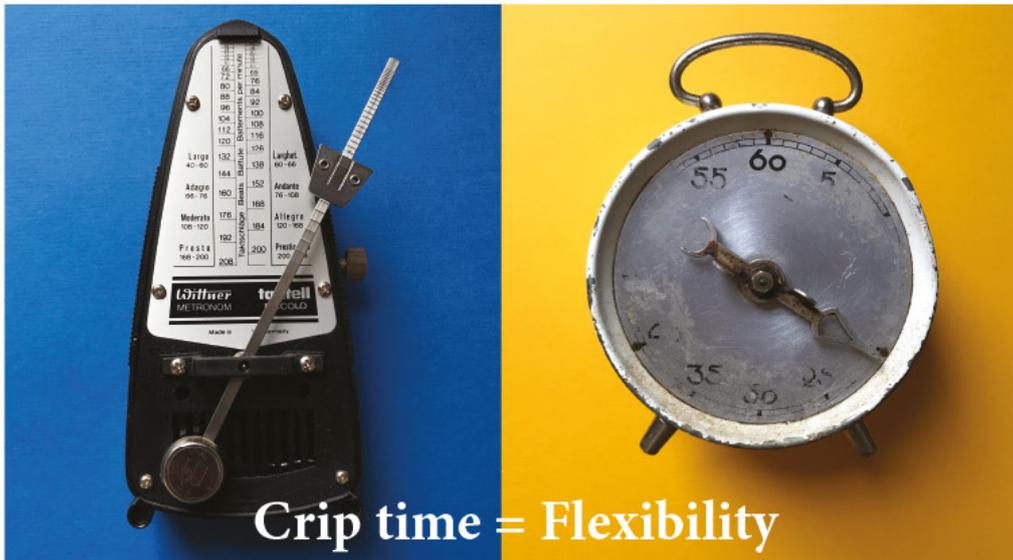
“When an online event is over, you close your laptop and you are alone”



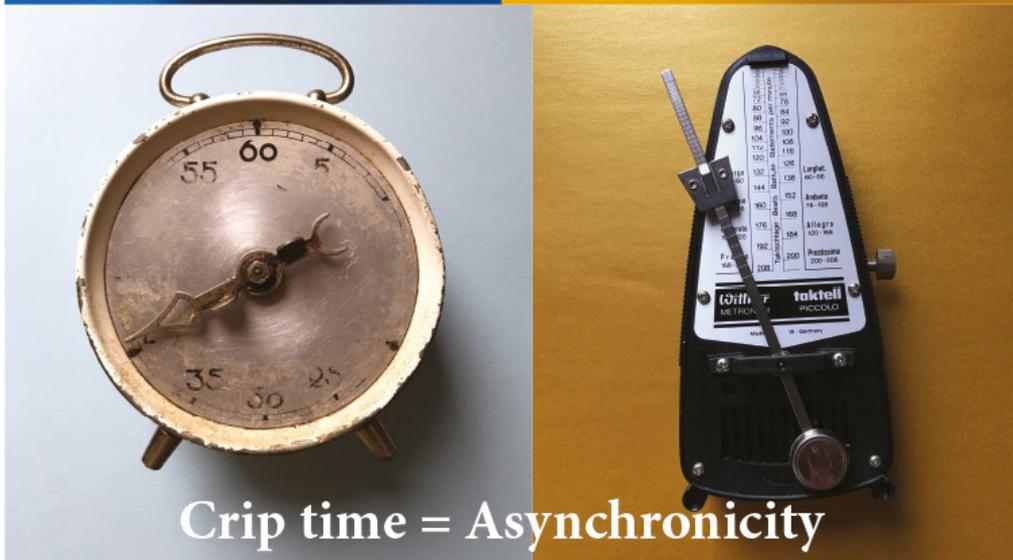
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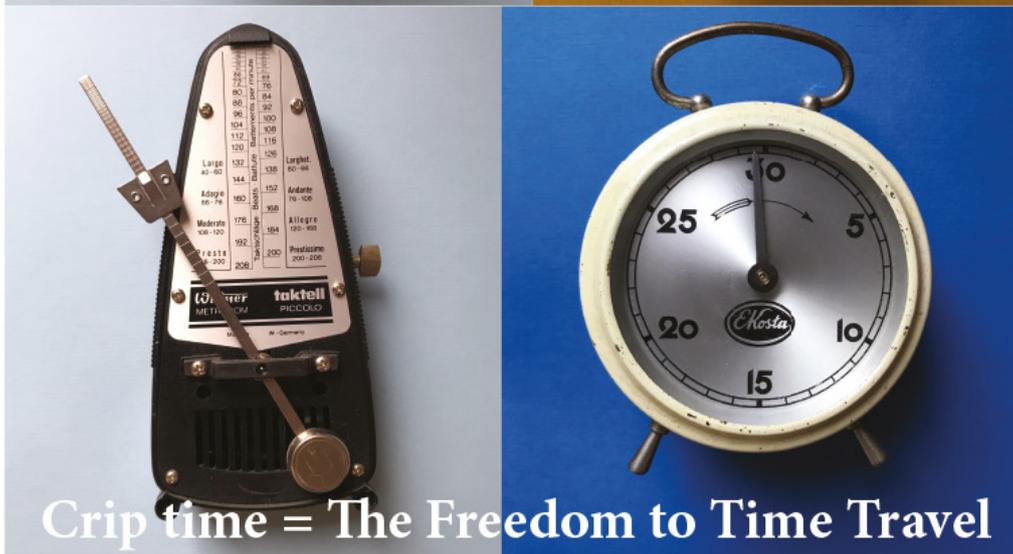




Crip time = Flexibility



Crip time = Asynchronicity



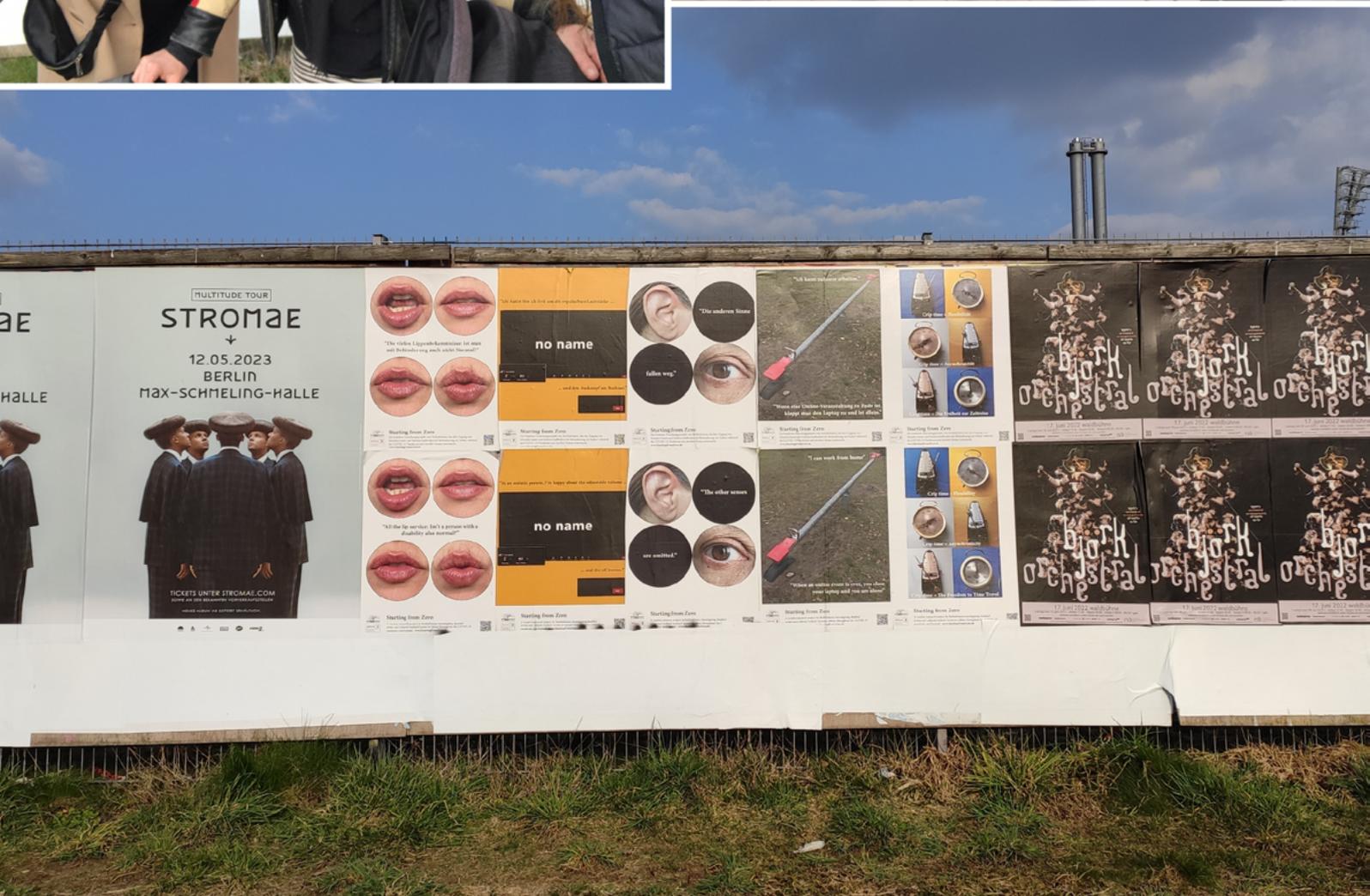
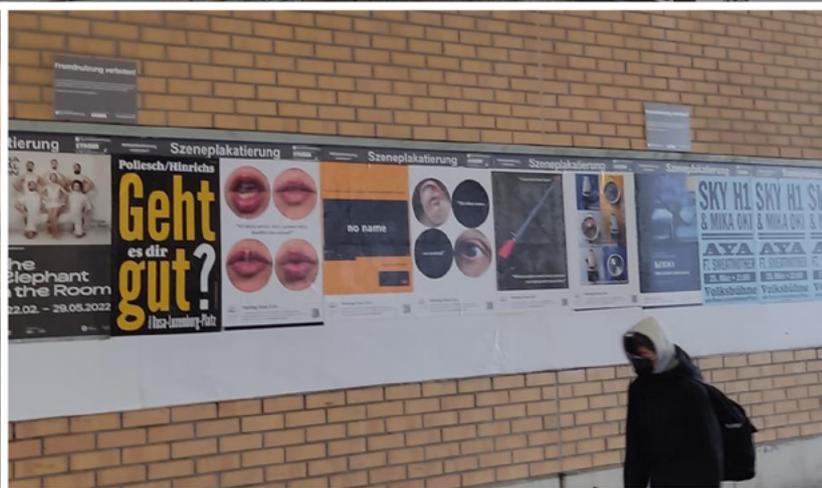
Crip time = The Freedom to Time Travel

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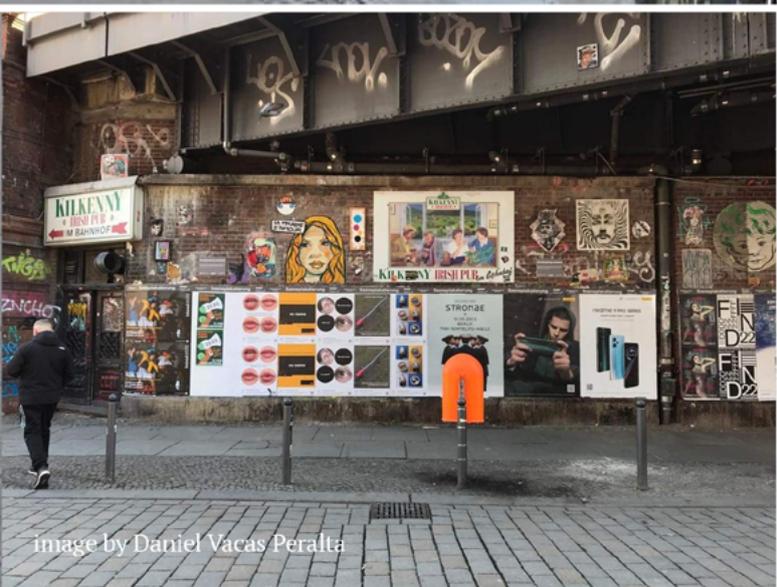


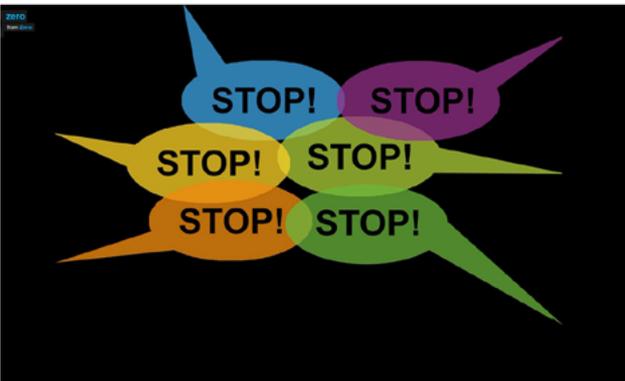
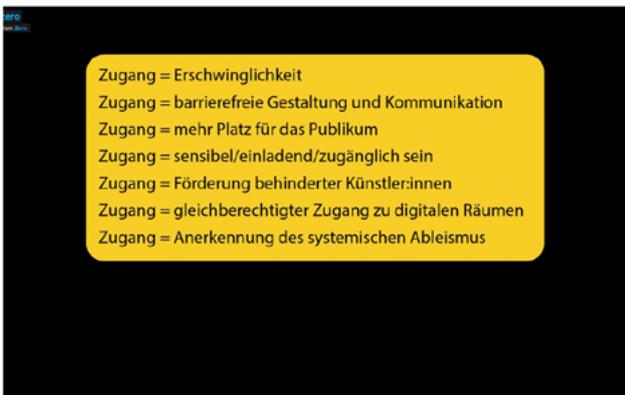
image by Daniel Vacas Peralta







**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.**



## Our Conclusion, Our Proposition

Starting from Zero was a creative research project that investigated 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.

Our idea for this project was to be multi-modal in our approach and present opportunities for people to respond in a multitude of ways. Originally, and perhaps somewhat optimistically, when we wrote our project proposal we had hoped that in addition to our online survey we would eventually be able to conduct in-person creative workshops using a variety of hands-on materials and activities. Sadly, what was reflected in the survey – that COVID-19 prevented the physical coming together of disabled arts workers and collective expressions of thought through tactile media – also affected how we were able to collect our data. However, we adapted and sought new ways of collecting our data through online means, facilitating multiple creative ways for people to engage and respond, and through reaching out and directly contacting individuals and groups we knew were among the most at risk. As a team, we too struggled through moments of isolation, not being able to meet and work together in the same space, moments of fatigue and even sickness, but also profound moments of care for each other and our participants.

Our project doesn't try to provide all the answers around access for all arts organisations in Germany, but rather to shine a spotlight on the desires and demands of disabled people working in the arts, their strength in the face of an extremely challenging and in some cases, life threatening time, and the strategies they adopted to cope. We have asked disabled arts workers what their experiences in producing and participating in arts and culture during the COVID-19 pandemic were: what they would keep, add, and throw away. We would now like to ask the cultural sector at large, and in particular, the gatekeepers of arts and culture: how will **you** start from zero?



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