

issue # 1

un//masking -  
an introduction

UN//M A S K I N G  
the performing arts

I'm out...





# un//masking the performing arts issue #1:

## un//masking - an introduction

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# HOW

## To Read This Zine




This zine is all about un//masking - the artistic practice of expressing your neurodivergent\* traits. In this zine we share any research, reflections, tools and open questions around neurodivergence, un//masking and disability justice\*.

This zine has been created specifically for and by queer and neurodivergent performers, in order to make the in//visible disability more present on stages. These zines are queer collages of experiences, scores, methodologies, artist examples and tons of citations - presented as bubbly, exciting and confusing as my neurodivergent brain. A space for open, unanswered questions, daring and funny tryouts and a space for crip\* failure.



In the spirit of crippling / glitching / neuroqueering and un//masking the system together.



**Zine setup:** This zine is part of a series. All the base knowledge around un//masking is also extensively discussed in zine #1.

**J**ump around! There is no need to read the zine series or each zine issue from a-z, please give yourself permission to read this zine in whatever way suits you. To make jumping around easier, some theories or thoughts might be partially repeated.

**Glossary Attempt:** To contextualize how I understand the terms I use in the zines, and how they stand in reference to each other, I made a printable glossary-attempt-mind- map for download.



**Un//masking** is a practice and a methodology specifically created for neurodivergent performers, supporting them in making more neurodivergent-friendly choices. The whole zine series is based on researching un//masking for performers and what that could look like on and off stage for different individuals.

**Toolbox:** The zines are set up as a toolbox to collaboratively un//learn different ways of un//masking. The goal is to find ways of integrating them into our stage performances - or discover ways in which we might have already integrated them.

**Transdisciplinary:** Each zine is a toolbox, with practical examples, which are gathered across the performing arts such as theatre, music, art performances, drag performances, comedy shows or literature readings. Each field has different conditions (e.g. performance length, kind of audience, funding structures, scene standards). Not all the tools proposed might fit to your practice, so just take what speaks to you <3



**Who is I?** For most of the texts, I is Lovis, a white, neuroqueer, nonbinary performer, drag artist & DJ from Zurich. A few years ago they started their own un//masking practice: Lovis regularly facilitates un//masking workshops and organised the un//masking research LAB with 10 other neuroqueer performers, which is often cited in these zines. Lovis is a late-diagnosed neurodivergent person, working with a neurodiversity-affirming approach which is an extension of the social model of disabilities. Sometimes I are other people, but in that case you will always find their name cited.

**Reworking:** Feel free to further reuse all the ideas of this zine! If you use sCRIPts, methodologies, text passages or full images, we would love to be referenced

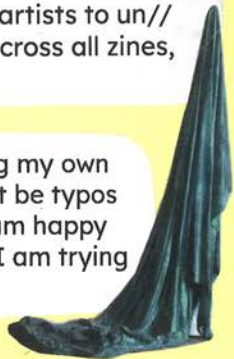


and this is  
the un//masking  
LAB I keep  
banging  
on about  
↪

**Bibliography:** All the bibliography and some further resources from the zines #1 - #4 can be found at the very end of zine #1. 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.

**sCRIPts:** Are little scores / instructions written by different neurodivergent artists to inspire other neurodivergent artists to un//mask their own work. You will find them scattered across all zines, and zine #4 is fully dedicated to sCRIPts.

**Un//masking my writing:** In the spirit of un//masking my own writing and challenging my perfectionism, there might be typos or things I misunderstood at the time of writing, While I am happy about feedback, I hope you are as generous with me, as I am trying to be gentle with myself.



# Glossary Attempt

## A Poster

I really struggled writing a glossary, I felt constricted by the format and nervous to do it wrong. Given that activist language is always in discussion and changes very quickly - as it should - it seems important to explain some terms and contextualise how I understand them.

In order to give my mind-mappy brain an adequate form of expression, please look at the A2 Poster I have created. It will show how the concepts relate to each other.

Nonetheless, a glossary didn't give me enough space to elaborate, so here are some expansions on certain important terms and especially some citation pearls:

### Words in the glossary attempt:

Ableism  
Access  
Aesthetics of Access  
Bodymind  
Crip  
Crip Theory  
Crip Spacetime  
Disability Justice  
Internalized Ableism  
Intersectionality

Masking  
Neurodivergent  
Neurodiverse  
Neurodiversity Movement  
Neurodiversity Paradigm  
Neuroqueer  
Pathology Paradigm  
sCRIPt  
Social Model Of Disability  
Unmasking  
un//masking

# Zine Overview

Masking describes the coping strategy of hiding neurodivergent traits to conform to societal norms, which consumes a lot of energy. Unmasking is the empowering but vulnerable process of shedding those different masks.

Building on these concepts, I propose un//masking as a neuroqueering practice - specifically created to question the tensions and practices of un//masking in the performing arts.

The // represents the constant fluidity and tension between the nonbinary concepts of masking and unmasking.

- First, the zine discusses different terms that are needed for the discussion of un//masking, such as: Neurodivergence, Neurodiverse, the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Masking and Unmasking. This includes some personal stories about the word “normal”, and some expansions on the privileges and dangers of masking and unmasking.
- The zine then moves on to explain what a methodology is and which different methodologies supported the work around un//masking. It further expands on the following methodologies: Performing Disidentification, Neuroqueerness, Disability as Method and Aesthetics of Access. It also gives some artist examples of Disability as Method and Aesthetics of Access.
- The zine then goes on to explain what un//masking is, and coining it as a Methodology. A big step for Lovis! :)

- Next the zine expands on un//masking in the performing arts. This includes reflections on everyday performances in society, the stage as a place to un//mask, and reflections on making neurodivergence more visible on stages.
- Then the zine expands on the apparent contradiction of un//masking and performing on a stage, which was often discussed in the un//masking LAB. It summarizes some of those thoughts, and shares some personal thoughts, research, as well as an AI summary on authenticity.
- The next part reflects on ticcing in a stage setting, and asks how un//masking can be included in a performance, without it feeling like acting or betraying yourself. It touches on Aesthetics of Access to support un//masking on stage.
- Then the zine expands on the disability conundrum, and how both access in general and un//masking specifically always contain inherent contradictions.

# An Introduction

## On Neurodivergence

The term neurodivergent was coined in the year 2000 by Kassiane Asasumas. It's not a psychological term used in medical diagnoses, but rather a political term (similar to queer).

It describes people with reduced or intensified perception of sensory stimuli (visual auditory, smells, ...); different orientation in space and time, and different processing styles. It can also involve various forms of communication that diverge from the norm (e.g. non-verbal or direct communication).

**“Neurodivergent refers to anyone who functions in a way that diverges from dominant societal norms, standards and expectations. If you think differently, learn differently, communicate differently, feel differently, behave differently, process information differently or function differently, you are neurodivergent. It doesn't matter how you came to diverge; it matters that you diverge - and there are so many ways people can diverge.”**

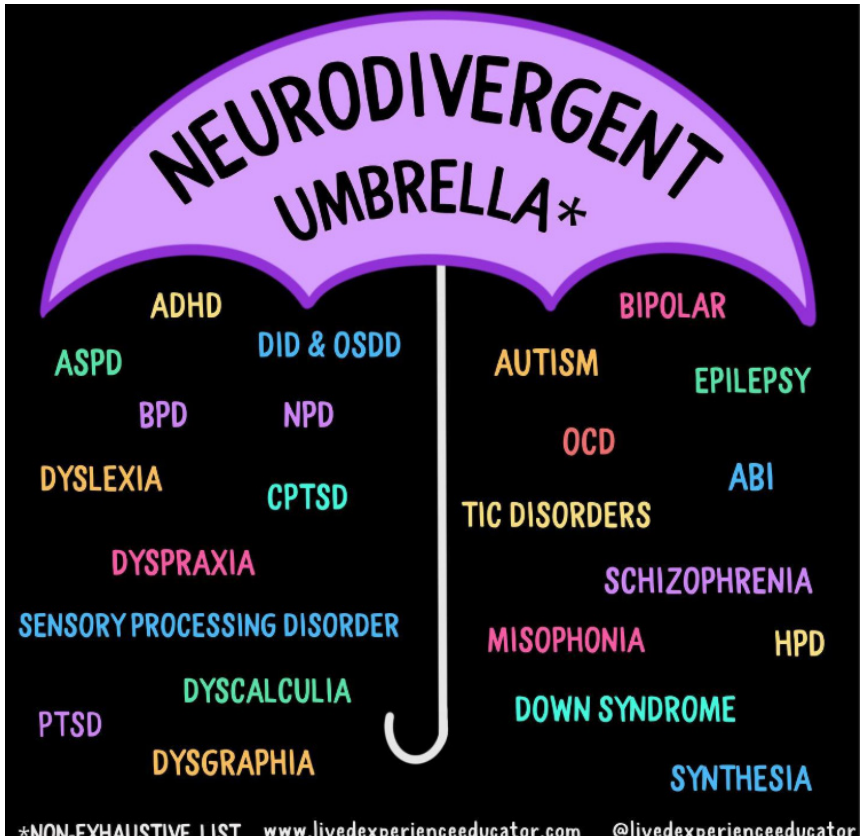
- Sonny Jane Wise on Unmasked by Ellie Middleton

**“Neurodivergence (the state of being neurodivergent) can be largely or entirely genetic and innate, or it can be largely or entirely produced by brain-altering experience, or some combination of the two.”**

- Nick Walker, [neuroqueer.com](http://neuroqueer.com)

““Neurodivergent”, sometimes abbreviated as ND, means having a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal”.”

- Nick Walker, neuroqueer.com



## **“Neurodivergent - not disordered”**

**- Sonny Jane Wise**

Neurodivergence is often associated with reduced or intensified perception of sensory stimuli (visual auditory, smells, ...); orientation in space and time etc. It can involve various forms of communication that diverge from the norm (e.g. non-verbal or direct communication).

**“There is no such thing as a “neurodiverse individual.” The correct term is “neurodivergent individual.” An individual can diverge, but an individual cannot be diverse.”**

**- Sonny Jane Wise**

I like the term neurodivergent because it gives us a term to unite under, a term to fight with, while still not relying on a system of diagnoses.

However, I do see that most people without diagnoses do not identify easily with the term or might feel “not enough”. I hope this will change over time and become more like the term queer, which is used very widely. While we are grappling for language and explanations in a time of identity politics, we should always keep in mind that having clearly defined identities and labels makes us attackable too. So within all this grappling for words and definitions, let’s try to keep the terms fluid, ever changing and adapting. I like the term “error” from Legacy Russel’s Glitch Feminism which can be adapted to neurodivergence too:

**“Decolonizing the binary body requires us to remain in perpetual motion; accidental bodies that, in their error, refuse definition and, as such, defy language. Forcing the failure of words, we become impossible. Impossible, we cannot be named. What is a body without a name? An error.”**

Let’s be lustful errors together!

UCCRE...  
De  
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gg  
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w...  
p...

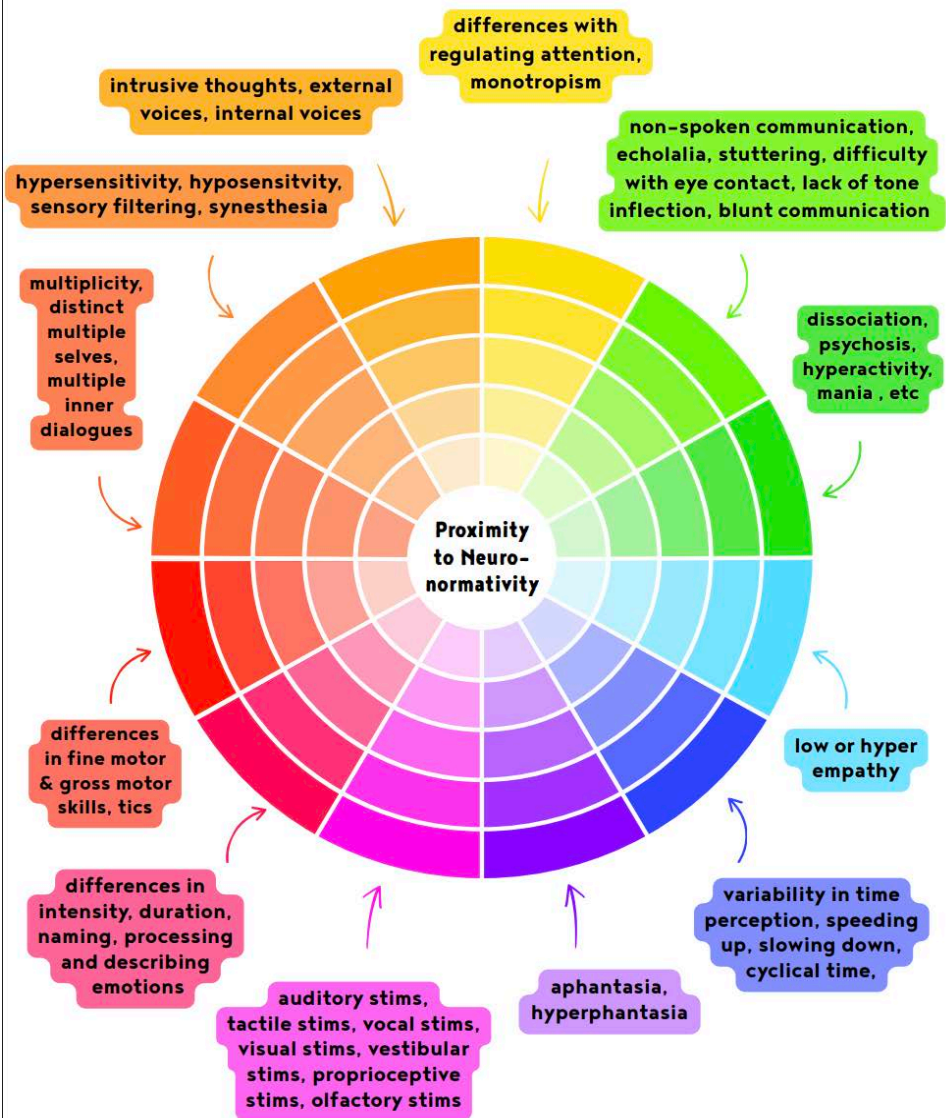
HUMAN? ,  
NEVER  
DEAD  
I.M



idm...  
w...  
p...

idm...  
w...  
p...

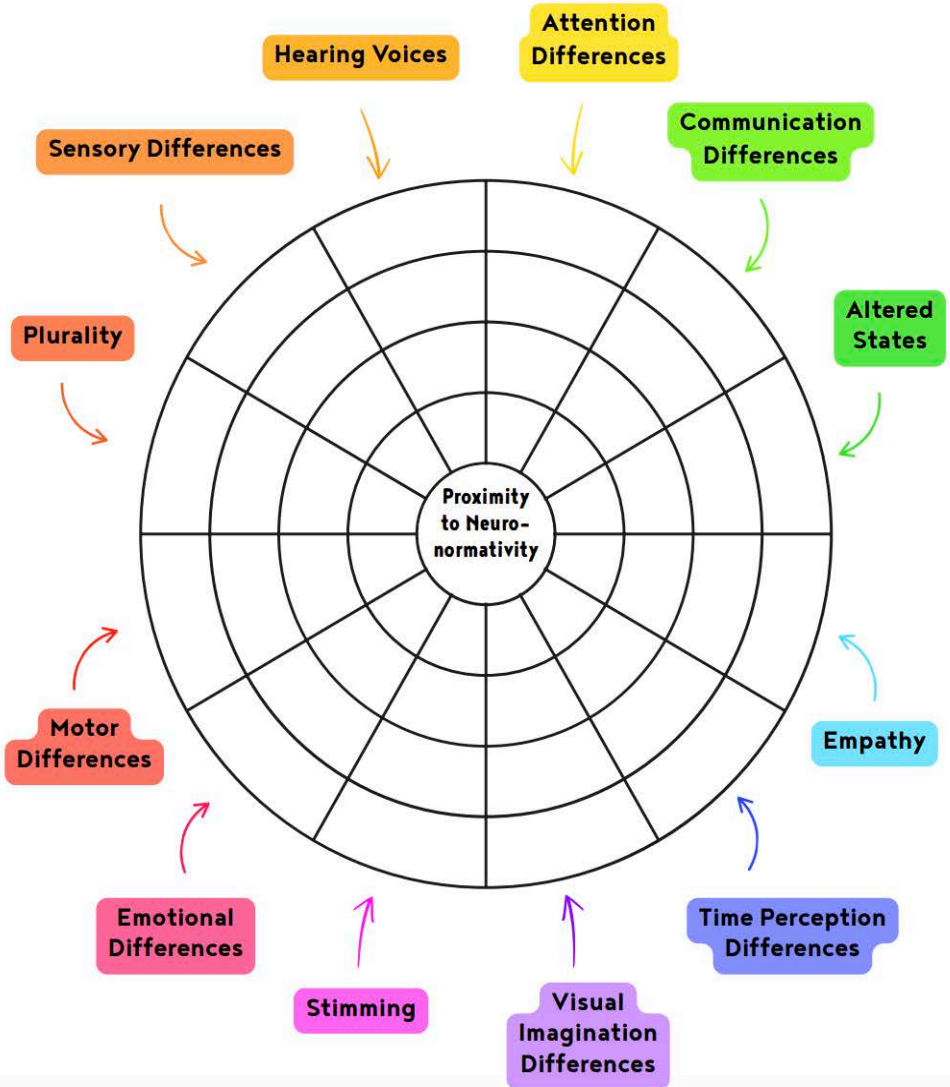
# The Neurodivergent Spectrum Chart



by Sonny Jane [www.livedexperienceeducator.com](http://www.livedexperienceeducator.com)

# Colour In Your Own Neurodivergent Spectrum

If it helps, try and colour in according to the frequency and impact of your differences, altered states and experiences.



by Sonny Jane [www.livedexperienceeducator.com](http://www.livedexperienceeducator.com)

## Neuronormativity & Neurotypicality

Neuronormativity is the idea that neurotypicality, or the typical functioning of the human brain, is the only correct way to think, feel, behave, and communicate. It's a set of social, political, cultural, and personal norms that can lead to marginalisation, discrimination, and exclusion of people who deviate from the neuronorm.

**“All people are assumed to think, socialize, feel, express emotion, process sensory information, and communicate in more or less the same ways.”**

**- Devon Price, Unmasking Autism**

**“Neuronormativity harms neurodivergent people and neurotypical people”**

**- Sonny Jane Wise<sup>1</sup>**

Like heteronormativity, neuronormativity is a hegemonic system that leads to discrimination and exclusion of those who cannot or do not want to behave neuronormatively. All people suffer under neuronormative standards of being, but some suffer more than others. Even if we learn to un/mask individually, society's compulsory able bodied- and able minded-ness will be much harder to change.

**“A neurotypical brain does not exist, there is no one standard brain. However, there are people who function in a way that fits or aligns with neuronormativity. The way they think, learn, and communicate meets the standards of neuronormativity. They aren't disadvantaged by neuronormativity.”**

**- Sonny Jane Wise<sup>2</sup>**

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1 On lived experience advocacy & challenging neuronormativity (youtube)

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvfxcGGRHY>

# On The “Normal”

The word normal has been lingering above me. Around me. Within me. Is it normal to be trans? Is it normal to have anger outbursts? ”Can you please behave normally”? “Normal milk, please”. The normative construct creates an outside, a „not normal“. And therefore discrimination. Dr. Devon Price says in his book “Unlearning Shame”, that the internalisation of societal norms has profound effects on mental health, self-esteem, and well-being.

**“Societies decide which bodyminds are normal or abnormal (disabled) and then create systems and spaces to fit only those deemed normal. This in turn leads to the exclusion, abuse, and violence toward bodyminds who have been labeled as disabled.**

**- Critical Disability Studies Collective UMN**

**“All people are assumed to think, socialize, feel, express emotion, process sensory information, and communicate in more or less the same ways.”**

**- Devon Price, Unmasking Autism**

But I don't want trans and disabled people to be “allowed to be normal too”. Because the concept of normality is very useful to keep up power systems. As long as there is a “normal”, there will be an “abnormal” - someone “on the outside” who is somehow worth less and therefore it's okay to punish or dismiss them. So I don't want to fight for each little group to be normal too, I want to overcome the norms - dissolve them.

**“Brilliant Imperfection resists the pressures of normal and abnormal. It defies the easy splitting of natural from unnatural. It emerges from collective understanding and stubborn survival.”**

**- Eli Clare, Brilliant Imperfection**

# Internalized Neuronormativity

Internalized neuronormativity - derived from internalized ableism - describes internalizing societal norms and expectations that prioritize and validate neurotypical and able-bodied experiences while devaluing or marginalizing those of neurodivergent individuals.

Examples are beliefs that neurotypical functioning is the only “right” or “correct” way to think, feel, behave, and process information.

**“For Walker, internalised neuronormativity is internalised oppression, a phenomenon wherein minority groups unconsciously accept and believe the prejudices and biases forced upon them, thus self-maintaining and reinforcing said systems of oppression.”**

**- Aby Watson, Disordering Dance**

**“What do you think “healing” is? Do you think that it means becoming as close to able-bodied as possible? Do you think it is always sad or terrible to be sick or disabled? Do you think everybody wants to be able-bodied and neurotypical, and would choose it if they could?”**

**- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Care Work, Dreaming Disability Justice**

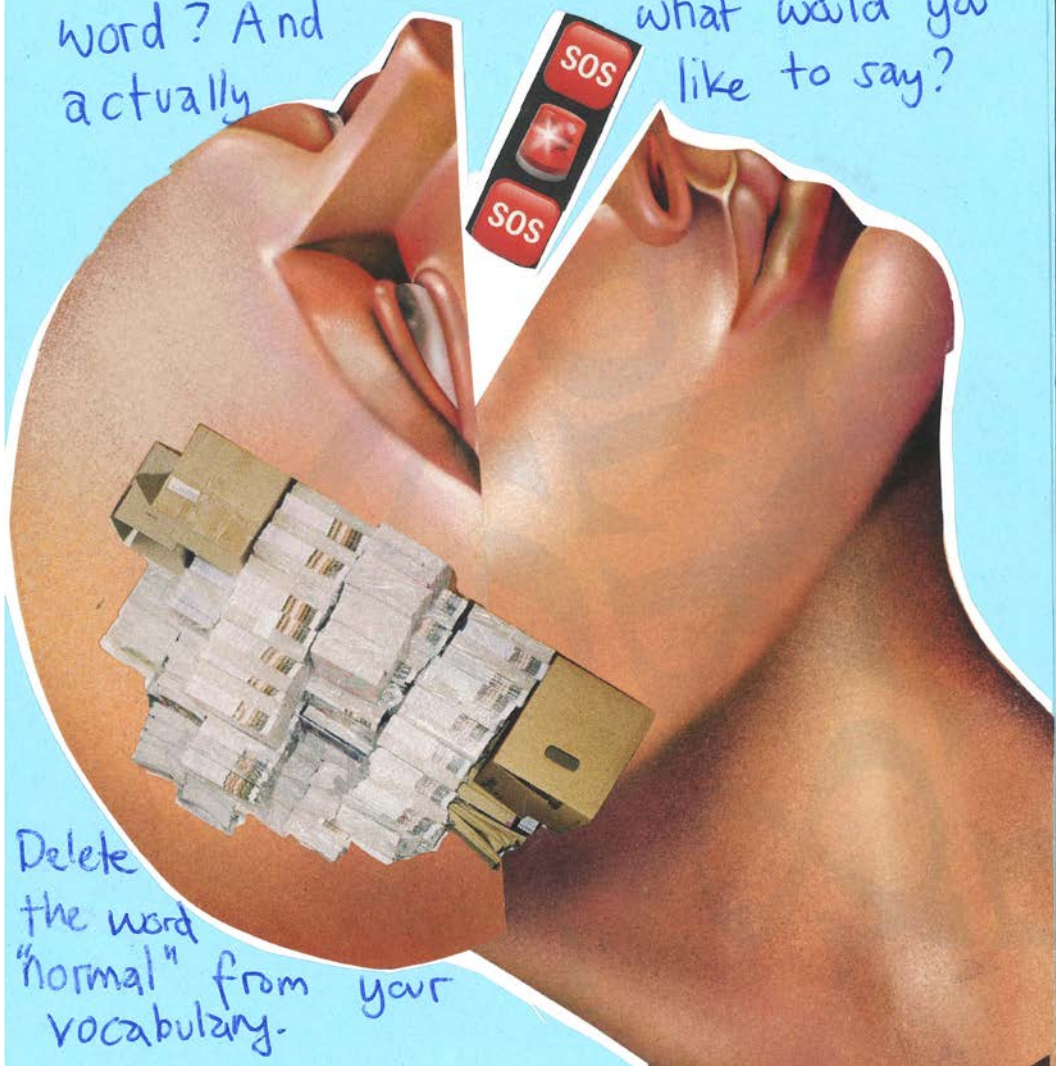




# SCRIPT

challenge your "normal"

note when you use the word "normal"  
which norm do you reinforce by using the  
word? And what would you  
actually like to say?



Delete  
the word  
"normal" from  
your  
vocabulary.

# New Paradigms

Dr. Nick Walker, a longstanding autism scholar & activist can phrase this way better than I can:

**“In terms of discourse, research, and policy, the pathology paradigm asks, “What do we do about the problem of these people not being normal,” whereas the neurodiversity paradigm asks, “What do we do about the problem of these people being oppressed, marginalized, and/or poorly served and poorly accommodated by the prevailing culture?”**

**- Nick Walker, Toward a Neuroqueer Future:  
An Interview with Nick Walker, Nick Walker and  
Dora M. Raymaker**

## Pathology Paradigm

**“The pathology paradigm starts from the assumption that significant divergences from dominant sociocultural norms of cognition and embodiment represent some form of deficit, defect, or pathology. In other words, the pathology paradigm divides the spectrum of human cognitive/embodied performance into “normal” and “other than normal,” with “normal” implicitly privileged as the superior and a desirable state.”**

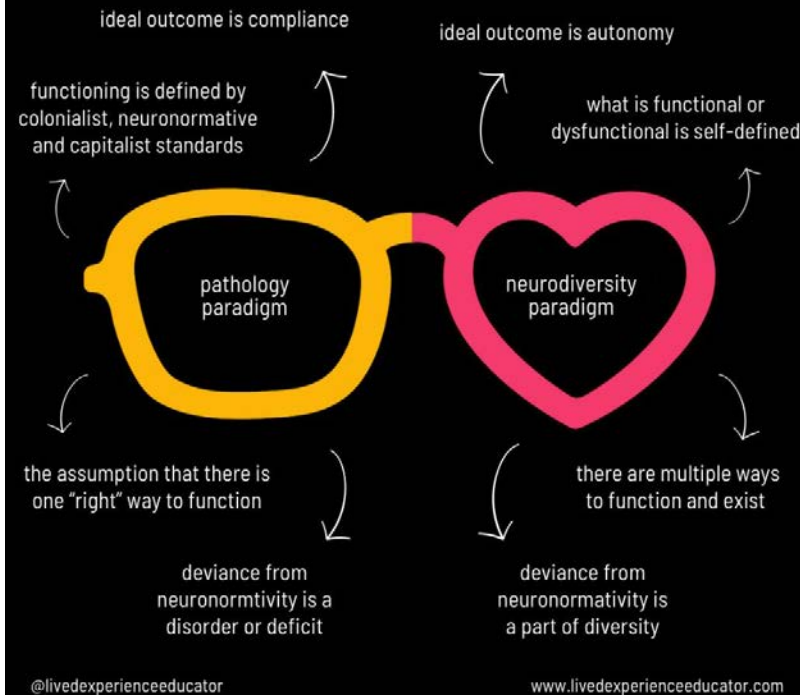
**- Nick Walker, Toward A Neuroqueer Future**

## Neurodiversity Paradigm

“The neurodiversity paradigm starts from the understanding that neurodiversity is an axis of human diversity, like ethnic diversity or diversity of gender and sexual orientation, and is subject to the same sorts of social dynamics as those other forms of diversity—including the dynamics of social power inequalities, privilege, and oppression. From this perspective, the pathologization of neurominorities can be recognized as simply another form of systemic oppression which functions similarly to the oppression of other types of minority groups. When we recognize neurodiversity as a form of human diversity, and recognize the pathology paradigm as a form of systemic oppression like racism or heterosexism, it’s easy to see that the concept of a “normal mind” is just as absurd and innately oppressive as the idea that white people are the default “normal” race or that heterosexuality is the one “normal” sexuality.”

- Nick Walker, *Toward a Neuroqueer Future: An Interview with Nick Walker*

# what prescription are you using?



**“The two paradigms—the pathology paradigm and the neurodiversity paradigm—are as fundamentally incompatible as, say, homophobia and the gay rights movement, or misogyny and feminism.”**

**- Nick Walker, Toward A Neuroqueer Future**

# Neurodiverse & The Neurodiversity Movement

Neurodiversity describes that each person has a different brain. The term acknowledges and celebrates the broad variation in human brain function and behavior. This term includes both neurodivergent people, as well as neurotypical people - describing the existing neurodiversity amongst humanity.

Neurodiversity is a theory and a social movement that embraces and supports all the different people equally in their abilities and how they interact with the world around them. Differences are not considered to be deficits that need to be “fixed”, but just part of diversity.

Attention: an individual cannot be neurodiverse, this term is only used for groups, as it refers to the variety in population, place or group.

# The Neurodiversity Movement

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Principles are inspired by and based on Sin Invalid's 10 Principles of Disability Justice found at [sinsinvalid.org](http://sinsinvalid.org)

### **Leadership By The Neurodivergent Individuals Most Impacted**

The Neurodiversity Movement must be led by neurodivergent individuals but most importantly, it must be led by neurodivergent individuals who experience various systems of oppression.

### **Honouring The Movements That Came Before**

The Neurodiversity Movement can only reach its potential by recognising other social justice movements and aligning itself with prison abolition, disability justice, queer and trans liberation and mad liberation.

### **Access Needs Are A Right**

The Neurodiversity Movement recognises that access needs are human needs and individuals should not have to earn having their needs met.

### **Intersectionality**

We must consider that every neurodivergent person comes with different experiences of privilege and oppression.

### **Anti-Capitalist**

The Neurodiversity Movement needs to be anti-capitalist and actively challenge capitalism especially as neurodivergent individuals' very existence challenges capitalist values and standards.

### **Autonomy For All**

The Neurodiversity Movement needs to acknowledge that neurodivergent people deserve autonomy in how they choose to live their lives as well as autonomy in deciding what is distressing and defying what recovery, success, well-being or functioning means to them.

# WHAT IS MASKING?



# What Is Masking?

Masking is used in different contexts for different fields. In the context of neurodivergence, masking was first introduced by the autistic community as an alternative to the - mostly enforced - ways of learning neuronormative ways of communicating, interpreting emotions and interacting socially.

Neuropsychological and clinical studies document that neurodivergent individuals adopt strategies to compensate and appear neurotypical.

This process, known as masking, means neurodiverse traits are actively suppressed. Examples of masking are widely varied.

**“Most of us have to mask everything from our information processing style, to our lack of coordination, to our limited food preferences, to the fact that we require more rest than neurotypical people are expected to. Masking shapes the fields we work in, how we dress, and carry ourselves.”**

**- Devon Price, Unmasking Autism**

Training autistic people how to behave to more neuronormative standards has a long history in the diagnosis paradigm.

**“Autistic masking is an emerging research area that focuses on understanding the conscious or unconscious suppression of natural autistic responses and adoption of alternatives across a range of domains. It is suggested that masking may relate to negative outcomes for autistic people, including late/missed diagnosis, mental health issues, burnout, and suicidality.**

**This makes it essential to understand what masking is, and why it occurs. In this conceptual analysis, we suggest that masking is an unsurprising response to the deficit narrative and accompanying stigma that has developed around autism.”**

**- Amy Pierson & Kieran Rose, A Conceptual Analysis of Autistic Masking: Understanding the Narrative of Stigma and the Illusion of Choice**

Thinking about unmasking as an alternative practice has been an important step. The book “Unmasking Autism” by Dr. Devon Price from 2022 has been a staple summarizing the current discourse floating around internet forums and social media. Unmasking has since been more widely used in the neurodivergent community, and slowly but surely is also being more researched in the last years.

## **Benefits Of Masking:**

- Better chances to participate in the neurotypical “system” e.g. making it through school, going to university, receiving job opportunities, invitations to social gatherings etc.
- Tool to “get through” something (e.g. finishing a task or learning a new skill)
- Reduction of unwanted attention & likelihood of being targeted for bullying
- Reduces the risk of neurodivergent traits being misinterpreted in public and by law enforcement. This may increase a certain feeling of security and safety.
- Less discrimination and stigmatisation associated with neurodivergent traits in society

However, these adaptive strategies are not without severe psychological and emotional costs.

## Disadvantages Of Masking:

- Unintentionally reinforces neuro-normative standards and culture.
- The social connections that were formed while masking might not be as profound.
- Reinforces the dissociated connection to our bodies & can lead to identity fragmentation.
- Increases the risk of burnout, depression and suicidal tendencies.

Not only neurodivergent people put on masks to adapt socially, but for neurodivergent people, adaptation is a vital tool to be able to maintain work, school, friendships and partnerships. The more one diverges from neuronormativity, the more one needs to mask to integrate themselves, and the more energy it costs to mask. Hence neurodivergent people are more prone to the risks of masking which are mentioned in the research above.

**“Certainly, all people engage in some form of performance in their daily lives. However, the necessity to perform according to values experienced as alien, alongside the often-dire implications of performing unsuccessfully, is accentuated among autistic people.”**

**- Ben Belek, ‘A Smaller Mask’:  
Freedom and Authenticity in Autistic Space**

## Unmasking

The concept of unmasking formed within the autism community to describe the process of shedding the masks that are put up to mask one’s neurodivergent traits, and is now widely used across the neurodivergent community. Since around 2010 it has slowly entered academia and started widely spreading on social media around 2020. Unmasking as an alternative practice to learning to behave as neurotypical as possible, has been an important step in the emancipation of neurodivergent people.

The book “Unmasking Autism” by Dr. Devon Price from 2022 has been a staple summarizing the current discourse floating around internet forums and social media and has influenced my knowledge about unmasking greatly too.

Unmasking has since been more widely used in the neurodivergent community, and slowly but surely is also being more researched in the last years.

Unmasking looks different for each person and can include communicating more openly about one's neurodivergence, less covering up of struggles and overwhelm, asking for more adaptations to your neurotype and embracing the "weirdness" more. Unmasking can be seen as a constant tension of shedding and putting on different masks - a vulnerable, ongoing process that requires a supportive environment. It is proven that unmasking can lead to increased self-acceptance and mental well-being.

Being late-diagnosed often comes with a life full of masking. Research has shown that women or people assigned female at birth have the tendency to mask more, which makes them get diagnosed much later. They argued that masking is a "multifaceted, emotionally and psychologically rooted practice that often emerges subconsciously within a restrictive social context".

This dynamic means that certain groups - for example, neurodivergent women, Black individuals, and physically disabled people - might engage in masking to a greater extent, which can lead to underdiagnosis and, consequently, a delayed or absent access to support and resources.

Unmasking can be seen as a constant tension of shedding and taking back up different masks. It's finding systems and structures that make performing more accessible and sustainable.

## **Masking Is A Privilege**

Within the unmasking discourse, it's important to point out that many neurodivergent people might perceive masking as a privilege, which they struggle to achieve.

Like most things in life, masking neurodivergence is not an either/or proposition. It's not as simple as good or bad, it's not binary. There is a high cost that comes with masking, and there is also a high cost associated with being exposed in this society when not masking.

The cost of masking is significant AND for some people masking may still be considered the safer option or the lesser of two evils.

Unmasking can be seen as a constant tension of shedding and taking back up different masks. Exploring ways to support neurodivergent individuals - whether through policy, education, or therapy - requires acknowledging the multiple roles of masking - both protecting and constraining identity.

## **Un//masking Is A Privilege Too**

While this zine series proposes many different techniques on how to include your disability more proudly, it is important to be very clear: un//masking does make you more vulnerable.

How is deviating from neuronormativity an empowering and political act, and how much does it lead to discrimination? Who is getting more discriminated against when un//masking? How are intersectionality marginalized people (like black, trans, mad or physically disabled neurodivergent People) more punished when un//masking?

As mentioned before being visibly neurodivergent and socially “different” increases the chances of being discriminated against and being bullied. I would still like to learn and write more on the intersectional issues of un//masking as a black or brown person, or the intersection between un//masking and madness. Overall we know that it can oftentimes be helpful to mask your disability.

Especially in institutional settings we have to be very intentional on when and how to un//mask. Let’s be clear that we are not romanticising an “always-un//masked” state. Whether calculated for safety reasons or just to get through institutional experiences - masking is always a valid option.

**“Inauthenticity is not only inevitable, but, according to Dennis Waskul, even desirable at times. inauthenticity, insincerity, or simply the necessity to abandon moral struggles and say “to hell with it!” are common features of everyday life, and even of a good life.”**

**- Vannini & Williams, Authenticity in culture, Self, and Society**

# The Dangers of Neurodivergent Visibility

While I write much about the neurodiverse paradigm we are fighting for, most of the world still is heavily influenced by the pathology paradigm. Especially in the year 2025 with a worldwide shift towards neo-fascism we are heavily reminded of the power ableism and eugenics<sup>3</sup> still holds around the world.

We live in a time where Trump's US government is looking into creating Autism registries<sup>4</sup> and the UK's NHS is planning to test all trans people on ADHD and Autism<sup>5</sup>. And we must fear that this is only the beginning.

Hence being openly and publicly neurodivergent, as well as being diagnosed through the state, can be a threat and each choice concerning un//masking needs to be a conscious decision with the consequences in mind. It's also okay to change your mind over time.

Here's some thoughts on the in//visibility of queerness, which can be adapted to neurodivergence:

**“Due to this visibility, read as a sign of difference, homosexuals, for example, have historically been targeted and thus subjected to social discrimination, medical pathologisation and criminal prosecution. Only that which is made visible can become the object of surveillance. More visibility therefore also means ‘a greater integration into normative identity specifications and parameters of control and discipline’”**

**- Sabine Fuchs, Queerness Between Visibility and Invisibility<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> Eugenics: the idea that some people are smarter, healthier, and better because of their genes. (E. Brooks and M. Bates Introducing Developmental Disability Through a Disability Studies Perspective.

<sup>4</sup> CBS News, 22.04.2025

<sup>5</sup> The Telegraph, 20.03.2025

<sup>6</sup> Translated with deepl.

# Methodologies

I started approaching art through a more theoretical lense four years ago when I started studying “Transdisciplinarity in the Arts”. I wanted to learn more about queer theory and challenge myself to read the complicated texts I always heard about. When I started, I was super intimidated by all the big words I never heard (like methodology,<sup>7</sup> score<sup>8</sup>, or hegemony<sup>9</sup>).

Below are a few theoretical approaches to neurodivergence, disability and queerness which helped me express concepts I could “feel”, but didn’t have the perfect words for. I was so happy when I finally found them and I want to share four key concepts with you: Performing Disidentification, Neuroqueering, Disability as Method and Aesthetics of Access.

## What Is A Methodology?

I needed quite a moment to understand what a methodology is exactly, so here’s an attempt of an explanation of methodologies in relation to the arts:

A methodology is a structured approach or a framework, something like a “how-to” guide often used to describe art practices. It defines the repeatedly used methods and principles which lead to some kind of patterns. While a method is more “outcome” focused and mainly applied without much thought for the framework itself, a methodology is more studied, systematical, and constantly reassessed. A repeatedly used method can develop into a methodology over time. Some methodologies are widely used, while some are very specific to the practice of one artist.

Here are some methodologies that influenced me and emancipated me in my un//masking research and practice:

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<sup>7</sup> See below.

<sup>8</sup> See Issue #4.

<sup>9</sup> A predominance or authority held over others. Can be political, economical, by a state or military. E.g, ableism, scientific truth, the U.S. pop culture and christianity are hegemonies.

# Performing Disidentification

During my studies I always struggled explaining how my Drag both references Pop Culture but simultaneously critiques a lot of power dynamics within it. Therefore I was really happy when I finally found José Esteban Muñoz's disidentification theory, so it was important to me to include it here.

It explains the strategy marginalized performers use to navigate and reshape their identities in a world that often excludes or misrepresents them.

They reject dominant cultural narratives and challenge the status quo by adopting a mix of negotiating, reappropriating, and reinterpreting prevailing norms. Essentially, it's about reading oneself into narratives that weren't initially intended to include you.

1. **Resistance:** Marginalized performers create art that critiques dominant cultures and challenges prevailing norms and stereotypes.
2. **Reclamation:** instead of fully disregarding dominant culture, it takes elements of the mainstream and transforms them, to assert the performers' own identities and reflect their personal and collective experiences.
3. **Hybridization:** Performances can blend many different cultural influences, creating a more nuanced and complex expression. This ultimately produces a new sense of reality which articulates an uncanny truth about dominant culture

# Neuroqueering

## Crippling & Queering

Both *crip* (reclaimed from *cripple*) and *queer* - are originally slurs which turned into self-empowering terms by disabled or LGBT-QIA+ people respectively. They describe people, relationships, and behaviors that exist outside traditional bodymind norms. Robert McRuer explored how *crip* theory critiques the ways in which able-bodiedness is assumed to be the default, much like heteronormativity.

*Crip* theory intersects with *queer* theory, as both challenge societal norms and structures that marginalize certain identities.

Next to being adjectives, they also function as verbs (*cripping* / *queering*) which describe a practice of challenging the status quo and encouraging political resistance.

I was first drawn to the topic of masking because many people assigned female at birth are late diagnosed with ADHD and autism due to extensive masking. As part of my past artistic work on gender and transitioning, I extensively studied binary gender stereotypes and their negative impacts on society. So somehow it's no surprise that gender stereotypes impact fields of disability and neurodivergence as well.

When zooming into the neurodiversity discourse of *crip* theory, I was impressed to see the parallels between in//visible disabilities and my nonbinary trans identity: Both struggle with the importance of visibility, which also comes with considerable danger. And because of these aspects both fields have discourses about "coming out", the liminal space of "not passing" and "internalized" transphobia/ableism. Devon Price - who is transgender himself - compares neurodivergent masking to how queer people are forced into a cisgender heterosexual world:

**"Nobody chooses to be closeted, but they are born in the closet. In the same way, nobody chooses to wear a mask, but is born with a mask."<sup>10</sup>**

I believe it's interesting to work with these parallels, which is why I am very interested in neuroqueering.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/14/1092869514/unmasking-autism-more-inclusive-world>

# Neuroqueering

Nick Walker writes on their website:

**“Neuro-queer (verb): Engaging in practices intended to undo and subvert one’s own cultural conditioning and one’s ingrained habits of neuronormative and heteronormative performance, with the aim of reclaiming one’s capacity to give more full expression to one’s uniquely weird potentials and inclinations.”**

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”** Justine E. Enger adds.

**“Neuroqueering is a project that demonstrates the deconstruction of oppressive able-bodied/ableminded discourses through disidentification... It allows for a contingent, fluid sense of identity (rather than mere celebration of difference) and challenges identity categories that are frequently constructed around neurotypical norms.”**

## **- Justine E.Engner, Neuroqueer Disidentification**

Nick Walker says that those who engage in neuroqueering “delight in subverting definitions, concepts and anything authoritative”. This is why un//masking is such a fascinating neuroqueering practice for me - I see un//masking, just like neuroqueering as a way to go through life.

"The terms queer, crip, neurodivergency, and neuroqueer are used in a variety of ways and are often fluid in their meanings. I use the term queer as an identity -... as a theoretical approach that challenges dominant notions of categorization and identity boundaries (queer theory); and as a verb to signify the act of challenging these categories (to queer.) Similarly, I use the term crip (theory) to describe challenges to binary notions of boundaries between disabled and "normal" identities/bodyminds."

Justine E. Egner

of the Disability Rights Commu-  
nity was NAVE R PAPER!

# Disability As Method

**“Disability is a set of innovative, virtuosic skills”**

**- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha, Dreaming Disability Justice**

Disability is often seen as a label or identity, mainly connected to access questions, hence talking about disability as a “separate category”. In the 2010’s scholars (like Dokumacim, Kim, Friedner and Weingarten) started to think about approaching disability as a methodology. The phrase “disability as method” emerged, which is “considering the disabled body as something to think with rather than to think about”<sup>11</sup>.

Reframing the individual and collective experiences, expertises and the creative approaches to problem-solving of disabled people as a methodology is a great tool to reframe which knowledge is appreciated within academic and artistic fields. Friedner and Weingarten said it “allows us to place disability in conversation with other concepts and worlds”<sup>12</sup>.

Jina B. Kim said that disability itself should be shifted

**“from noun - an identity one can occupy - to verb: a critical methodology”<sup>13</sup>**

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11 Crip Authorship: Disability as Method, Mara Mills, Rebecca Sanchez

12 Crip Authorship: Disability as Method, Mara Mills, Rebecca Sanchez

13 Crip Authorship: Disability as Method, Mara Mills, Rebecca Sanchez

Here's an example of an artist using disability as method in their work:

## JJJJJerome

JJJJJerome Ellis (any pronoun) is a disabled Grenadian-Jamaican-American artist, surfer, and person who stutters. The artist works across music, performance, writing, video, and photography. Concepts that organize the artist's practice include: unknowing, improvisation, fugitivity, illegibility, inheritance, opacity, prayer, gap, contradiction, aporia, eternity, unpredictability, interruption, and silence. Ellis researches relationships among blackness, disabled speech, divinity, nature, sound, and time. The artist's body of work includes: contemplative soundscapes using saxophone, flute, dulcimer, electronics, and vocals; scores for plays and podcasts; albums combining spoken word with ambient and jazz textures; theatrical explorations involving live music and storytelling; and music-video-poems that seek to transfigure archival documents.

**“I have an ongoing practice of spelling my name JJJJJerome Ellis. I do this because the word I stutter on most frequently is my name.”**

Listen to the album “The Clearing” by JJJJJerome Ellis



# Aesthetics Of Access

I loosely summarized and quoted an Article by Noa Winter on Aesthetics of Access<sup>14</sup>.

In comparison to the broader concept “Disability as Method” used in many fields, “Aesthetics of Access,” describes a practice specifically used in the performing arts and goes back to the English “Graeae Theatre Company<sup>15</sup>”.

It refers to various artistic practices from a disabled and deaf/hard of hearing perspective that consider accessibility as part of the creative process. Accessibility resources are part of the concept and rehearsals from the very beginning of the creative process - developed with the same artistic standards as a the stage design or the choreography.

The aim is to offer disabled and deaf/hard of hearing visitors an equally aesthetic theatre experience as the non-disabled, hearing audience. This is an appealing alternative to accessibility programmes that are only developed once a production is (almost) finished (also called “retrospective fitting”).

Aesthetics of access proudly focuses on the beautiful and exciting aesthetics that centering access can create, by forming everything from scenography, text, sound, costumes, choreography, audience position and engagement... Artistic accessibility is just as diverse as the productions themselves.

**Important:** Aesthetics of Access can not be created by exclusively non-disabled, hearing teams, but only under direction of disabled people or in close artistic collaboration with us.

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14 <https://gessnerallee.ch/en/article/aesthetics-of-access-exploring-artistic-accessibility>.

15 Since its official opening in 1980, Graeae Theatre Company has been an international leader and innovator in accessible theatre. “We create radical theatre, placing access at the heart of our work.” ([www.graeae.org](http://www.graeae.org))

## “Nothing about us without us”<sup>16</sup>

Noa Winter describes some examples of Aesthetics of Access as follows:

**Relaxed Performance (RP):** The production deals artistically with the fact that certain theatre-specific conventions, such as sitting still for long periods in a confined space, unannounced strong sensory stimuli or interaction, can represent a barrier, especially for neurodivergent people. Detailed information is provided about the course of the event and the aesthetic means used, and it is possible to leave the room. An inviting, aesthetically designed announcement that this is an RP and what this means is part of the performance.

**Integrated audio description (AD):** The auditory description of the visual level, such as costumes, props and movements, is not broadcast via headphones issued only to blind and visually impaired visitors, but is audible in the room for the entire audience. Instead of the AD having to adapt to the rhythm of the production, it co-determines its dramaturgy. Other elements of blind dramaturgy are often used, such as tactile objects or sound-generating costumes.

**Spoken and sign language(s):** Hearing and deaf/hard of hearing performers use sign language and spoken language(s) on an equal footing. Translation and communication processes are part of the stage action and function without interpreters. An individual aesthetic of language, communication and (non-) understanding is developed for hearing and deaf/hard of hearing audiences.

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<sup>16</sup> “Nothing about us without us”: The slogan “Nothing about us without us” is very old, but can be traced back to the disability rights movement in South Africa, and globally gained traction in the 1990s. It’s a rallying cry for the idea that people with disabilities should have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, rather than being excluded from the process.

Here's an example of a neurodivergent person using aesthetics of access:

## Touretteshero

In 2011, Jess Thom, who lives with Tourette's Syndrome, was asked by the audience and staff during a comedy show to move away, as they grew intolerant of her vocal tics. She agreed to go because she felt humiliated, but as she sat tucked away alone watching the show sound booth, it got her thinking: "Where's the one seat in the house where I'm not going to be asked to leave?" And that's how she started performing comedy and taking the stage herself as Touretteshero. Her live show combines storytelling, stand-up, and puppetry, and every performance is "relaxed"<sup>17</sup>.

Jess' sets are created through ticcing - a method that celebrates the humor and creativity of Tourette's, performing is her way of reclaiming the laughter associated with Tourette's, transforming it into a genuinely funny cultural alternative. It's not about mocking or commiserating—it's about redefining a frequently misunderstood syndrome. "Tourette's isn't funny, but lots of tics<sup>18</sup> are." Thom says.

For her successfully touring show "Backstage in Biscuit Land" she performed alongside Jess Mabel Jones, who helped her keep the show on track so that Thom is able to express exactly what she wants to say.

**"My tics could quite happily ramble off about something for ages, and I think it's important that there's lots of room for that real spontaneous, chaotic stuff,"**  
**Thom says in an interview with The Guardian.**

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<sup>17</sup> Meaning it will be accessible to audiences who can't follow the conventions of traditional theatregoing. More about relaxed performances in Issue #2.

<sup>18</sup> "Tics are chronic (long-term) repetitive and involuntary sounds and movements. It's possible to suppress tics for a while, but eventually they have to be let out. I often tell children this is a bit like how it feels if you try not to blink. Tics usually start in childhood around the age of seven. For some people symptoms disappear as they get older, but for many Tourettes carries on into adulthood. The sounds are called vocal tics and the movements are called motor tics." - Jess Tom, touretteshero.com



② Put the things in your pocket.

③ Take the little

while  
sing /  
something  
else (like speaking  
a text / performing  
a song...)

Feel the little  
things / play with  
them / perform during

that feel

complete  
the little



# The Methodology Of Un//masking

## Un//masking

Based on the methodologies “disability as method” and “aesthetics of access”, I claim that un//masking can be seen as a methodology as well. Shifting from a pathology-based view to embracing the neurodiversity movement, un//masking is a neuroqueer crippling and glitching practice.

un//masking is a methodology which is concentrating mainly on the performing arts<sup>19</sup> which can take many different shapes and forms depending on the field, and the person’s neurodivergence. This includes the act of performance itself, but also everything that comes with performing - including the creation processes, promotion, collaboration, organisation as well as rest after performing.

As masking or unmasking isn’t a simple on/off switch but a continuously negotiated, fluid practice, I use the two backslashes (//) to emphasize its dynamic nature. Both ends of this dynamic spectrum need training - and deciding when and where to un//mask is always a strategic choice each individual has to negotiate for themselves. Therefore these zines are a collection of un//masking tools, practices and ideas which reflect on different practices within the performing arts, and meet different access needs. I call it a toolbox. But these aren’t tools to improve you. They’re an exit from the performance.

I am interested in un//masking as a counter-movement to conforming to a standardised society and the associated ableist, racist, queerphobic and capitalist values - values that are often conveyed through masking. Therefore I think un//masking necessarily needs to be an intersectional practice, constantly questioning different forms of suppression and how they interplay.

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<sup>19</sup> The performing arts: in this context here can mean theatre, art performance, live music, dance, spoken word, comedy, drag etc.

# Critical Self-Reflection

As we begin our un//masking practice, it's essential to stay mindful of power dynamics and to engage in ongoing critical self-reflection. Who amongst all neurodivergent individuals has the opportunity to un//mask? Who feels safe enough to be vulnerable - and who doesn't? Who is able to mask more easily, and for who is masking a huge effort - in which circumstances does this dynamic shift?

This awareness becomes especially important in team settings, where power structures and dynamics can vary widely. Consider factors such as team hierarchies, or those who may struggle to voice their thoughts, and the impact of intersecting marginalizations.

- How can you be un//masked and also care for the room and the people in it?
- How can we make space for several neurodivergent people to un//mask simultaneously, as an act of collective care?
- Who takes care of who when several people un//mask?
- Who gets to un//mask often, who doesn't?
- How does un//masking not reinforce discrimination?

# Un//masking In Performance

I don't like when people take the term masking too literally. I see the visual picture in front of my inner eye, so I understand the connotations. But I struggle with un//masking being taken too literally. Because the mask has always been discussed in dichotomies like depth and surface, authenticity and deception. And I would like to get away from the two-dimensional narrative into an understanding of "many different masks" that we wear at all times, sometimes in thinner or thicker versions, sometimes some masks, sometimes others.

When it comes to performance, I am very interested in asking questions which go beyond the binary and literal idea of masking.

I wondered how "putting on a mask" can support un//masking?

And if un//masking in a stage setting can ever not be an act of performance?

## Performing Every Day

Judith Butler already argued that identity is constructed through repeated actions and performances<sup>20</sup>.

While these zines focus mainly on un//masking the performing arts, my everyday life heavily influences my performances and vice versa.

**"I performed cis drag all my life"**

my dear trans friend Eva says about their gender performance before transitioning. And if you think about it, masking is a continuous act of performance as well. Performers consciously adopt roles, gestures, and expressions, blurring the line between authenticity and artifice. The same can be said about neurodivergent people who mask.

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) - no, I never managed to read this extremely complicated book. I learnt about it at university and read several short summaries of it.

**“Away from the neuronormative gaze, I realised I have been unconsciously masking all my life. I grew aware of the extent to which I perform in everyday life; how I externally shape myself by motivation to meet the expectations of others.”**

**- Aby Watson, Disordering Dance**

## Making Nonvisible Disabilities Visible

**“Pride pairs joy with a determination to be visible”  
- Eli Calire, Exile and Pride**

Looking at the long established and still prevailing norms in the different performing arts, they often seem to be excluding neurodivergent needs - maybe are even designed to keep the performers' as well as the audience's neurodivergence masked.

Socially, neurodivergence is often invisibly constructed.



© Ellen Murray / Social Media: @ellenfromnowon

**“In ableist, mainstream performance spaces, access is mostly only ever considered - maybe - when audience members are concerned. In my experience, most theatre managers and staff never imagine that performers, directors, light and sound techs, stage managers, and volunteers could be disabled.”**

**- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Care Work - Dreaming Disability Justice**

Mirjam Kreuser writes in her book “Crip-Queere Körper”<sup>21</sup> that the theatre is a room where compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness are pre-constructed through the constant repetition of normative actions.

Based on Sara Ahmed’s “straightening devices” theory, Mirjam Kreuser says that the view of the audience is “straightening” anything they see. This entails that neurodivergent performers are often read through a neurotypical lens, which “straightens” them closer to neurotypicality.

**“Crippling and queering offer subversion through practices that reveal the construction of all identities and thus expose the norms of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness as constructed coercion.”**

**- Mirjam Kreuser, Crip-Queere Körper**

Thus, performers need some kind of “coming out” to re-establish their crip and queer performance in the room and amongst the audience. For the case of un//masking, If we look at this theory through the lens of un//masking, this means that neurodivergent people are not seen as neurodivergent by most spaces and audiences, unless they have an active practice to work against this like crippling and queering - or in this case un//masking.

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21 Crip-Queer Bodies

**“The act of un/masking has the power to simultaneously hide and reveal. It destabilizes supposedly fixed identities and blurs the lines between the self and the other, the visible and the invisible.”**

**- A. Baccanti, F. Link, J. Spangenberg & A. Stichnoth, Un/Masking , Reflections on a Transformative Process**

Even within crip and queer spaces I feel like neurodivergence is often forgotten and there is still a strong need for neurodivergent visibility, role models and communities. Therefore I believe actively and visibly diverging from neuronormative ways of performing is still a very important and political act.

Being un//masked not only when performing on stage, but also throughout the processes of creating, practicing, venue coordination and promotion.

**“Being visibly neurodivergent is an act of advocacy because it normalises and validates neurodivergent traits. Hiding or suppressing our neurodivergent traits perpetuates the idea that conforming to neuronormative ways of moving, speaking, and processing information is the only acceptable way to exist in the world.”**

**- Devon Price, Unmasking Autism**

# The Stage As A Chance To Un//mask

“I see performance as a form of un//masking because I can take space, be loud... on stage it's welcome to be weird.”

- Tallboy



Tallboy photographed by @glossygritty

When we started to dissect stage un//masking in the LAB, we often circled back to the feeling of power and control a performance can give.

A performer is vulnerable, but also enjoys a different status than the audience. Mostly, the performer is seen, perceived and heard. And artists enjoy a major decision power, a kind of control over what happens next, but also how the room is decorated and how loud the music is. In that sense, the stage can be a kind of protection.

**“I often tell a story about Patty Berne, the cofounder and Haitian Japanese fellow powerchair-using disabled badass artist and organiser of Sins Invalid. I once asked her why she had chosen to use performance art as her primary way to advance disability justice. Why not just do a workshop? She paused and said, “You know, I could do workshops until I was blue in the face, trying to convince white disabled people or able-bodied people of color to care about us. And I’ve done that. Or I could make a three-minute piece of performance art that shows them the inside of their dreams and nightmares and fuck their shit up. I chose that route.”**

**- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Care Work - Dreaming Disability Justice**

The adrenaline high, and the freedom to be loud, wild and weird - things that are much more socially accepted on a stage than they are in the streets - support being un//masked in stage.

**“Bodies that are disorientated in everyday life can re-orientate themselves on stage by means of the practices of crippling and queering. This reorientation does not mean a restabilization after a transgressive phase, but rather the enjoyment of maintaining instability and not moving away from it towards a new stable status quo. While the unpassing is risky and frightening in everyday life, it can be tried out in the theatre. The theatre offers a safe place to try out transgressive practices. It is therefore a safe(r) space that can, however, always remain limited by intersections that are reflected in the institution, audience structure and cast of performers.”**

**- Mirjam Kreuser, Crip-Queere Köprer**

# Un//masking Performance: An Oxymoron?

When we talked about the performance of un//masking practices like stimming, one of the LAB participants asked:

**“But stimming in front of an audience, isn’t that acting as well? Stimming comes from an internal place. So wouldn’t performing a stim just be a choreography of the stims, rather than actually stimming?”**

## **Some open questions from the LAB:**

- If stimming is dancing, how can we make it repeatable?
- Can un//masking be recreated in front of an audience, without losing its authenticity?
- Are un//masking and performance a contradiction - an oxymoron?
- What is “authenticity” and the “un//masked self” on stage?
- How can un//masking on stage stay a subversive practice and not fall into a good “acting achievement”?
- And didn’t I mention before that everything in life is a performance? So isn’t un//masking a performance too?

# On Un//masking And Authenticity

The word “authenticity” often showed up when I did my research around un//masking. Authors, researchers and activists alike kept talking about un//masking and the “authentic self”, the “authentic truth” and so on.

Rose et al wrote in their research amongst autistic teenagers:

**“Masking and authenticity seemed to be two potential (but not necessarily mutually exclusive) responses to being autistic in a mostly neurotypical world.”**

Reading all the research I kept asking myself: “yeah but what **IS** authentic? How do I know what’s “the authentic me”? I find authenticity very complex, and only had time to do a surface research on this very interesting, deeply philosophical topic.

**“Authenticity may be seen as some sort of ideal, highly valued and sought by individuals and groups as part of the process of becoming.”**

**- Phillip Vannini and J. Patrick Williams, Authenticity in culture, Self, and Society**

We kept circling around the word authenticity in the LAB, trying to avoid it.

Researching more on authenticity after the LAB I came across the “paradox of performative authenticity”. AI summarized it for me as follows:

“Describes the tension between being authentic and showing authenticity”.

# The Paradox Of Performative Authenticity

Here's how this becomes paradoxical:

1. **The Act of Proving Authenticity Contradicts Itself:** Authenticity is often seen as being “true to oneself” or effortless”. However, as soon as someone (or an entity like a brand) makes a conscious effort to demonstrate their authenticity, it introduces an element of performance, which inherently feels less genuine. For example: claiming “I’m just being real!” might come across overly curated or insincere, undermining the very authenticity that is trying to be conveyed.
2. **External Validation vs. Internal Truth:** Authenticity is deeply personal, but when people (or organizations) strive to appear authentic, they often cater to external expectations of what “authentic” looks like. This can lead to a form of conformity, where people adjust their behavior to gain approval, ironically moving away from their core self or values.
3. **Social Media and the “Curated Realness” Trend:** Social media amplifies this paradox: Platforms encourage users to present their “true selves,” but the process of selecting, editing, and posting content is inherently performative. For instance, influencers might share “authentic” moments of vulnerability, but those moments are often carefully chosen and packaged for maximum engagement. This creates a tension between authenticity and the performative nature of the medium.
4. **Cultural and Commercial Pressures:** In some cases, cultural or market demands push people to commodify authenticity. For example: an institution might emphasize its commitment to sustainability or local roots to appeal to audiences. While these values might be genuine, the deliberate emphasis on showcasing them for profit or success can feel calculated, which can dilute the perceived authenticity.
5. **Self-Awareness Complicates Authenticity:** The very act of reflecting on “Am I being authentic?” can make someone overly self-conscious and result in behaviors that feel forced. True authenticity is often spontaneous and unselfconscious, but the desire to ensure it can ironically lead to overthinking and performative actions.”

Just like “authenticity”, I also really struggle with the word “natural”, which is often used by transphobic people to argue that trans people are not “real” or “natural”. And of course this topic also has been widely discussed in disability studies. But the “natural” discourse isn’t for today.

All I wanted to point out is that over the years I have become more careful to speak about facts as “natural”, about “inner truths” and about the “authentic self”. Maybe some things seem like a “truth” to me right now, but with a changing environment and society, they might not be true for a future me or are not true for someone growing up in a different cultural context, with a different marginalization or in a different time. I still move forward with my “best knowledge and conscience” as we say in German - I try to stay connected with my body and find things that feel right. This shall not hold me back from taking long-term decisions that feel empowering to me. But I am also deeply rooted in the knowledge that everything is fluid and what feels right today, might not be true tomorrow when contexts have changed - another disability conundrum I learn to live with.

While I can’t make conclusions about these questions on authenticity with final answers, I believe it’s important to keep this sentence in mind that AI spit out on self-awareness and authenticity:

**“True authenticity is often spontaneous and unself-conscious, but the desire to ensure it can ironically lead to overthinking and performative actions.”**

**- Co-Pilot (AI)**

FUCK

AUTHENTICITY  
I KNOW WANT

— I JUST

TO BE

MYSELF

An un//masking LAB participant brought it up as follows:

**“I think there is a fine line between authenticity and un//masking. I believe when it comes to masking or unmasking, it’s almost the word authenticity - especially how it’s used in the English language - is so ambiguous, in a way it can’t apply. Somehow it seems and feels un//masking is a lot more literal than authenticity, especially because authenticity comes with an expectation that there is a “real” version, as opposed to the fact that we are always real, in every moment we are moving and being and existing. And I feel like from my experience in the un//masking LAB it was a good time to question what “being real” and “moving authentically” actually means. That’s why the word is so tricky. When you think of un//masking as opposed to authenticity you think of removing the layers, whereas authenticity is always already choosing something...  
Am I making sense? (laughs).”**

**- New Kyd**

## **On Ticcing and Involuntary Sounds**

**“My un//masking feels like a game of hide and seek. Where my tic likes to hide - but space seeks it.”**

**- New Kyd**

New Kyd is a Zurich-based inter(-disciplinary) movement artist, DJ, and producer whose work traverses dance, sound, and visual media to explore identity, survival, and diasporic existence. As a performer at the Schauspielhaus Zürich Dance Ensemble (2021 - 2024), they performed with Trajal Harrell on The Köln Concert, The Romeo and many more.

As a person with a tic making involuntary sounds, understanding when and how these tics come up on stage, when and how they can be suppressed, and finding ways to incorporate them into the performance have been topics for New Kyd for many years.

**“I would say for me ticcing is a sign that I am present, but in a deeper way, rather than when I am maybe surprised by my tic in public. As someone who had to perform in many many stages around the world, In a way the stage and the rehearsal space are another home. And therefore a place where I am now able to become comfortable to tic as a form of un//masking. Then when it comes to choreography, the more comfortable I am in it, the more I am able to see whether I tic or not.”**

**- New Kyd**

In the LAB we discussed ticcing as an aesthetic form. Something that can be incorporated into the soundscape of the piece. Sometimes the un//masking of the tic might become a performance element. The tics can be elongated into an aesthetic element. Maybe the unpredictability of the tic, is what makes it un//masking rather than a stylized and plannable performance element?

**“When it comes to stage and choreography it’s tricky because when I am given choreography - when I perform choreography, there is a process where, because I am so focused on the choreography, I don’t end up ticcing - which for me is a way of un//masking. When I perform it’s almost like my focus is so preoccupied with a performance. However, with enough time, patience and openness for the process on stage, especially in the terms of having either silence or stillness, that’s when my ticcing happens.”**

**- New Kyd**

There is a fine line though between celebrating an un//masked tic, and performing it. How can you feel perceived and seen doing an involuntary movement of ticcing? And when does un//masking the tics turn into self exploitation?

The performer JJJJJerome, mentioned earlier in this zine, is known for his stutters. When we watched an interview with him, New Kyd mentioned: “See, he didn’t really stutter in the interview. I felt like he was kind of expected to do so.” New Kyd shared how they sometimes feel when there is an expectation for them to tic and they do it, it sometimes feels like betraying yourself. So not ticcing is sometimes a way of protecting yourself from the expectations of a neurotypical audience too.

**“Ticcing for me is a personal and a vulnerable thing, therefore I don’t like to feel like I am just “giving it to anyone”, allowing just anyone to experience this vulnerability.”**

**- New Kyd**

Earlier that day we had talked about something “performed” versus something “choreographed”. And that choreography can also be a shield of protection. New Kyd had reflected:

**“Choreography is a mask too - dancers tend to hide behind choreography”.**

So in this case, maybe choreographing a piece that leaves space for ticcing, but does not require ticcing as an essential element is a form of un//masking, which still keeps a kind of mask in place to protect the performer.

**“With un//masking, I create the frame and I make the decision through the choreography...”**

**- New Kyd**

## A Structure To Un//mask In

Xan Dye's movement piece on stimming is called "I am rooted but I flow", which somehow has a similar basic concept inherent: there is space for Xan and their neurodivergence - the flow - but it's also rooted in a specific frame which allows them to un//mask. In their case it's that the audience knows what they are coming to watch, and that they are giving themselves permission to enter a state that is not a "grand" performance, but really stick with being rooted in the flow state.

When we circle back to Tallboy, the Drag King who can un//mask on stage by being loud and wild, we can see that there is a similar structure inherent. Curating a space to be un//masked in a clear frame.

For each field of the performing arts, and for each individual artist un//masking probably looks different. Un//masking reflects the interplay of societal pressures and individual agency. It's something that is unpredictable and might look different from day to day.

So what seems to be important in a performance setting, is the empowerment to allow the neurodivergence to enter the stage, while the neurodivergent performer has the freedom to see when un//masking is coming up (and when it doesn't). Performers hence need the full power and control over the situation. And this frame needs to be clear to the audience.

In the LAB, we ended up talking more about the different kinds of performances - and the audience expectations that come with it. Maybe it's more about letting the audience know what they are coming to see. Calling something a live "movement research" leaves much more room for un//masking, than calling something a choreographic dance piece - something that is "re-performed" in the same way again and again. However, I believe that over time and with practice, the dance piece needs to become un//masked too.



## Creating Art That Invites Un//masking

Using aesthetics of access to create pieces that embrace neurodivergent expressions as part of the creative process can invite un//masking.

Some examples of neurodivergent aesthetics of access<sup>22</sup>:

- Show “current states” of a work rather than a “final piece”, allowing for changes as you go.
- Integrate pockets for free improvisation into the piece; this could even just be a little moment to say a few words about how you are, or a little improvised movement scene.
- Create modular pieces or scenes which are adaptable to your daily state by having different lengths or different energy modes.
- Include stimming objects, soundscapes that encourage and support involuntary sounds, or soothing movements into the aesthetics of the performance.
- Set up structures that can support spontaneous un//masking, and work with teammates that encourage that.

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<sup>22</sup> This is just a short overview, I will talk extensively about un//masking practices in Issue #2, #3 and #4.

# Un//masking: A Disability Conundrum

What if my un//masking leads to difficulties for other people's access needs? Well that's where the disability conundrum comes in.

Mia Mingus' term "access intimacy" acknowledges that accessibility is a complex and nuanced issue, and that true access may require a degree of personalization and collaboration that is not always possible for everyone simultaneously. Some access needs stand in direct contrast to each other.

The bright lights in buses, which are making the busride more accessible for visually impaired people and single women, is really hard for me, a light sensitive neurodivergent person.

Someone's need to fidget with their hands might distract me when I try to concentrate. But it's about sitting with this conundrum - and still keep trying. It's about dissolving the neuronormative power structures of which needs are more respected and protected.

**Finding balance between my needs & the needs of the room - a constant discourse, an ever ongoing conundrum.**

**"Do I contradict myself?  
Very well, then I contradict myself.  
(I am large, I contain multitudes)."  
- Legacy Russel , Glitch Feminism**

One good example of an un//masking conundrum could be the question of lateness mentioned before.

While lot's of neurodivergent people struggle with punctuality - something that can be un//masked by being more flexible with time, there are some people with limited energy or time to be flexible.

This is why having a transparent exchange on eye level about each person's access needs is important.

**“If you need people to be punctual to meetings then this would be a good place to say that. For example: “please be as punctual as possible for meetings, I have limited energy and any delays decrease the amount of time we can spend working together / I have to travel with care assistants so delays are very costly for me / I have to book accessible transport in advance so I will have to leave punctually even if the meeting starts late.”**

**- Romy Walden, Access Rider, What is an Access Document?**

# “Failure” to Un//mask

And even if you try to un//mask, you might sometimes fail to do so.

We can easily fall back into old patterns or lack energy to deal with the societal “shame” that comes with being un//masked. So let’s be very clear here: you can’t fail un//masking. Because the right amount of masking and unmasking is changing person by person, moment by moment.

Un//masking is a continuous practice and a methodology that is designed to fit you. The two backslashes (//) remind us that sometimes this might also be a conscious \_\_//masking practice.

So it starts every day anew - by asking yourself:

**How can I best accommodate myself  
right now?**

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# INSTA ACCOUNT RECS:



- @ a\_different\_spectrum
- @ businesscrip
- @ criptonite insta
- @ disorderingdance
- @ divergent\_design\_studio
- @ doing.neuroqueerness
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- @ livedexperienceducator
- @ neurodivergent\_insights
- @ neurodivergent\_lou
- @ neurodivers
- @ the\_mini\_adhd\_coach

# This is it for now...

## Thank you for reading!

The next issue “un//masking the performing arts - un//maing in practice” will include the following topics:

- un//masking as a somatic practice
- Stimming
- Audiences
- Relaxed Performance
- Facilitating
- un//masking LAB experiences

If you are interested in providing a sCRIPt, collaborating on a zine or project, or organising an un//masking workshop or LAB in your city, or any other wild ideas, please get in touch under:

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I'm

late...