



A Disabled Artist?

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A Disabled Artist

An empty space.

And intuition.

I'm in that empty space.

And guided by intuition.

Although it often feels like it's precisely the empty space that makes people focus on me.

Me, who by all norms regulations sections of law meaningful and meaningless inner messages in peoples' minds shouldn't be in that empty space.

The empty space.

Focuses its eyes on me, and yet.

I enjoy performing. How mischievous?

How ludicrous?

We need something to guide us. I'm pondering.

What is artistry? What is the artistry inside me?

How do I apply meaning to it? How do others apply meaning to it?

Are we the same or are we different?

Why are so many eyes on me? Why do I either face so many expectations, or no expectations at all?

Disabled, but she doesn't look like one. What does not looking disabled have to do with how expectations are formed?

Disability and artistry, disabled artistry, sacrilege.

I don't like it. Remember, disability isn't an adjective, it's an identity. I don't identify as a disabled artist, only as an artist.

People try to brand me in different ways.

Like look. Look at the disabled artist now doing her disabled art in her disabled way.

But it's not like that, it's definitely not like that.

I only wish

To do things in peace,

to be in that empty space in peace, channelling art from within me and into me, and to focus on my intuition instead of people's looks that demand and question the disabled artist now that she's here, now that she's really here.

When she overcame all obstacles and made it here. Oh how lovely how enormous and what a privilege it is that, with me being here, the celebration of art, the equity of art, the representativeness of art can now tick a box.

After all, we've achieved the goals for equality.

Because here, in a hub of diversity, as a diverse person.

Oh how inclusive oh how lovely is a disabled artist.

And, she made it here and our spaces are safe.

For you, oh disabled artist, although you don't look like how a disabled person is often pictured, but perhaps that's precisely the reason this is even greater.

This is even more interesting.

This will reach an even wider audience.

Oh disabled artist.

How lovely that you're here and in such a fun-loving mood, and we bow to you.

Thank you thank you for being here

so we get to admire your disabled art.



Internalised Ableism

I just composed a piece of improvised poetry. It just came from my brain, and in fact, I wish to improvise this entire text, because that's how I compose my poems anyway, by improvising. Something that comes raw directly from within me, doesn't need to be matured or crafted or revised, but is complete and valuable as it is.

In this essay or text, I wish to stop for a minute to address the expectations a disabled artist faces from others, as well as from internalised ableism, and I refer to my own experiences.

Firstly, as you can see from my poem, I'm particularly interested in the way art made by marginalised groups is perceived. What I mean is that art made by a woman with an immigrant background is not seen as merely art, but always as art made by a woman with an immigrant background. It's always assumed that a trans-person creates art from their own perspective, channelling their process of sex reas-

signment or something else, somehow addressing the diversity of sex and gender in their work.

I often feel that as a disabled artist I'm expected to address disability, that people want me to somehow open the experiences of a person born with disabilities.

'How does it feel when the world has always been like this for you. Have you ever wanted to be free of your disability? Weren't you, Julianna, annoyed with the training wheels on your bicycle? Do your feet hurt? Why does your foot turn inward like that when you walk? Why is your hip twisted? Does it ever untwist? When the physiotherapist used to move you in front of the mirror when you were little, and even though you stood straight as an arrow like the good little schoolgirl you were, why did it feel like you were still twisted in knots.'

And that conflict is interesting, and to tell you the truth, that's what I'd like to talk about, precisely what that conflict is and how to portray

that conflict in art. But why don't I? Why do I rarely create poems about disability? Why do I often create poems about everything else and only implicitly talk about disability?

So, I'm a performance poet. What I find particularly important is my stage presence. I get inspired by the audience, by being on stage, by the microphone, by my trembling hands and trembling voice, by the flow I hear in my voice.

And all that is super important to me. That's why I'm recording this for the first time, I've never recorded at home before, and in some funny way it feels like recording a poetry gig. And actually, that's something I've done a bit.

So, for me, being an artist in fact means out-doing myself. It's not about audience worship or performing for the audience. At the end of the day, I do performance poetry for myself, even though the audience plays a crucial part. And what does that crucial part of the audience have to do with performance poetry and in what way does it tickle my senses?

When I'm on stage, I get very self-conscious. That's when I actually want everybody to look at me. I even crave their attention. It's interesting, because when I was growing up, I was extremely shy and even timid.

But now, I have moments when I crave being watched and listened to, and I crave attention. At the same time, the few steps I take to the stage – and unfortunately the stage is often ornamented by stairs or a platform of some kind that makes it difficult for me – I often get, through proprioception and sensory input, even more aware of the fact that here, right here, walks a disabled artist, and I feel that then my stiff legs stiffen even more, and I think that everyone is looking at me in a funny way like 'Ok, she's got some decent poetry, but why is she walking that way on stage?' Or if a friend helps me up on the stage, I fear the audience is wondering if that's part of the performance.

And at the same time, I'm aware of the fact that probably all this I'm telling you now is at least ninety-seven and a half percent internalised ableism. And what does that have to do

with art? What does it have to do with my art – that's it, that's it. How do I move about on stage, or how I don't move? I feel that the spasticity caused by my congenital cerebral palsy nails me on my spot. There's the mic stand, there's under-160-centimetres-tall me, there's the phone or notebook of poems in one hand. There's the microphone, there's the gaze of the audience, there's me gazing at the audience. There are so many concurrent and simultaneous situations I need to handle, and it's all about art, and it's also all about what kinds of expectations I set for my own performance, how well I can balance all the themes and little bits that go with it.

I often feel like I have two different ways of being an artist, a performance artist working in a space. I feel it's precisely that I get stuck, my movements are spastic, I move in a slow, robotic kind of way, without the cool robot dance swagger. You know what I mean, the disco kind.

At the same time, I've always said that I make clumsiness cute. It's kind of like flirting for me. It's somehow characteristic to me, like a trademark. And I'm proud of it. Then again, I'm very nervous. In a poem, I once wrote that my nervous system is too nervous, and this was in reference to my cerebral palsy.

I feel like if someone would film my performances, and people have, I would always be doing a whisking motion with my hand. I would gesticulate with my hands. Which, in a Finnish context, is undoubtedly somehow interesting or different, but I do gesticulate a lot, and some might see it as lively, which is how I see it. But then I also notice that I would see even that as a type of disability. Like, 'oh, she's nervous. She can't even hold back those nervous ticks.' And then again, so what if I can't?

Because I'm glad of it, maybe it's part of the story. Maybe it's a part of me, and it's a part of me and the performance.

Tokenism

In short, by internalised ableism we mean all those internalised ways in which the usually oppressive society looks at you and which you

yourself have, in a way, accepted as a part of you. For example, as I pointed out, it's very easy for me to see myself through what you might call disability lenses. Because that's the way society looks at me, so as someone with a congenital disability, my childhood has been medicalised through and through.

And all the time there's that painful friction of, okay, being a disabled person in a world of non-disabled people, and as a disabled person facing the expectations of non-disabled people, but also facing the expectations of other disabled people. That's what I find interesting. That's why I talk about how it affects the kind of art I create. Thematically it doesn't affect it all. But actually, when I deconstruct the way I exist in a space, how I create art in a space, into its atom-sized components, as you may have noticed from the text above, I'm sort of processing it subconsciously through my disability lenses.

Now, finally, I'd like to talk about how art created by disabled people is perceived, and how I think there's something toxically tokenistic about it. You may ask, 'what's tokenism?', and I can tell you that I'm not very good at defining things, but for me, tokenism means seemingly promoting, let's say, equality and diversity. Let's include, for example, a person of colour into a work community because it looks good on the outside, it makes good PR and paints a beautiful picture of us as a work community. But the actual, bigger acts of equality and equity are left out. And everything is just a sort of facade.

I often feel that my disability has been decorated by this kind of idea of tokenism.

In my art, I do have to consider whether the reason I'm asked to play a gig is because I'm a bloody good performance poet, or because I'm disabled. Although I have to admit that not an awful lot of people know I'm disabled, because, as I said, I rarely address it in my poetry. Because I just don't find it interesting in that moment, because I don't find it interesting in that moment to create poetry about it, as I've said, in an explicit and visible way.

I often feel like I don't tick the disabled artist box because my art isn't disability art in any way, which is not to say disability art isn't super important. It definitely is. Art is an amazing tool for addressing social issues and fixing them, giving them attention, visibility, and a platform. But. For me, art is important for art's sake. I believe it has value in itself, not as an instrument of politics. So I want to create poetry about everything beside it. I want to create poems about a bird I saw that had a broken wing, about a fox I came across that looked oddly grey. I want to create poems about tree bark peeling off and revealing a red colour underneath, wondering if it could be used to paint something on paper. I want to create poems about how I feel anxious today, how I feel anxious in a good way today, and seeing hare tracks in the snow and wondering if the hare had its young with it.

Maybe the fact that I don't do disability art is somehow surprising to some people. Maybe for me, this is a way to fight the kind of silent tokenism of 'hey, I'm here today, I happen to be disabled, I happen to be an artist, but these layers, these sections and worlds don't overlap today, so I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I still make some bloody terrific art.'

And I'd like to pause here, and I'd like that you, dear reader, would pause here as well. What kind of internalised goals and expectations are you considering when you encounter a disabled person creating art. Do you assume that you have to know that the artist is disabled? Curiosity is normal. I'm a very curious person, too.

Do you assume that they somehow address disability, or embodiment, or ableism, or otherness in their art? And what if they don't? What if you don't find those keywords, what do you expect to find?

And what if it's not like that? How does it make you feel? How does it feel in all your senses? How does it feel inside you? Are you disappointed? Surprised? Do you catch yourself in this point of view, thinking, convincing your-

self that, after all, disabled people often make disability art?

And when you consider all these questions, remember to be kind to yourself. We can't always help our assumptions, but it's important to recognise them, and just as important as re-

cognising the assumptions, it's important to recognise that no one – not with their art, with the content of their art, with the presence of their art, with the identity of their art – owes us anything. ●

Exercises

Exercise 1

Reflect on what you are like in situations where you must present or perform something. What factors most define your actions? Is it your emotional state, audience's attention, the desire to perform, a chance to win, a desire to be part of a group activity, the importance of the matter you are presenting, or something else?

Exercise 2

Reflect on the ways to use movement, voice, and presence in a group activity. Can you find ways to support your confidence and sense of security in a group activity? For example, speaking quietly or loudly, repeating a small movement, physical proximity to other people, or holding an object?

Exercise 3

Write or compose a poem about an issue related to equality and accessibility that is important to you. Alternatively, you can assemble sentences and words from cut-up newspapers. Present it to someone or record it for yourself.