



Mentee: Marie Alexis

Coach: Annie Hanauer

#### Introduction:

This project was set up as an exchange of experience and research between two practicing neurodivergent/disabled dance artists, focusing on choreographic process as well as accessible/inclusive methodologies. We stationed ourselves at the nexus of choreographic research, inclusive dance practice, and advocacy. Over the course of the year we met regularly online, and twice in person to see each other's work in Zurich—Annie attending one of Marie's final rehearsals of *ERROR 508* and Marie coming to Annie's performance of *A space for all our tomorrows*.

After a fruitful year of exchange and discovery, we decided the best way to articulate our findings was to send each other several interview questions, summing up how each of our artistic practices were affected by this year of exchange.

#### Annie's questions to Marie

Annie:

- 1) What excites you about the artistic potential of your inclusive work methods, or methods we have discussed & explored together?
- 2) Has your approach/thinking about inclusivity & access in relation to your own work evolved or changed over the year? And how?

Marie:

What I find the most exciting is the idea of not splitting advocacy and artistic work into two separate fields, which was my approach at first. Through our exchange, I realised that everything about my work - from the topics I chose to the aesthetics that appeal to me personally - is already an expression of neurodivergent perspective and experience of the world. The realisation that these perspectives can be communicated and also used as such opened up a multitude of new possibilities



already, first of all the chance to offer an audience a glimpse of what it can mean to perceive the world through autistic senses.

The fact that it did not come to my mind before also „excites“ me in an analytical/intellectual way of understanding more how neuronormative pressure has been affecting me: it made me realise I did not trust that my (authentic) artistic voice as it is has any relevance. This has changed dramatically, in the best of ways.

### 3) What aspect of accessible working are you curious to delve deeper into in the future?

Some of the projects sketched out as a result of our exchange are built around the intention to create artistic works and spaces where people can not only learn about neurodiversity but experience neurodivergent perspectives through their own senses. Among other ideas, our exchange culminated in the sketching of a four years project that has been submitted for the „Konzeptförderung“ long time funding format of the City of Zurich. It is an ambitious and risky endeavour as there is no guarantee that it will work. But I am very excited to try and looking forward to research tools and formats to reach that goal at least to some extent.

### 4) Did anything unexpected or new emerge over the course of this year?

Unexpected and new for me was the understanding that sometimes, inclusion of one group means exclusion of another - and that it is not always helpful to try to do right by everyone. Reflection, contextualisation and critical self-analysis are crucial, though!

### 5) You have already created a lot of your own bespoke accessible working methods coming from your perspective as an artist & your collaborators--What wisdom within those methods do you think is valuable for the wider dance world / society?

Part of the methods I developed and am still developing question the mostly unquestioned fundamentals of what „work“ means and how



human beings are to be involved in „work“. Even though in the field of the arts we tend to be more „human“ than in many other fields (like expression of emotions during work and separation between the „work persona“ and the „private self“), rarely I saw the basic structures put in question. It is somehow still common to work 8 hours a day, 5 days a week (or more). I had already started shortening the days for my company and am now starting to shorten the weeks to 4 days, too - while staying at the pay level of full-time work. Additionally, we put a lot of attention to the building of a safe space for all group members and started implementing Non-Violent Communication as a tool in our collaboration processes.

The more I develop and reflect these tools, the more I come to realize that traditional working structures are not only deeply ableistic but also are deeply rooted in capitalism. Both ableism and capitalism are strongly connected anyway... Thus, the methods that I, as a neurodivergent individual, need to apply to be able to work at all are also a proposition for all other human beings to make life a bit kinder and healthier. This is true for so many accessibility needs of neurodivergent people: open and clear communication, spaces with reduced sensory input, more resting and digesting time - these are only some needs that are vital to us but also could be an improvement for everyone.

And last but not least: neurodivergent perspectives are atypical (and still underrepresented). By creating art that grows out of these perspectives and enabling others to experience them not only creates visibility and understanding for neurodiversity itself but also for diversity in general: for the fact that we may all have different abilities, experiences, backgrounds, views and needs - and that we are all human and equally valid. Exposure to experiences that are different from ours can substantially contribute to embracing those differences - which is valuable (and critical) for the world both inside and outside of dance and arts.



Marie's questions to Annie

Marie:

1) Which aspects of inclusive/accessive work and working methods specifically regarding neurodiversity did you discover during our time together? Are any of them relevant for your own work?

I was really inspired by what you have created in your own rehearsal process to support both yourself as choreographer and your neurodiverse team. Your use of the Nonviolent Communication method, daily checking in & out, and how you shape rehearsal hours has all been crafted with such care.

Before I met you I also had never had someone describe to me their experience of autism. I had some understanding but that was the first time I really heard someone's individual experience. I know that I have much less experience & knowledge about the many ways neurodiversity can manifest and how to support that in my practice, compared to the work I have done with disability, so it was brilliant to see how you work. I loved learning about how your way of thinking shapes your artistic viewpoint & methods.

It made me think that I can look at modes of communication & how I set up environmental factors in my own practice to better support people, and also how the ways many things in the art world are structured—from auditions to feedback to funding applications—create barriers for neurodivergent artists. There is a lot more to learn and discover, and lots to change.

2) What would you say are the differences in inclusive work with visible vs. invisible disabilities? What are the similarities?

In both cases you are very much subjected to other people's assumptions and lack of knowledge and awareness, but when you have something visibly 'different' about you, then people's assumptions and judgements are immediate. As I've experienced it, there is a very exhausting and constant thing of having to deal with other people's



reactions to me, and I guess with an invisible disability there is the chance to only disclose what you want or need to, so there is a choice there. But as you put it, with something invisible there is also a pressure around whether to 'out' yourself or not, and wondering how, when and how much to tell people. They both take a lot of energy to manage in different ways.

I think with invisible disabilities and neurodiversity there is less awareness in the general public—in the UK I've seen that starting to change and really blossom over the last 4 years or so. You've mentioned how a lot of people misunderstand autism as something 'behavioral' which they think can be modified, instead of actually a completely different way of functioning, which continues to do harm to autistic & neurodivergent people.

As you very correctly said the other day, and I feel exactly the same about having a visible disability, the focus always seems to be on what a person can or can't do, instead of the actual experience of this way of being. Our individual experiences are much more interesting, nuanced, and holistic than the boring and oversimplified ideas in the general public, for example, 'autism is a superpower' or people getting fixated on asking me what physical tasks I can or can't do. That's why I'm super excited about your proposal for *Multiverse*, and why we need to be hearing from disabled and neurodivergent artists much more.

### 3) What did you enjoy most in our exchange and common work? What inspired you, what did you find challenging?

We have a lot of overlap in our artistic interests, improvisation scores and structures, working with pattern, repetition, and an interest in subtle humor or human absurdity. So it was a really big pleasure to meet a kindred spirit, and geek out about those shared interests!

And, we also have really different experiences of disability & neurodiversity, both in our lives, and in our working processes, so I started to understand a new perspective, which I really loved.



It was very nice to be reminded through our collaboration that art and life cannot be separated, getting away from capitalistic or industrialized ideas of 'productivity,' and enjoying an organic way of exchanging that we could shape the way we needed in both of our quite busy & full lives. Incredibly important exchanges happened when we were just chatting over some food or a drink.

I found it challenging at first to think of this idea of "mentorship" which for me feels hierarchical, or that one person's experience is more valuable or relevant than another's, which doesn't resonate with me. I liked that we reframed it together as an exchange between two practicing artists, to reshape the idea of 'expertise' to something which is multi-directional, as in reality we can all learn from one another all the time, in an interdependent, symbiotic way.

#### 4) What are you taking with you from our year together?

Something that kept reappearing and that sticks with me is this notion of knowing and understanding our needs, which is super important, but especially for disabled and neurodivergent artists to understand & be able to communicate somehow. It's also the antithesis to most dance training, which often focuses on ignoring/overriding our needs, or pushing past them. That inspires me to underline this as a skill to train, when I teach or lead anything—training our ability to recognise our changing needs, and honor them while remaining connected to what is being proposed by a choreographer, teacher, or director. And then as a leader to keep responding to those needs, to make space for them, as a choreographer to keep seeing them as part of my creative framework.

I'm taking with me a lot of inspiration to continue learning about neurodiversity and how I can best support and welcome neurodivergent artists into the work I do. I'm taking a renewed excitement about the innovative work that comes from disabled & neurodivergent artists. And most of all, I am taking a huge burst of certainty that we need more of this—more disabled and neurodivergent artists in leadership, more diverse perspectives meeting the public through art, more thinking and doing that



actively reshapes the ingrained/assumed systems of work & productivity that actually don't serve very many of us. As you said, art can play such an important role in communicating something that cannot be easily communicated, and I think working accessibly & inclusively creates even more potential to spread understanding & empathy.

Next steps:

This collaboration has led to the discovery of shared interests, artistic ideas, and new methods in accessible practice, and has underlined the importance of creating new connections between artists in different countries. This sharing of practice leads to the evolution of our thinking and methods, which in turn can create change in the wider industry from a grassroots level. We both have the desire to continue our collaboration, and look forward to finding opportunities to co-research further. Thank you for supporting our exchange, it seems like the beginning of much fertile ground to explore.



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