didaskalia
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From the issue: **English Issue 2024**
DOI: 10.34762/af1t-kg66
Source URL:
https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/horizontal-aesthetics-and-bed-activism-pandemic-subversive-horizontality

/ CRIPPING PERFORMING ARTS

Horizontal Aesthetics and Bed Activism: Pandemic Subversive Horizontality

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The article was written as a response to the call for papers *Cripping Performing Arts*, edited by Katarzyna Ojrzyńska and Monika Kwaśniewska. The series is published from issue 178.

During the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, artists without disabilities resorted to tactics considered as emblematic for disability art and activism. They cripped artistic practice using strategies that had been developed for years by artists and activists with disabilities. The main aim of this essay is to analyse examples of such cripping practices taking the categories of horizontal aesthetics and bed activism as a starting point. The tension between temporality and chronicity is also explored as a decisive feature in the context of the cripping of art (and other activities in public space). Finally, the article argues that the creative strategies in question have deeper roots going back to 20th century neo-avant-garde practices.

Keywords: disability; crip; art; activism; COVID-19

Katarzyna Żeglicka's manifesto 'Who Gives Me the Right to Be Crip' begins with the following insight:

> I may be wrong but cripping has become fashionable in Poland. It seems to be bandied about left and right […] The non-disabled, heteronormative, neurotypical majority is cripping the mainstream before the disabled community has done it. I read about it in articles and event descriptions […] Cripping has been colonized (2023).

I interpret Żeglicka's words as a critique of appropriating cripping as an aesthetic and identity category and of applying the term to non-disabled artists. Żeglicka's critique is not accompanied by specific examples of such appropriations, as the author focuses on her own experience.

I concur with Żeglicka's observation that elements of the crip artistic practice of people with disabilities are seeping into the mainstream (in art, performance, activism and the academy) and that the history and legacy of people with disabilities and their communities are being bypassed in the process. My reading of this process, however, is different from hers. Instead of defining it as appropriation, I regard it as re-invention of crip strategies by people without experience of disability. Some forms of crip artistic practice were already to be found in the twentieth-century counterculture, and it can be argued that they correspond in character with the current turn towards slowness and rest, both involving resistance to capitalist productivity and monetizing diverse embodiments of slow culture. This turn was apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, and I consider the related quarantines and lockdowns as the cause of the trend of artists and arts organizations adopting cripping practices.

In this article I focus on selected practices I regard as important in the cripping of the arts and the theoretical propositions used to analyze them. I argue that contemporary arts practice is being cripped by artists with disabilities as well as artists without personal experience of disability who, however, have no desire to take over crip strategies. Both groups adopt similar tactics arising from lack and restriction. What distinguishes them, however, is the temporal span of the restriction. While for people without disabilities it tends to be temporary (as it was the case with pandemic lockdowns), for many people with disabilities it is chronic.

What is cripping (the arts)?

Disability art is transgressive since it entails the transgression of the prevalent ideas of who can be an arts practitioner and who has actual access to the public sphere, public space, education and the institutions that validate artistic work as professional. It also challenges the established divide between art work recognized as critical artistic expression and art work considered as an element of therapy.

Another reason that makes disability art transgressive in that it is often designed not so much around an end product, be it an artwork, theatre work or performance, but around a creative process conducive to interdependence, relationality, collectivity and collaboration. A prime example is the portraits of people with disabilities by Riva Lehrer, an American artist with disability. Her work is reminiscent of the Renaissance tradition of depicting subjects surrounded by objects reflecting their interests, values or social status. For Lehrer, the finished products (portraits) are important (they are exhibited in galleries, reproduced and analyzed), but equally important is the process of their creation.

The artist refers to the process as ‘circular and collaborative’ (2022a), describing her method as follows:

> For decades, my portrait collaborators have come to the privacy of my home studio and participated in intense, profound live sittings. I believe that the true product of a portrait is not the object, but the exchanges between artist and collaborator. Intimacy is the very foundation of what we do (2022b).

Lehrer repeatedly meets and talks with her sitters, shares her space with them, invites them to stay at her home. When discussing her work, she foregrounds relationality and communalizes the creative process by defining her subjects as collaborators who are not just models and interlocutors but also guests at her home.

Importantly, Lehrer’s practice strongly foregrounds an intimate, domestic space, temporarily and cyclically shared with her sitters as part of the creative process, which distinguishes it from the studio as a space located outside home, associated with professionalized artistic production.

Technology-mediated online interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted Riva Lehrer’s working mode. Due to pandemic restrictions, her portrait-painting sessions were held in front of computer screens. This mode of collaboration resulted in the creation of a portrait of Alice Wong, an American disabled essayist and activist. In it, Wong sits in an electric wheelchair, wearing a mask attached to her ventilator tube, both the wheelchair and the mask being integral to her daily life and serving as hallmarks of her media persona. She is portrayed within the video chat interface among other desktop screen items. This is how Lehrer summed up the period of her work during the Covid pandemic:

> After several panicky months, I developed methods that allowed me to persist. I began by doing portraits over Zoom, drawing my collaborators framed in the rectangle of my laptop screen. There were good conversations, but not quite what happens when we are together; just the slightest bit less fluid and honest (2022b).

Lehrer considers the experience as disruptive to her relational and hospitable working mode, although, as she told Wong, the pandemic made her realize that her previous working method excluded some people – her lift and bathroom, which were inaccessible to electric wheelchair users, would prevent Wong from visiting and staying at her home.

The successive lockdowns disrupted the normative cycles of cultural endeavour, forcing them online. Audiences and arts funding bodies adopted and accepted relationality and the use of private spaces as legitimate work environments. In their work, artists turned to their own bodies, intimate settings and widely available tools such as smartphones and webcams. The strategies, tactics and means they adopted are reminiscent of the relational artistic practice of people with disabilities, rooted in the body and its condition and involving domestic spaces and inexpensive tools.

Artists with disabilities, many of whom have to navigate permanent scarcity, lack and inaccessibility outside of pandemic restrictions, develop strategies and modes of action that involve individual and communal support. This applies not only to artistic practice but also to everyday survival strategies in a world governed by scarcity rather than abundance. Arseli Dokumaci, an ethnographer and disability studies scholar, writes about shrinkage, defining it as ‘a lessening or diminishing in relation to the scope or range that was available before’ (2023, p. 18). As one’s health deteriorates or disability progresses, the opportunities offered by the environment shrink.

But as challenging and traumatizing as limitations may be, notes Dokumaci, they also inspire creativity: ‘when the environment’s offerings narrow, and when its materiality turns into a set of constraints rather than opportunities, the improvisatory space of performance opens up and lets us imagine that same materiality otherwise’ (2023, p. 7). Dokumaci describes examples of daily improvisations developed by people with disabilities (she conducted research among people living with rheumatoid arthritis and chronic pain) to help them navigate a reality whose offering of opportunities is diminishing. As she notes, in the face of the climate crisis, pollution and wars, opportunities shrink for both those with and without disabilities. And this prospect looms before many of us. In this context, the daily improvisations of people with disabilities chart potential strategies for coping with a shrinking pool of resources and opportunities.

I regard COVID-19 lockdowns as marking a radical, traumatic shrinkage of opportunities. In the fields of education, work, activism, art and performance, they entailed the adoption of solutions that had long been used by people with disabilities. Excellent examples of this process are described in the online document ‘COVID E-lit: Digital Art During the Pandemic’ (2022), a collection of online interviews conducted by Scott Rettberg, Ashleigh Steele, Søren Pold and Anna Nacher with artists working in the field of electronic literature, i.e. literary practices in the digital environment.[1] The interviewees recount their pandemic experiences of containment, isolation and professional precariousness. They note the role of the yearning for face-to-face interaction and for being in public spaces, of seeking new creative strategies and ways to reach audiences, and of disrupting the boundary between private and public. Those working in the field of electronic literature must have expertise and tools, but some of the pandemic projects discussed in the document pivot on the physicality of the creators, the use of simple and accessible tools, and practices that can be pursued in one's immediate environment. Notable, too, is the relationality inherent in these projects. In *I Got Up, Pandemic Edition* 2020, Xtine Burrough references *I Got Up* (1968–1979), a mail art project by the Japanese artist On Kawara, who sent daily postcards rubber-stamped with the time he rose from bed to two of his friends. Burrough reprised On Kawara's gesture using her mobile phone. She noted down the date and time of her getting up on various surfaces – her hands, paper or paving slabs (while walking her dog), or composed them out of her dog's treats (which the dog then ate) – before filming them. As Burrough points out, some of her daily acts of noting down were performed while playing with her children, who she was taking care of full time after the closing of schools and kindergartens. Kawara's self-referential gesture was transformed into a diary of family life in which Burrough disclosed communal activities and acts of care such as cooking for others or looking after her children or dog.

In the projects discussed in 'COVID E-lit', the turn towards the body and its functions, primarily breathing, is clearly visible. The artists' recording of their breathing was a meaningful gesture in the context of COVID-19 symptoms and a political gesture in the context of the murder of George Floyd and global inequalities addressed by Achille Mbembe (2021). Whilst Annie Abrahams recorded her own breathing as part of *Pandemic Encounter*, Anna Nacher and Victoria Vesna launched *Breath Library* (2021), a project comprising a breath repository (to which anyone can submit a recording of their breathing) and online community meetings/workshops/meditations focused on care. This recourse to the artists' own bodies and the prominence accorded to quotidian, trivial or so-common-that-almost-unnoticeable activities was the outcome of the temporary shrinkage of possibilities and of the practice of joining together into care-based collectives. All this correlates strongly with the permanent lacks and limitations experienced by artists with disabilities and with the ways these lacks are navigated.

Horizontal aesthetics and bed activism

In this section I discuss two theoretical notions that can be used to describe and analyze disability-related activities playing out at the interface of art and activism, particularly in the conditions of pandemic containment: horizontal aesthetics, proposed by Noa Winter in their articles 'Aesthetics of Horizontal Access – An Ode to Lying Down in Art Spaces' (2020) and 'Aesthetics of Pain, Fatigue, and Rest: Working Methods of Chronically Ill Artists within Disability-led Performances' (2023), and bed activism, as proposed by Noemi Nishida in her book *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability, Dependency, and Desire*(2022). Noa Winter, a curator, theatre-maker and accessibility expert, note:

> in a traditional Western theater setting, the most common and unquestioned requirement for attending a performance is the capability to sit quietly for at least one hour without a break. The vertical positions of sitting, walking, or standing seem to pervade all kinds of attending artistic work [...]. Verticality seems to imply being open, public, and creative (2020).

Winter argue that the opposite of verticality, horizontality, is commonly associated with privacy and sleep and, in public space, with homelessness, intoxication and, occasionally, holiday-time relaxation. It is thus linked to an absence of productivity or attentiveness. Winter's claim 'lying down seems to violate the rules of what it means to be a "good" audience member' (2020) holds true for both the arts field and the academy. Identifying with queer, disabled and chronically pained people, whose queerness, disability and pain affect their engagement with artistic work, particularly in institutional settings, Winter point out that horizontality has long been present in the history of art, invoking the example of Frida Kahlo, who painted lying down and had her bed moved to the gallery to attend the opening of her 1953 exhibition.[2] Proposing horizontality, Winter primarily discuss accessibility of diverse arts spaces to audiences. They speak of their own discomfort and pain when they had to stay in a position dictated by the auditorium chair at a show by Claire Cunningham, an icon of disability performance and dance. Winter stress that 'even our understanding of access [...] is still highly influenced by ableist norms' (2020) and they point to the aesthetic potential of horizontality, not only in relation to creative strategies or artistic practices but also with regard to the way an artwork, theatre show or performance is engaged with. Winter describe how their lying down on the floor during the Cunningham show affected their perception and reception of it. Their perspective changed – not only did they see differently the performer's body and the way she moved and handled objects, such as her crutches or the upturned cups she walked on, but their perception of the sounds changed too. Winter stress that (2020) 'being horizontal is the gateway to a whole new world of aesthetic experiences' (2020).

Akemi Nishida investigates another dimension of horizontality, bed activism, defining it as 'resistance and visioning as well as bed-centred critique of social oppressions emerging from people's bed spaces – and particularly the beds of disabled and sick people' (2020, p. 159). Providing examples of bed activism, Nishida invokes mechanisms of building online care and support communities through blogging (or content creating, as we would say today), writing and signing petitions, as well as exerting pressure on politicians (organizations and companies).[3]

The researcher also frames the practices of art, storytelling, and love-making – particularly the love-making of people from marginalized groups who are often denied the right to it – in terms of bed activism.[4] Importantly, for her, bed activism and bed-born wisdom apply not only to activists and artists who stay at their homes but also to people who stay in bed at establishments such as hospices, hospitals and nursing homes. I consider it particularly important to recognize the experience of these people in terms of knowledge and competence.

The horizontality proposed by Noa Winter and the bed-related practices discussed by Akemi Nishida stem from the bodily experience of disability, chronic fatigue or pain. These activities are predicated on allowing modes of corporeal public participation (in the arts, the academy and, more broadly, political activity and representation) other than those customarily acknowledged and accepted as reflecting the ideals of independence, productivity and efficiency.

A notable example of making art and exercising agency from bed is *Culicidae*(2022), a short film directed and produced by the Australian artist Greg Moran, who is a quadriplegic. Moran is also the script-writer and plays the lead (and only) role in the film. His protagonist battles the titular mosquito throughout the six-minute film. We watch him from above, in close-up, lying in a medical bed. He’s wearing an oxygen mask to help him breathe and is surrounded by medical instruments and everyday objects which are within easy reach of his mouth. Using his mouth, he efficiently manages his environment: he drinks, covers himself, makes telephone calls, turns on and off the lights and operates his bed by deftly moving a plastic stick he holds in his mouth. His fight with the mosquito, which puts one in mind of cinematographic sword duels, is a masterclass in using the tool. After several suspenseful and humorous attempts to kill the insect with the end of the stick after it alights on various objects, the protagonist triumphs and breathes a sigh of relief, only to hear the hateful buzzing again. The film is a testament to Moran's mastery of the tools at his disposal. The auteur nature of the picture, of which Moran is producer, director and writer, also demonstrates his prowess and competence in managing the complex process of film production.

The Other Side of Dance (*O outro lado da dança*, 2022) by Diana Niepce, a Portuguese dancer and choreographer with a mobility disability, is a perverse variation on horizontality and verticality. The performance begins with the performer being dragged onto the stage. Crawling and pulling herself up, Niepce moves across the floor – with difficulty, slowly but efficiently, exploring the possibilities of her body. Niepce's horizontal choreography poses a counterpoint to her verticalization as the dancer becomes attached to a crane operated by her stage partner. Supported by the machine, Niepce's body 'stands' on the stage before rising up and circling in a fast-paced flight which the artist seems to have no control over and which, by her own admission, is brutal and painful. The autonomous horizontality, which corresponds to the condition and dynamics of Niepce's body, is juxtaposed against a coercive, violent and out-of-control verticality.

One must remember, however, that horizontality and staying in bed as artistic or resistance practices are not exclusive to the arts and people with disabilities. Mark Twain was a champion of writing from bed. Lying down, reclining and bed were also an important part of the work and social life of the Polish poet, writer and playwright Miron Białoszewski (*Polegiwania/Lyings*, 1961), a vital component of which was his ‘bunk’.[5] In the field of art, artists associated with the twentieth-century neo-avant-garde movements such as the Fluxus, including Milan Knížák (the performance *A Walk Around Nový Svět: A Demonstration for All the Senses*, 1964) or Yoko Ono, practised various forms of lying down in public spaces. One of the most famous examples is Yoko Ono’s and John Lennon’s peace protest held in 1969. The couple stayed in a hotel bed for a fortnight. The photographs of Ono and Lennon lying in bed against the backdrop of an impressive urban view, dressed all in white, entered the canon of 20th-century pop culture as their media visibility brought them wide media exposure. The horizontality of the body in public space was also explored by the French performer Orlan, once briefly associated with the Fluxus. In her ‘MesuRages’ performance series (launched in the 1970s) Orlan would lie down and crawl on gallery floors measuring the space with her own body.

In Paisid Aramphongphan’s book *Horizontal Together: Art, Dance, and Queer Embodiment in 1960s New York* (2021), horizontality is a significant element of the author’s examination of queer embodiment in the art, dance and performance work of three 1960s New York avant-garde artists: Andy Warhol, Jack Smith and Fred Herko. Aramphongphan looks at lying down, reclining and staying in bed as both the subject of art and the target mode of engaging with it. He discusses performances taking place in private apartments with audience members reclining on the floor. The researcher quotes the words of the artist Harold Stevenson concerning his large-scale canvas *The New Adam* depicting a reclining naked man: ‘the best way to view the painting is by lying on the floor – therefore unable to see the limits of the canvas, lost in it, as it were’ (2021, p. 4). Aramphongphan treats horizontality as a useful tool for visual analysis of works of art. He also sees it as conducive to attaining non-hierarchicality in making and writing about art. Horizontality provides an essential language for describing non-authoritarian collaboration and care strategies that do not rely on one-person leadership.

Artists and performers have used the transgressiveness of public horizontality as a tool of institutional critique by practising public horizontality outside galleries or transgressing the institutional norms of artistic production and reception.

It is also worth mentioning activist lie-ins, which can be traced back to the tradition of *satyagraha*, the tactic of non-violent resistance that Mahatma Gandhi turned into a tool of political action. *Satyagraha* entered into dialog with and influenced Western traditions of civil disobedience and passive resistance.

Lie-ins, which are predominantly held in public spaces (with rare exceptions such as Ono’s and Lennon’s protest), have become the staple of resistance in the fields of politics, ecology and health policies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They have spawned a number of variations, such as ‘die-ins’, including the early 1980s New York protests against the US authorities’ denial of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, during which protesters lay down in churches and in the streets pretending to be dead or unconscious, and ‘sit-ins’, or chain-ins (or similar forms of protest), in public spaces resorted to by climate and environmental protesters (e.g. ‘Just Stop Oil’ campaign). During radical lie-ins, public spaces are occupied for extended periods and transformed into temporarily domestic, intimate spaces, including places of rest and sleep (such as the tent cities of #occupymovement or the activities of the Polish She-Wolves/Wilczyce collective in defence of the Carpathian

Primeval Forest). The practice, in its various incarnations, has been adopted by people with disabilities to occupy government buildings (e.g. Federal Offices in Philadelphia in 1977 or the Polish Parliament in 2018) or to paralyze public transport by lying down in front of inaccessible buses (e.g. ADAPT groups' protests across the USA in the early 1980s).

The Polish influencer couple of Wojciech Sawicki and his wife Agata Tomaszewska, known online as Life on Wheelz, represent an interesting way of practicing horizontality and bed activism. Sawicki, who has a disability, gives prominence to his bed setting in his YouTube series 'In Bed with Wojtek Sawicki'. The perverseness of the title seems intentional – the influencer duo has made their name by publishing content that breaks stereotypes and upends prejudices against the sexuality of people with disabilities. The couple have advertized Durex condoms and appeared on the cover of the acclaimed weekly opinion magazine *Tygodnik Powszechny* in a photograph referencing Annie Leibovitz's famous portrait of Lennon and Ono, with a naked Sawicki and a fully dressed Tomaszewska looking directly into the camera.[6] Explaining the title of the YouTube series, Sawicki says that 'first [...] I am in bed, and second, I invite you into my intimate world'.[7] The videos' opening sequence is a montage of photographic portraits of Sawicki that show him making faces, all taken from above and capturing Sawicki lying in bed. All videos follow the same format: the influencer lies in bed and speaks for several minutes, filmed in a single shot by a camera placed over his bed. Sawicki, positioned in the centre of the frame and gazing directly into the camera, delivers a narrative focused on his experiences and emotions. In this respect, the series fits perfectly into the vlog format common on YouTube and other social media platforms except it crips it with its evident horizontal form and its content: Sawicki discussing his disability and his fears and anxieties about his future, health or death.

The Facebook page of Life on Wheelz contains a post documenting the making of 'In Bed with Wojtek Sawicki' with the caption 'This is my home recording studio.' The photograph shows, in side view, the influencer lying on his bed and recording. He is looking up into the camera of the smartphone clipped to a shelf-mounted plank structure, which also supports a computer. His breathing tube, always present in his videos and photographs, can be seen, as can the wires of his recording/streaming equipment. It should be noted that the duo has only recently begun exploring horizontality. Previously, on their social media they emphasized the mobility, activity and verticality afforded to Sawicki by his electric wheelchair. Other influencers/activists with disabilities produce content that is similar in tone, bringing to the fore the potential and possibilities of people with disabilities. In his online content, Sawicki has been videoed in various locations (urban, beachfront, forest). The influencer's verticality and mobility were on display, but he repeatedly stressed that this came at the cost of great effort by him and his team.

The public reception of lie-ins has been mixed. The protests of Ono and Lennon met with ample criticism levelled not only at the pair's doing nothing but also at the fact that they were attended to by hotel staff for a fortnight.

Whatever emotions they have provoked, the public lie-ins held to elicit AIDS-prevention steps or aimed against environmental damage did not tend to attract similar criticism. A lie-in in and of itself, therefore, cannot be regarded as elitist and self-focused or, conversely, communal and non-hierarchical. The response to it seems to be predicated on the liers-in' self-denial of comfort (absent in the Ono and Lennon case) or rest, which, as Winter point out, is integral to sleeping or lying on the beach. Another factor affecting the response and impact of such protests is whether protesters expose themselves to the risks attached to subversive horizontality in public spaces, such as peace-disturbance charges.

Horizontality has been present in the arts and activism in the 20th and 21st centuries. The representation of reclining and sleeping works differently in different fields of art – it is one of the traditional motifs of painting and sculpture, but it eludes the canon in the case of Andy Warhol filming long periods of sleep in an effort, apparently, to counter the perception of film as a story about events. What appears to unite horizontality-oriented art and activism (treating the two separately is becoming outdated) is the conspicuous and rule-upending transgression inherent in lying down when it occurs outside its customary niche of staging, convention, safety and temporary personal rest. In the section that follows, I look at a different tension, that between disability-grounded practice and practice rooted in other experiences. I believe that at the core of that tension lie the temporality and chronicity of horizontality, which were thrown into relief during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Temporality/Chronicity

I regard the difference between chronicity and temporality as crucial in the cripping practices employed by artists with disabilities, and which, during the pandemic-related quarantines and lockdowns, were increasingly adopted by artists who did not identify with disablity art. During COVID lockdowns people without disabilities experienced temporary isolation, reduced mobility, limited face-to-face interaction and anxiety about their health and life, all of which are the everyday reality for many people with disabilities. The widely held expectation was that the unpleasant predicament would end and things would return to ‘normal’. This perspective is far less common, if at all present, in the spectrum of experiences of people immobilized at medical and care establishments.

Kateřina Kolářová points out the tension between temporality and chronicity in crisis situations and the social injustice they exacerbate. The researcher uses this dichotomy as an analytical tool to explain the change that occurred over time in the discourses around willingness to sacrifice and the recognition of pandemic vulnerability (2023). Kolářová notes:

> The binary juxtaposition of two temporal regimes (the acute, which was articulated to govern the epidemic threat of viral exposure, and the chronic, which pre-existed and outlasted the exceptionality of the acute) has been crucial for articulation of another distinction: the shared vulnerability of the collective on the one hand, and the individualized identity of the vulnerable on the other (2023).

Critical of the representation of chronic pain in the performing arts and of its absence in disability studies, Noa Winter take a slightly different approach to the dichotomy of temporality and chronicity: ‘acute pain fascinates performance makers, audiences, and scholars alike – but while self-inflicted pain has the ability to engage the spectator, the seemingly unincorporable and undesirable experience of ongoing chronic pain disengages the audience’ (2023, p. 238). They point out: ‘chronic pain and fatigue are often glossed over or omitted in favor of representations that emphasize artistic capacity or a certain playfulness with authenticity and failure’ (2023, p. 233).

Both researchers added the notion of tension between temporality and chronicity to their analytical toolkits in 2023, which may lead one to conclude they did this in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting lockdowns limited the space accessible to artists, activists and performers (as well as other population members) to their homes, interrupted interpersonal interactions and created a demand for practising and communicating care for self and others. While for most people the situation was only temporary, people with disabilities, including artists, activists and performers, had faced confinement, restricted personal freedom and limited access to public spaces long before the pandemic, some of them chronically, and they navigated these restrictions by adopting practices such as creating art and building care-based collectives.

COVID-19 lockdowns

One can problematize the tension between temporality and chronicity by juxtaposing two Polish online arts projects. In April 2020, during lockdown, Teatr Studio and Komuna Warszawa invited collaborators to join their newly launched ‘Lockdown Project’. The initiative offered financial support to creatives who had lost their income overnight due to lockdown. Participants were invited to create and record performance work in their lockdown locations – domestic, intimate spaces, often shared with others. They were expected to adhere to clearly defined rules in the spirit of minimalist low-tech, making use of everyday objects and their own bodies and to forgo editing. The resulting recordings were then published on YouTube together with a description of the project tenets and the organizers’ statement: ‘Once upon a time Komuna Warszawa launched a project called Microtheatre (Mikro Teatr), urging artists to radically self-restrict, minimizing stage means. It seems now the time has come to take this practice to the next step’ (2020). It was expected that the conditions of pandemic confinement would encourage (or force) the embodiment of this creative philosophy. The recorded performances vary in duration, theme and format. Whilst some of them reflect the trickster spirit, others are a testament to the frustration and fear of the early weeks of lockdown. Most of them are not dissimilar to one another in terms of choreography and what we actually see on screen. Most performers sit relatively still behind a table (they were required to include a table and use it as the stage), singing, reciting or telling a self-referential story.

In response to this ‘lockdown challenge’, four dancers, performers and activists with disabilities (Filip Pawlak, Katarzyna Żeglicka, Tatiana Cholewa, Patrycja Nosowicz) recorded a witty and subversive version of it before publishing it on social media as *beyond #lockdown* (2020). Żeglicka, Cholewa and Nosowicz – each in their own home – crafted complex, well-considered, impressive choreographies in accord with the guidelines of the ‘Lockdown Project’. Their performances are in stark contrast to the motionless participants of the project, most of whom deliver their lines from behind tables. Monika Kwaśniewska-Mikuła, a theatre studies scholar, emphasizes that the performers interact with their home environments and assistive technologies in an intentional way (2022). Instead of using them or other objects as props or witnesses to their restrictions and lockdown predicament, they incorporate them into their performances in relational and partner-like ways. A montage of their recorded performances is accompanied by Pawlak’s powerful and uncompromising off-screen message to the project organizers, participants and all those complaining about their lockdown-induced plight, confinement and radical limitation of possibilities: ‘Let’s be honest: what do you actually know about self[!]-restriction? Not even a month has passed since you got stuck at home’, before adding: ‘Dear artists, we stay at home professionally.’ Reeling out a witty list, Pawlak reclaims the experience, practice and expertise for people with disabilities: ‘We, the titans of self-restrictions, specialists in problem matters, professionally unemployed, woe experts, heroes of social distancing […]

acrobats of ineptitude.’ He plays with paradox, combining seemingly distant, or even opposite, concepts that code professionalism, prowess and proficiency in what is generally perceived as negative and unwanted. The experience of shared misfortune and hardship during COVID quarantines and lockdowns united and, to some extent, placed on an equal footing people with and without disabilities. What differentiated the two groups, however, was the expertise people with disabilities had due to their experience, and that differentiating factor was predicated on the temporal perspective – the temporality or chronicity of confinement and radically reduced educational, professional, artistic and social opportunities of the two groups.

The scarcity associated with chronic containment and inaccessibility can inspire creativity and promote interdependent relationships with other people and everyday objects. This is demonstrated by Żeglicka’s, Cholewa’s and Nosowicz’s masterful choreographies and Pawlak’s brilliantly written and spoken commentary. We must remember, however, that they are people with disabilities who are active, mobile and have agency. Do they speak about their own experience of disability when they speak about being trapped on the fourth floor? And to what extent their experience of lockdown coincides with, say, the one in residential care homes, which was extreme and far more extended than lockdown for other citizens?[8]

In conclusion

Some practices related to arts production and reception, now associated with practices resulting from the corporeal, cultural and social experience of disability within disability and crip studies, are rooted in artistic and activist strategies known from the 20th-century avant-garde and counterculture. Nowadays they are increasingly being used within mainstream arts by people with no experience of disability or exclusion. This conjunction of inspirations, revisited tactics and shared creative practices is multi-directional and multi-layered, and it is seen in the work of artists with and without disabilities. It is worth considering the extent to which these practices, and the meanings attached to them, evolve as they are adopted by successive generations and groups of artists. A host of questions arise around horizontal practices and practices pursued from bed. Are they a formal choice outside the received canon or the only mode available to artists, activists and audiences? Are they the product of excess or of scarcity? Are they temporary or chronic? Do they build communal, non-hierarchical relationships?

Pandemic confinement, limited social interaction and a radical cutting off from services and from free access to diverse goods – all of which are part of the daily experience of seniors with limited mobility and people with disabilities and their companions (usually family members, predominantly mothers) – have become an experience shared across the population. The experiences of isolation, scarcity, lack and anxiety about the health of oneself and one's loved ones have become common. This has been accompanied by the amplification of the discourses and practices of care so typical of excluded communities, including the queer community and the community of people with disabilities. Perhaps this temporally commonified experience of trauma, isolation and fear catalyzed the use of similar expressive means and forms of activity. Nevertheless, the capital of experience, action scenarios, inaccessibility-coping mechanisms, mediatized communality and of artistic practices and other forms of artistic creation available to people with disabilities has not been tapped into. The legacy of disability, even if not unprecedented, contains not only projects that are interesting artistically and knowledge-wise but also ready-made scenarios for activism and artistic practice in situations of lack and crisis.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

I would like to thank Sławomir Łotysz, the series editors Katarzyna Ojrzyńska and Monika Kwaśniewska-Mikuła, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments, which helped me to reconsider some aspects of this article.

This article was written thanks to the research project ‘Media and Epidemics (MEDEP): Technologies of Science Communication and Public Health in the 20th and 21st Centuries’, funded by the National Science Centre (project number 2021/03/Y/HS3/00283) as part of the CHANSE ERA-NET programme (project number 101004509).

Niniejsza publikacja została sfinansowana ze środków Wydziału Polonistyki w ramach Programu Strategicznego Inicjatywa Doskonałości w Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim.

This publication was financed by the Faculty of Polish Studies as part of Strategic Programme Excellence Initiative at Jagiellonian University.

A Polish-language version of the article was originally published in *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna* 2024, no. 181/182, DOI: 10.34762/jwks-8f36.

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Footnotes

1. For more on electronic literature, see: https://eliterature.org/.
2. Henri Matisse, who became disabled, worked in bed too, as did Salvador Dali, who, however, had no disability.

3. Activities of this type are, rather dismissively, referred to as slacktivism, that is, political or social engagement manifested through online practices such as commenting, liking, sharing or signing petitions, which, while offering a pleasant sense of agency, is safe and undemanding. It is worth remembering that for people for whom other forms of political engagement are inaccessible due to architectural, communication or mental barriers, online activism may be the only form of activity available. Due to the physical state of some online activists and the way they use electronic equipment, it may not come as easy or effortless to them.
4. Heidi Andrea Rhodes (2023) discusses this in the context of (medical) colonialism.
5. Other authors ‘*writing from bed*’ include Aurora Levins Morales, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Johanna Hedva.
6. The photograph is by Renata Dąbrowska.
7. See *Life on Wheelz, W łóżku z Wojtkiem Sawickim (In Bed with Wojtek Sawicki)*, https://youtu.be/Va0oAlWnRUM?si=Y4Chb4bz2NBxYeNJ&t=34 [accessed: 20 May 2024].
8. This subject is explored in the documentary *Fire Through Dry Grass* (2022), directed by Andres ‘Jay’ Molina and Alexis Neophytides.

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