

Protokoll Tischgespräch / Transcript of Table Talk / procès-verbal de la conversation:

3a Cultural leadership positions are not intended for people with disabilities (EN)

Mit / with / avec: Kate Marsh (GB)

Key question:

The structure of the arts and culture sector makes it difficult for people with disabilities to be decision-makers. In Switzerland, for example, there are virtually no people with disabilities in leading cultural positions. What is behind it? Are there no qualified people? What needs to change?

Kate Marsh (KM) moderated the discussion. KM worked as a dancer and producer, as well as in research and teaching. Her Ph.D. dealt with leadership and disability. She was frustrated with the conversation that was held about the topic. In addition, she saw no progress being made in the power structures to adapt to people with a disability. KM had hoped to find a solution when writing her Ph.D. but instead, she was confronted with more questions than before: Do we need people with disabilities in leadership positions? Can we change the way we think about leadership now? How can we be empowered to change the current power structures?

In the beginning, she gave a few inputs for the discussion:

- Leadership is a myth and a societal construct. Therefore, it could be reconstructed and thought of differently.
- It is a myth that the UK is more progressive concerning disabled people in decision-making positions than other countries, e.g. Switzerland.
- It is important to talk about what qualities make a leader and who decides about these qualifications.
- People with disabilities have no possibility to educate themselves to achieve a leadership position, they need to find their own ways and do their own training to lead.

- Do we [disabled people] not fit cultural leadership positions or do these positions not fit us? Do we need a different definition of what leadership is to improve the current situation?

D starts the discussion. Artists in cultural leadership positions are clearly missing. D sees the problem in the job profiles. These are not tailored for people with disabilities. In the current situation, positions are given only to those disabled people who can fulfill the same qualifications as non-disabled people. As a consequence, disabled people still don't fit into the system. For D, new job profiles for disabled people need to be created.

K made the experience that there are quite a lot of disabled artists who could possibly take up leadership positions. However, there seems to be a silent agreement between these artists that they are only here for fun and are not going to touch Excel-Sheets. Their will to get into leading positions is very small.

F throws in keywords from yesterday's podium discussion. Disability is a way of thinking and a way of living. All the people on the podium, so thinks F, have a strong ability to self-reflect. This is a quality many disabled people possess that could be very useful for a decision-maker. But self-reflection needs a lot of time. Who wants to pay for this?

KM adds that in our culture leadership is strongly connected with effectiveness and speed. Is it possible that leadership can be slower? She thinks that leadership for disabled people requires more time and would be more expensive, but that it would be worth it.

D questions whether disabled people in leadership positions would be factually more expensive? Maybe much work that was done before by decision-makers will fall apart when you change the system. In this way, leadership for disabled people is a chance to get rid of empty work time and content.

A points out that leadership means to make decisions. How many people with disabilities are ready or willing to take this responsibility? A is in the position of giving away leadership positions and in the past, she offered it to many disabled artists. She made the experience that not so many of them wanted to be in this position.

G asks if this could be because of the set of expectations we have for a leadership position.

A explains that she is in the position to give these positions away for more than 20 years and she always received the answer from artists that they wanted to make art. She experienced that it is challenging to find people for these jobs. At the podium of 2017, she also asked various people with a disability but always received the same answer.

M agrees that leadership is about making decisions. The starting point for M would be a change of perspective on leadership. This could begin with altering the process of how to reach decisions rather than just defining the leader as the only decision-maker.

G adds that there are different kinds of leaders and that there are various options to organize this position. L brings the example of co-creation, facilitation. This is not exotic anymore and offers the possibility to think differently about leadership.

KM goes along with the opinion that it is very difficult to offer a leadership position to disabled people. There are for example cultural leaders who say that they are going to step down from their position to give way to a disabled person. This, on the other hand, can feel like pressure or an order: "Now go and lead". The main problem is that disabled people don't see themselves represented in leading positions and are therefore sometimes too anxious to take the job.

J says that there are hardly any role models or inspiring persons that make disabled people think "Oh, I could be a leader". In the future, it is essential to arrange a good example so that disabled people feel represented in the power structures and feel more encouraged to take jobs in leading positions. There is also a lack of possibilities for disabled people to take up education in this area. Mostly they have to find their own training and mentors. Only people with a lot of confidence and skills take these jobs. Because there is little support, people sometimes feel quite alone and helpless in these positions.

KM is interested in the tension between taking a leadership position and leaving your art behind. How is it possible to cling on to your art and be a leader?

C sees this tension as well. If you are an artist, you feel the responsibility of representation. You don't want to leave e.g. your company because it's part of your identity and you want to be present on stage. If you take a leadership position, it feels like you go and run off inside a building, leaving your project behind. Many artists are also scared that they will not have enough time to be still present on stage.

L asks why the table is always assuming that disabled people in cultural leading positions were/are artists? Is there no possibility for education?

M explains that you are not a leader automatically. It's a process and development. Only experience can enable you to do such a job. Just creating opportunities for disabled people is not enough. They need to be able to grow and to develop.

N agrees and adds that it is as a disabled person already hard to get into universities. We need to have this institutional shift.

For KM it is crucial to remember the historical and social impact. Disabled people mostly feel like they were left out their whole life. Another problem is that people with disabilities tend to get plonked. KM was plonked into her Ph.D. because she was the only person who was interested in it. There is always the pressure of being the only one. She feels like there is not very much behind her [past] and there is not very much in front of her either [future]. This feels very fragile. You start posing yourself the question: Where might I be plonked next?

J points out that it is important to have structures that enable making art and being in leadership at the same time. There is just the difficulty of how to keep the fire as an artist and a leader. Is there a way to be more flexible?

D suggests that the leadership position could be shared between a general manager (for administration purposes) and an artist (for experiments and curation). This way you can limit the pressure. It is a question of how to organize these positions.

A says that for her, leadership is about how to run a house. However, she also thinks that ruling e.g. a dance company is also a sort of leadership because art leads to and inspires to give new ideas. To run a house means to do more administrative tasks. Artists who are in leadership positions want to create but are literally eaten up by their administration

job. Therefore as a leader, you need different skills: Organizational skills and artistic skills, these two roles can merge. Artists themselves do lead in their own way. This must be taken seriously as well.

D suggests that you need to give open frames to disabled people where they can try out a leadership role during a short period of time. D did this in his own house. There he gave a disabled person the chance to curate a part of the programme. These smaller possibilities enable disabled people to try out the job of a curator without leaving their job as an artist. For institutions, this means giving space, time and money to artists to take over the board of trustees for a month or so.

A wants to know what the experience with this system was like. How was it for the house, how for the disabled artists?

D explains the project: There was a financial frame, what the curators could spend. The task was to curate a minimum of two evenings in two months. The artists who were curating were not allowed to be on stage themselves. For him, it was a very inspiring experience.

K wants to know if there is continuity and sustainability with this project.

D answers that they tried out the curation-project in four slots. They noted that two months is not enough time. Now D has another project, to give out more space to disabled artists to curate. All is still in progress. Some of the artists who curated are developing their own project. It's all about trying out.

K adds that there are also other models like artists in residence. But she criticized that there often is no sustainability in those projects. What comes next? Another question she continually asks herself is how to measure the "success" of these models. How can one decide if the project worked out and therefore can be continued?

For N there are two crucial words: Risk-taking. N worked as a choreographer and learned there that you don't know everything beforehand. One thing that she kept in mind was the thought that it is okay not to know. If you want to change the system it is important that the community shares this "I don't know" with each other, works out new solutions and enables continuous development.

D totally agrees. This is the quality you need for a leading position. Only if you can deal with risks and new circumstances you can change and improve things which is a crucial part of the leaders' work.

KM sees a tension between the way society sees leadership and what leadership means to disabled people: In society, leadership is linked to the adjectives strong and stable, whereas leadership for disabled people means vulnerability and risk-taking. Gatekeepers play a key role in this. They are mostly non-disabled people who make space for disabled people. There is no conversation happening between the non-disabled and the disabled leader. This, however, would be very important – for both sides.

A points out that the table also needs to discuss who applies for these jobs.

N also notes the lack of conversation between gatekeepers and people with disability. Gatekeepers must be willing to have this conversation. But at the moment there is just ignorance.

KM also agrees that people need to open up to have this conversation.

K notes that there is a certain pressure when you apply for such a job because you know that you will be the spokesperson for the whole community and they all have high expectations that you change the power system and the existing structures.

C wants people who provoke in leadership positions. He wants disabled people to apply for these kinds of jobs and shake up the system. Because something needs to be done.

K says that there is a certain precariousness in this because you don't know how the future will be. In addition, if you have a leadership position you also need to speak for the organization you are working for, not just for your own concerns.

D is in human resources and writes job advertisements. He thinks that disabled people don't apply or they apply and then try to fit in. Therefore, D questions the whole structure.

J brings an example from the UK. There, people with a disability are guaranteed to have a job interview. As an effect, they sometimes only get invited because of their disability. This is dangerous.

D asks if it would be a good idea to add the sentence “People with disabilities are welcome to apply”. The others agree. Just a little sentence helps to apply because the applicant knows that there is a willingness in the organization to work with disabled people.

K says that the application system is a can of worms. The application work is not transparent and not open. The process itself is very fraud. In the UK we have these guaranteed interviews but does this solve the problem? This rule is just there to give the institutions a good feeling so they can say that they invited disabled people to interviews. Something needs to be done!