

# un//masking the performing arts

## about my master thesis

Lovis Heuss

Mentored by Irene Vögeli & Pascale Schreibmüller

ZHdK Transdisciplinarity in the Arts, May 2025

### Summary

Masking refers to a social practice of “intentionally, or unintentionally, hiding aspects of yourself to avoid harm in neurotypical environments. Long term masking can lead to neurodivergent burnout and mental health issues.”<sup>1</sup> Not only neurodivergent people<sup>2</sup> put on different masks to go through life<sup>3</sup>, but masking is a vital tool for neurodivergent people to be able to maintain work, school, friendships and partnerships. Nevertheless, I find it important to ask in which moments un//masking can release new resources - energies that are otherwise used for masking. I am interested in un//masking as a counter-movement to conforming to a standardised, ableist society and the associated pressure to perform - values that are often conveyed through masking.

For this master thesis I focused on collecting theories and practices around masking and unmasking, creating a new methodology called un//masking - specifically focused on the performing arts. I then researched practices which performers already use to un//mask their work - from their creation processes through to their performances. The goal of the produced zines is to provide neurodivergent artists with a toolbox, supporting them to implement some un//masking tools into their own practices. The zines are bringing different angles of un//masking into a brimming field of tension. A discursive snapshot, an extrapolating strategy, mapping the arising questions without the expectation of delivering answers – knowing well that discourse will shift and develop further over time. I hope to empower performers to better advocate for their access needs, and to create more discourse around this in//visible disability and the challenges faced in a performance context.

---

<sup>1</sup> Miller, Rees & Pearson (2021)

<sup>2</sup> See *glossary attempt* for terms that are unfamiliar to you.

<sup>3</sup> Anyone diverging from *neuronormativity* can engage in un//masking, however it is important to state that – just like in any other discourse around discrimination – some people (so called *neurominorities*, - with “neurodivergent” acting like an umbrella term similar to “queer”) suffer more from the “costs of masking” than people who diverge less from the hegemonial *neuronormativity*.

## Autoethnographic Positioning

I myself am a neurodivergent, white, nonbinary person. My practice and discourse are based in activism and often happen in queer subcultures, nightlife and collectives. I have a bachelor's in applied science of hospitality & business management, and work a lot in theatre and festival production. I am working with the neurodiversity paradigm, which is based on the social model of disability, and used the methodologies of neuroqueering (Nick Walker) and performing disidentification (José Muñoz). Most of my research was done in the fields of am interested in forms of resistance in relation to social norms. Collective practices, knowledge transfer, community-building and network creation are pillars of my practice.

## Research

- **Artistic Research:** related to un//masking and performance in art theory, psychology, philosophy, as well as queer-, gender- and disability studies.
- autoethnographic practice-research
- **Critical Autoethnographic Practice-Research:** Including many personal and lived experience through my own un//masking practice and regularly facilitating un//masking workshops and many conversations with neurodivergent friends. To establish this focus, I wrote the text from the "I" perspective and added several personal stories or diary entrances.
- **Movement Research:** Exploration of somatics and movement research (such as authentic movement, Butoh, embodiment, somatic stress releases etc.).
- **Un//masking LAB:** a collective research LAB with 8 neuroqueer performers of different performance disciplines (music, dance, theatre, drag) un//masking for 7 days at Gessnerallee Zürich in Spring 2025. We exchanged on experiences, collected artistic examples, and tried different un//masking practices. With a focus on collaborative processes and following disability study's critique on outcome-oriented projects, the LAB did not foresee a specific outcome, performance or sharing of results, but had a focus on having time for exchange. Through this process-oriented approach based on collective decisions, the group was able to try new things and able to embrace failure, which is an essential requirement of disability studies. I digested the LAB experiences in the zine series.

## (Some Of The) Research Questions

- How are un//masking practices in public and performance spheres not only understood as individualized wellbeing techniques, but also forms of social critique and everyday activism?
- How can un//masking be a daily, conscious and activist glitch / error in the System?
- How can we make more room for embodied knowledge in the performing arts? What are best practices disabled artists already use?
- How can “putting on a mask” lead to un//masking?
- How can we make space for the constant negotiation between an individual’s un//masking practice, disability visibility and aspects of collective care? What influence do stage settings have on these tensions?
- Is un//masking a performance an oxymoron? How can un//masking on stage stay subversive and not (only) perceived as an acting achievement?? What is “authenticity” and the “un//masked self” on stage?

## Methodologies

More about the Methodologies 1 - 3 can be found in the zines.

1. **Neuroqueer Disidentification:** Building on the concepts of crippling and queering” (Kafer 2013) and the neurodiversity theory (Singer 1998), neuroqueer is “actively choosing to embody and express one’s neurodivergence (or refusing to suppress one’s embodiment and expression of neurodivergence) in ways that “queer” one’s performance of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, occupation, and/or other aspects of one’s identity.”<sup>4</sup>
2. **Disability as Method:** is creating “modes of considering the disabled body as something to think with rather than to think about”<sup>5</sup>.
3. **Aesthetics of Access:** “describes a practice in the performing arts: accessibility is built into artistic production from the outset and with an artistic claim, rather than being added later. One condition is that disabled artists are involved in the process with their expertise.”<sup>6</sup>
4. **Collaging:** I believe collaging is a very queer and neurodivergent diy practice and therefore supports this project very well. The gathering and scrapping of information, citations, pictures, ideas and sCRIPts to create a new form of representation I did for this project, can be seen as one big collage which has informed how I wrote, designed and produced the zines.

---

<sup>4</sup> Justine E.Egner, 2022

<sup>5</sup> Arseli Dokumacim, 2014

<sup>6</sup> Diversity Arts Culture, 2025

## Deliverables

- **un//masking - a methodology:** I decided to use the term “un//masking” to describe a field of tension of an embodied, polyphonic, multi-layered and constantly developing exploration of actively diverging from neuronormativity, rather than a static, binary medical concept of masking vs. unmasking. Seeing conscious un//masking as daily practice of resistance in the public sphere, and on stage, ties it into the discourse of “neuroqueering”(Walker, 2015), “glitching” (Russel, 2022) and a constant practice of “performing disidentification” (Muñoz, 1999).
- **“un//masking the performing arts” zine series:** Making a zine series spoke to me, because it is a DIY collaging practice, gathering different forms of knowledge. Zines allow space for different styles of writing and I like the possibility to self-publish and share knowledge for free. The zines will be uploaded to the queer zine library - a diy mobile library celebrating radical LGBTQIA+ self-publishing - and can be downloaded for free to print and redistribute. Through splitting the zines into different issues, I was able to use different styles of composing, writing and decorating each zine. As the topic un//masking keeps unfolding for me, I keep finding new angles and interests. Having a zine series took away the pressure of making an exhaustive piece of writing, as I am hoping to produce more issues in the future. In crip authorship Louise Hickman notes: *“Crip authorship is a necessarily incomplete project.”* And so will my zines, as well as my further research on this topic be: No claim to be complete, and no fixed end in sight.
- **un//masking LAB structure:** In 2025 I was able to organise an un//masking LAB at Gessnerallee Zürich. I invited 8 neuroqueer performers and 2 people from Gessnerallee Zürich to discuss what un//masking in the performing arts can look like - on stage and in the creation and promotion process, in collective settings, institutional settings and as a solo performer. The goal was to gather all these ideas and existing practices and - together with my extensive research - create an un//masking zine to share the existing knowledge with other neurodivergent performers. The LAB also aimed to help each of the participants to integrate un//masking more actively into their practice. With the structure created, the un//masking LAB could happen again in another city with different participants - gathering more content and creating further research. I would be very interested to do that.
- **sRIPTs:** are scores or little instructions written by neurodivergent artists to inspire and instruct other neurodivergent artists to crip and un//mask their own work. sCRIPTs are real life examples which help to expand your un//masking toolbox and find your own ways to integrate your disability and access needs more into your artistic work. sCRIPTs can include instructions for the performance itself, or for any stage of the creation process.

# Decisions

## Scope of the research:

- The research is exclusively focusing on un//masking in the performing arts. It see potential in expanding un//masking into other artistic fields too.
- Within the frame of this thesis, I was not interested in the literal connection of masking to masks, the history of masks and its use in the theatre. If someone is interested in researching un//masking in the light of masks, I would be happy to read it.
- I did not have time to further engage in the topics of un//masking emotions and the challenges of un//masking in group settings. I hope to further work, maybe self-publish some more zines on these topics in the future.

## Sources:

- I am not interested in academic approaches to sourcing as they are difficult to process for my dyslexic brain - both to create and to for the reading flow. Therefore I decided to waive dates and page numbers, and did not source each paraphrased sentence. All the sources used have been gathered in an extensive bibliography at the end of Zine #1.
- I decided to still source the names or the authors and the name of the work when I do quotations, as I want people to find the general works and have the chance to read it themselves.
- I did not read all the texts which appear in the bibliography, some are also recommendations. I did read all the texts cited in citations.
- The sourcing might be a bit more inconsistent than usual, which I see as a form of un//masking this thesis.
- 
- While most pictures are sourced, the collages contain original pictures gathered from many different magazines and flyers, which are - as it often is the case in collaging - not sourced

## Un//masking the writing process:

- Because I struggle with academic writing, I decided to write in ways which work best for me. This includes a collage of different writing styles, including lot's of citations and using AI to support me in summarizing theories and texts.
- Next to many of my friends helping me in the process, AJ Venturini was paid to support me in the graphic design, sourcing, formatting and proofreading of this work.

# Credits

## Credits “un//masking the performing arts” zine series:

- Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, MA Transdisciplinarity in the Arts
- Edited and Formatted by: AJ Venturini & Chiara Pasini
- Proofreading support by: Eva Bracey, Tatjana Aebli, Jules Manning

## Credits un//masking LAB

- moinmoin Productions & Sandra Karim
- Noa Winter, Ramona Unterberg, Gessnerallee Technicians
- All the participants of the LAB
- With support from Migros Kulturprozent disframe - the funding and networking project for inclusive cultural practice
- A research project by Lovis Heuss with the support of Gessnerallee. Supported by Stadt Zürich Kultur.

## Further thanks to

- AJ Venturini
- Irene Vögeli
- Pascale Schreibmüller
- Nina Mühlemann
- Tiziana Jäggi
- all the queer and disabled people who came before me, and all the disabled people who passed already.
- Aby Watson
- Angela Alves
- Xan Dye
- The Heart Throb Mob
- My family

Lovis Heuss, 23.05.2025

All Rights Reserved

- 
- *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method* by **Mara Mills & Rebecca Sanchez**. (2021)
  - *Dictionary*, by **Diversity Arts Culture Berlin**. (accessed 11.02.2025).  
[diversity-arts-culture.berlin/en/diversity-arts-culture/dictionary](https://diversity-arts-culture.berlin/en/diversity-arts-culture/dictionary)
  - “Masking Is Life”: *Experiences of masking in autistic and nonautistic adults* by **Melanie Miller, James Rees, & Amy Pearson**. *Autism in Adulthood*. (2021).
  - “The DisabiliTy RighTs CommuniTy was neveR mine”: *neuroqueer Disidentification*. **Justine E. Egner**. (2019) *Gender & Society*, 33-1