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Against Crip and Queer Loneliness: Reclaiming the Freak Show in Contemporary Polish Performance Art

ABSTRACT

Freak shows, part of the entertainment industry that presented "unusual" bodies, used humor, hyperbole, and the grotesque, and reinforced normative ideas about "normality" and "able-bodiedness" (Bogdan; Garland-Thomson; Chemers), became popular in the capital cities of Central and Eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries (Herza; Demski and Czarnecka). The contemporary Polish performance entitled *The Freak Show* (2024), presented at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, sought to reclaim the freak show as a genre of performance art and to liberate it from its associations with low culture and oppression. Using their own corporeality, the artists addressed the abuse permeating historical freak shows. They challenged the distorted portrayal of the performers in the narrow, clichéd roles assigned to them and the excessive focus on their bodies' untypicalities, which had commonly been intended to evoke curiosity. The article argues that the artists behind the performance fostered friendship and community, combating queer and crip loneliness—experienced by disabled and queer people in ableist and heterosexual society—through "access intimacy" (Mingus). Furthermore, the visibility of their non-normative bodies in a major Polish art institution sought to foster empowerment among queer and disabled audiences.

Keywords: freak show, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, performance art, loneliness, able-bodiedness, crip and queer aesthetics, access intimacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Before presenting the main argument of this article, I will briefly pause to quote queer/trans disability studies scholar J. Logan Smilges's reflection on the moment "when you finally secure access to something for the first time—maybe a concert, a graduate program, a job, a relationship, a surgery—and you realize that you are still feeling all alone, and that no one seems to care" (8). Smilges problematizes ableism as merely "a collection of access problems" (3), suggesting that even if certain places or institutions are accessible, ableism can still render them challenging and isolating for disabled people. This article will address the sense of loneliness that is disproportionately associated with queer and disabled subjects and discuss what access to (art) institutions means for artists and audiences with disabilities.

In this article, I will analyze the Warsaw performance of *The Freak Show* (2024), based on interviews with the performers,[1] and examine how it addressed the oppression associated with historical freak shows. The artists challenged the narrow scope of clichéd, stereotypical roles assigned to the historical performers and the overemphasis on their physical differences, which were meant to provoke curiosity, as was typical in freak shows of the past. Visual sociologist and disability studies expert Robert Bogdan explains the different modes of representation of freak show performers, which served as projections of the normate's[2] fears and prejudices, and argues that when presented with non-Western Others, the normative audience saw "confirmed old prejudices and beliefs regarding the separateness of the 'enlightened' and 'primitive' worlds; they left the freak show reassured of their own superiority by such proofs of the others' inferiority" (197). By contrast, the contemporary Polish performance sought to present disability from the subjective perspective of the artists who created the show. The article further argues that the performers fostered friendship and community, fighting loneliness through "access intimacy," which disability justice advocate Mia Mingus defines as a "feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs." *The Freak Show* helped them combat crip and queer loneliness by strengthening the sense of kinship in the production process. Moreover, showcasing their non-normative bodies within an art institution aimed to foster empowerment among queer and disabled audiences.

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[1] While the article was in its final proofreading stage, the documentary *Freak Show* (2026, dir. Łukasz Ronduda and Filip Pawlak), presenting some of these stories, premiered at the Millennium Docs Against Gravity Festival.

[2] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines the normate as "the veiled subject position of the cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries. The term normate usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as *definitive human beings*" (8).

THE HISTORY OF FREAK SHOWS

One meaning of the word "freak" is "a person, plant or animal with an unusual physical abnormality. Now regarded as offensive when applied to people" ("Freak, *Noun* (4a)"). However, Bogdan explains that "freakishness" is not a trait of an individual, but rather an aspect of how people such as non-Western Others, people with medically unusual bodies, and people with rare abilities have been presented by entertainment enterprises and public institutions (5). At the turn of the 19th century, this term began to be used in connection with a certain type of display of human "abnormalities" (Chemers 6), and subsequently, during the 19th century, freak shows became part of the entertainment industry (4). They depicted "unusual" bodies through humor, grotesqueness, and hyperbole, while also shaping conventional notions of "normality" and "able-bodiedness."

Along with circuses, amusement parks, museums, and theme parks, freak shows were part of the entertainment industry. They all involved a specific way of life and a similar approach to audiences, or more accurately, customers. As Bogdan notes, "showmen working the freak shows systematically and pervasively misrepresented their exhibits to the public" (85), but the performers themselves also often created characters and stage personas for the entertainment industry. Bogdan illustrates this with the example of the two-headed Mexican man, Pasqual Pinon, who was exposed as a fraud; his second head was either a tumor with facial features or a well-made fake head (ibid.). Disability studies and feminist scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson similarly argues that showmen emphasized the performers' extraordinary characteristics, adding that "[p]osters and broadsides extravagantly proclaimed the peculiarity of the freak's body, provoking the spectators' curiosity" (61). She also notes that even the architecture of the elevated platform was set up to "[hold] the observer's gaze like a magnet, not only foregrounding the body on display, but exposing it in such a way that the physical traits presented as extraordinary dominated the entire person on exhibit" (ibid.). As will be discussed further, this exaggeration of the performers' "freakishness" was problematized in *The Freak Show*.

Freak shows and circuses were popular in the capital cities of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) during the 19th and 20th centuries, as part of the project of European modernity, which involved urbanization, industrialization, trade, tourism, and the establishment of new institutions such as museums and zoos (Demski and Czarnecka 7). Western colonial and imperial systems and discourses were evident in Orientalist trends in architecture and art during the Habsburg Empire and in the art collected by Czech travelers, as well as by museums and galleries (Rampley 6).

The first ethnic exhibitions in CEE took place at the 1873 Vienna World's Fair and at the Budapest Zoo in 1874. The research of Czech cultural anthropologist Filip Herza shows that these displays of human "curiosities" developed in CEE alongside their North American and Western European equivalents, while Polish ethnographer Dominika Czarnecka argues that circuses—"the main 'arenas' of displaying otherness"—"emerged and were developed, negotiated, and challenged" in the region (112). For example, the Warsaw-based Staniewski Brothers Circus was one of the world's most famous circuses. Czarnecka specifically observes how these performances reinforced racial and gender differences: "[F]or instance, in 1884, the Ciniselli Circus featured a show of 'real Indians' in Warsaw . . .; in 1888, the Schumann Circus advertised performances of African Ashanti people to Warsaw audiences; and in 1911, the Devigné Circus promoted shows of a Japanese troupe in Łódź" (115).

By exhibiting bodily differences, freak shows reinforced binary oppositions, such as normal versus abnormal. As a form of lowbrow entertainment, they often pathologized non-normative bodies. At the same time, ideas about scientific rationality, able-bodiedness, white supremacy, and human classification were developed. The concept of "normality" influenced a wide range of disciplines and research fields, including comparative anatomy, pathology, clinical medicine, criminal anthropology, critical race studies, eugenics, sexology, and psychoanalysis (Cryle and Stephens 4–5). Consequently, in the 20th century, due to "the eugenics movement and the medicalization of human differences" (Bogdan 63), the non-normative body was moved "from the stage platform to the teaching hospital amphitheater, the medical text, and the special institution" (Garland-Thomson 78). The following section will focus on the contemporary performance *The Freak Show*, which critically engaged with this history and aimed to reclaim it from a crip perspective. As Chemers argues, "every disabled body in performance . . . enters into some kind of dialogue with the perceived history of the freak show" (25). It is precisely through critical analysis, recognizing the connection between disability and performance, that we can rehabilitate this tradition (ibid.).

THE FREAK SHOW AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN WARSAW

The iconic new building of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (designed by American architect Thomas Phifer) opened on 25 October 2024 with a three-week-long artistic program. As part of it, on 31 October, the museum hosted *The Freak Show*, created by artists Nadia Markiewicz,

Filip Pawlak, Daniel Kotowski, Babcia, and Agata Wąsik, and curated by Filip Pawlak, Łukasz Ronduda, and dramaturg Szymon Adamczak.

The artists participating in the performance are all well-established within the contemporary art scene, as well as in the queer art community or among artists with disabilities. One of them, Filip Pawlak, is an experienced performer who studied at the film school in Katowice and the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, earned an MA in theatre arts from the Malmö Theatre Academy/Lund University, and is currently a PhD student in film and theatre at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He is an artist, a theatre producer, and an activist advocating for the rights of artists with disabilities. Since 2019, he has been involved in Europe Beyond Access, an EU project that connects and supports artists with disabilities.

The first act that Pawlak, impersonating a freak-show barker, introduced was the work of visual artist, performer, and curator Daniel Kotowski. Kotowski graduated from the Faculty of Interior Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and the Faculty of New Media Arts at the Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology. He was a member of the Polish Group of Deaf Artists, founded in 2012. He is currently a doctoral student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk.

His performance was followed by Babcia's show, in which they appeared on stage dressed as a dancing doll, drawing on their experience as a drag artist, performer, and costume designer who derives inspiration from all types of horror media. This act, like much of Babcia's other works, is grounded in Poznań's grassroots queer art community.

Next, artist Agata Wąsik performed as Lady Picassa. Wąsik is a graduate of the Grażyna and Kiejstut Bacewicz Music University in Łódź, where she earned a degree in music therapy. She is a classically trained singer who uses various musical genres and styles in her performances. Wąsik has been on stage since 2012, when she appeared in the theatre performance *W Przechlapanem* [*In Screwedville*] directed by the late Rafał Urbacki[3] at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute in Warsaw. In *The Freak Show*, Wąsik sang Grace Jones's song "I've Seen that Face Before" to music inspired by Astor Piazzolla's "Libertango," composed in collaboration with artist Marcel Pieczonka. Her character's, Lady Picassa's, face was covered with geometric, colorful, cubist-style makeup, crafted in collaboration with makeup artist Aleksandra Adamska.

Finally, Nadia Markiewicz performed dressed as a rose, which, having undergone spontaneous genetic mutations, served as an analogy for congenital

[3] Rafał Urbacki (1984–2019), a cripqueer performer and choreographer, was one of the precursors of crip choreography in Poland. He has been recognized for bringing crip aesthetics and perspectives into Polish contemporary dance.

disability in the plant world. Markiewicz is a visual artist, a graduate of the Studio of Spatial Activities at the Faculty of Media Art of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw (2020). She also attended the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam (2010–11) and the University of Warsaw (2011–14), and is currently a PhD student at the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków.



Fig. 1. *The Freak Show*. Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2024. Photo by Dominika Jaruga. Copyright by Madants sp. z o.o.

In terms of form, *The Freak Show* alluded to historical freak shows and local historical figures. At the beginning of the performance, Pawlak mentioned that the Staniewski Brothers Circus was located just a few minutes' walk from the newly opened museum building. Inspired by the genealogical traditions of Polish circus culture, *The Freak Show* sought to carve out its place in the history of Polish performance art by returning to its original location. The performance also evoked Stefan Bibrowski, a Polish artist who had hypertrichosis. Known as "Lionel the Lion-Faced Man," he became a popular performer on Coney Island. As Markiewicz explains,

> That was our way of revising the canon of great Polish people to include someone with an extraordinary body who worked in sideshows. We want to make the memory of these artists more prominent in our culture. Currently, they are exclusively viewed as victims, which is not irrelevant in many cases, but their agency and success are denied. So Bibrowski has become a kind of historic patron for us.

The Freak Show sought to challenge the historical perception of freak shows as lowbrow entertainments that display "otherness" and "abnormality" for the sake of spectacle. Hence, the featured artists took full control of their performances, and the ways in which their bodies were depicted, to prevent excessive emphasis on their atypicality. The aim was to challenge the common strategy used in historical freak shows to arouse the viewers' curiosity (Garland-Thomson 61).

As disability studies scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder argue, it is precisely through "[p]erversely championing the terms of their own stigmatization [that] marginal peoples alarm the dominant culture with a canniness about their own subjugation. . . . Thus, the minority culture deflects the stigmatizing definition back on to the offenders by openly advertising them in public discourse" (35). This was achieved by the artists acknowledging the value of their "extraordinary" bodies, understood as "generative potential of disability, the world-making work of disability as a concept and cultural force" (Garland-Thomson xii). The bodies of the non-normative performers who presented their work at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw gave the freak show a new meaning by consciously avoiding sensationalism or accentuating otherness. They achieved this goal by creating individual parts of the show by themselves, departing from stereotypical freak-show representations, and taking responsibility for how they presented their bodies and what they wanted to communicate.

Referring to David Krasner's *Resistance, Parody, and Double-Consciousness* (1997), Chemers argues that African American performance in the years following the Civil War "enabled black actors to take control, at least partially, of the terms of their reception. In so doing, they were able to cater to the racist hegemony. [T]hese actors were capable of negotiating the tricky line between resistance and deviance" (133–34). Similarly, *The Freak Show* artists reappropriated the freak show as a genre and dismantled its oppressive practices. They liberated it from its history by drawing on their individual experiences. As Chemers argues,

> Disability may never be liberated from the history of the freak show, but the freak show can and must be liberated from its historical neglect, so that the freak, hitherto visible only as a victim of conscienceless managers and degenerate audiences, can be recognized as an active agent, even as an artist whose work shapes and is shaped by the same dynamic social forces governing any theatrical production. (9)

The Polish artists' acts presented in *The Freak Show* were conceptually layered and visually captivating commentaries that did not portray disability through the prism of self-pity, anger, or weakness, but rather

provided viewers with an opportunity to build a relationship with the stage personas through humor, music, dance, and visual metaphors, and, above all, to approach these personas' unique ways of being in the world from the artists' own perspectives.

COMFORT: CRIPPING AND QUEERING A STATE-FUNDED INSTITUTION

Before the performance began, crowds of people waited patiently outside the hall where it was about to start. As the museum guard did not allow anyone to peek behind the curtain, the audience became impatient and feared that there would not be enough space for everyone. The tension grew. *The Freak Show* began with the barker Pawlak's entrance on stage. Announcing the start of the performance, Pawlak said that people with disabilities would be given priority to enter first and watch the performance comfortably. He then put everyone at ease, joked around, and created a pleasant atmosphere to make the whole audience feel comfortable, encouraging them to applaud the performers.

In this way, Pawlak playfully engaged with common strategies that disabled people are expected to follow in everyday contexts. As Garland-Thomson explains, "every person with a visible disability knows intimately [that] managing, deflecting, resisting, or renouncing that stare is part of the daily business of life" (26). She adds that "disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort. . . . Only then can each person emerge as multifaceted, whole" (14). Similarly, Chemers suggests that "part of the burden disabled persons have been made to assume" lies in their bearing "responsibility for the normate's discomfort," which results from the fact that their bodies are seen as "the source of the turmoil" (34). For the most part, *The Freak Show* conformed to the expectation that the performers should attend to the comfort of the "normate" audience, yet it did so to achieve a specific goal. As Markiewicz explains, "I know that disability is a topic many people would rather look away from, and my use of aesthetics associated with fun is meant to lure a viewer into it before they realize what it's all about. I am not upfront with it at first glance" (qtd. in Tomková 113). Similarly, the other performers created a safe space and a comfortable pace of the show only to increase the later shock effect and eventually share their personal stories, which they elaborated in the interviews I conducted, and their experiences of disability hidden behind the comfortable façade of humor, music, dance, and visual metaphors.

Postcolonial queer feminist theorist Sara Ahmed observes that when a person feels comfortable, they usually do not even notice it, taking this feeling for granted (*The Cultural Politics* 174). Pawlak's prioritizing of audience members with disabilities in the performance space can be seen as an attempt to make the normates aware of their privilege and somewhat balance access to comfort in the space. Ahmed explains that "some bodies can 'have' comfort, only as an effect of the work of others" (149). *The Freak Show* accentuated the fact that comfort and discomfort are often relational, in that the comfortable environment created in the museum "depend[ed] on the labour of [performers]" (ibid.).

The audience was also given permission by Pawlak to act in various non-standard ways, which was directly inspired by Coney Island's freak shows. As Markiewicz explains,

> I visited a show there twice and was amazed by the level of interaction that is encouraged from the audience members, which I think could also be interpreted as a form of accessibility. Strict theatre rules can be harsh on a viewer, and here they are encouraged to release emotions and move around.

This can be seen in parallel with the strategies used by self-identifying queer disabled artist Claire Cunningham, who, as Katarzyna Ojrzyńska, a disability and performance studies scholar, argues,

> opens her performances with a direct address to the spectators in which she invites them to behave in non-normative ways that are adjusted to their needs. They can leave the room and return whenever they wish to, they can change their seat, or lie down, and, if need be, they can make noises. (203)

Ojrzyńska offers a reading of Cunningham's practice in relation to Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetic" and explores various aspects of her strategies for building "care-ful relationality" in a performance space (204). A similar desire for relationality was evident in *The Freak Show*, which invited audience members to behave freely and be attentive to their needs. This can be perceived as an attempt to create an even more comfortable experience, particularly for non-normative spectators who find it difficult to adhere to theatre etiquette.

In general, crip and queer relational strategies offer an alternative to neoliberal individualism. The artists behind *The Freak Show* created an accessible space for free expression of emotions and movement, and for exchange between the audience and the performers. Pawlak played a pivotal role in this by structuring the performance, fostering a sense

of connection with the audience, and encouraging them to answer his questions out loud. He encouraged them to move around the space. His introductions also redefined the character of a typical barker in a freak show, as he did not misrepresent the performers to the audience and questioned the audience's excessive curiosity about the "freakishness" of the performers. For example, before Markiewicz's performance about mutated roses, Pawlak highlighted the beauty of diversity in the rose garden, while also mentioning Markiewicz's loss of her friend Carolyn, who died early as a result of a mutated gene (HTT). Pawlak focused more on the artist's personal relationship with her best friend Carolyn, which inspired the performance, than on the performer's physical qualities.

By accentuating the importance of comfort and relationality, *The Freak Show* also addressed the problem of the (in)accessibility of Polish art institutions. Research conducted in Kraków in 2024 revealed, for instance, that museums are still largely inaccessible to people with various disabilities, who account for 10% of all visitors. It showed that they are well prepared to welcome visitors with mobility impairments and seniors, but less so to welcome people who are visually impaired, d/Deaf, or hard of hearing (Kruczek et al.). To shed light on this issue, *The Freak Show* provided access and comfort to people with various types and degrees of disability. This was also achieved by providing additional access services. Any text spoken during the performance was translated into Polish Sign Language. Furthermore, *The Freak Show* featured whispered audio description for blind audience members. Babcia explains that they allowed blind audience members to touch and feel their costume and props after the performance. By offering alternative ways for bodies to access the performance space, *The Freak Show* made an important gesture that overturned the social structures of access, aiming to create a sense of comfort for people with disabilities—a goal that was achieved thanks to the artists' and interpreters' work.

Pawlak, who not only hosted the performance but also co-curated it with Ronduda, told me that they, as artists, recognized the museum staff's great effort in producing the performance and welcoming them to the institution. Although he notes that he and his colleagues worked under time pressure and were pushed to their limits, which is not in line with the accessible production methods they would have liked, the performers and producers felt that the museum personnel had done everything they could to accommodate them, even though the new museum building had only opened a week before the performance's premiere (Pawlak).

While the performance's inclusion in the museum's opening program can be seen as an inclusive gesture, it could also be considered merely symbolic. J. Logan Smilges argues that, even though certain places or institutions can be accessible, ableism can still make them challenging for

people with disabilities. Smilges problematizes "how too concerted a focus on individuals' access needs distracts from the messier, meaner, and more systemic ways that ableism operates in our world" (4). However, I believe that *The Freak Show* represents an important step towards transforming the institution through the artists' work. The performers provided valuable insights into the needs of disabled artists within the institutional context and, thanks to their efforts, the audience gained a deeper understanding of "institutions *as* formations," which can be transformed to embrace greater human diversity (Ahmed, *On Being Included* 173–74).

This allows us to consider the relationship between bodies and institutional spaces. To use Ahmed's turn of phrase, *The Freak Show* aimed to create "'a place at the table' in the hope that the table will not keep its place" (*The Promise of Happiness* 106). The focus should now be on the latter and on how the institution can be transformed as a result of this experience. The next section will further explore how the performance offered an opportunity to combat crip loneliness among the performers by fostering a sense of community during the production process.

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES

Kotowski's act began with him sitting silently on a wooden stool, dressed in a white tank top and white shorts, echoing the pose of Auguste Rodin's modernist sculpture *The Thinker*. After a few minutes, he began repeating the words "bla bla, bla bla, bla bla bla . . .," then got up and approached the audience. The artist explains: "Nowadays, every person not only has the right to believe in some truth, but also to create their own truth. At the same time, they are reduced to a freak-show spectacle, considered distrustful and abnormal." At the end of the evening, Kotowski returned in the role of an online streamer, while Pawlak filmed him. The image was projected onto a screen behind the artist, who repeated "bla bla bla . . .," now standing and gesturing "bla bla" in sign language. Finally, he took Pawlak's camera and started recording a live selfie video with the audience in the background, which was projected onto the screen.

Kotowski's goal was to comment on the crisis of today's intellectuals in the context of the rise of fake news and deep fakes in live Internet broadcasting, known as trash streaming (or patostreaming in Poland), in which a streamer performs and spreads shocking and often dangerous acts. His work encourages us to think about whom we take seriously, whose voice we trust and attach importance to, and why. The artist mocked contemporary political figures and online influencers who spread fake news, turning them into the main characters of his version of a contemporary freak show. This

interpretation of Kotowski's performance is based on the ideas he shared in the interview I conducted with him. In his previous works, he had already employed both the spoken phrase "bla bla bla" and its PSL equivalent as part of his artistic strategy to critically address the presence of sign language in the media and the social perception of that language and its users.[4] For instance, in his video *A Person Who Does Not Speak Is Not a Person* (2020), inspired by the iconic work by Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović (*An Artist Who Does Not Speak English Is Not An Artist*, 1992), Kotowski used a fake sign that he designed to resemble a word in sign language. Since performing this made-up gesture along with its verbal equivalent produces meaningless noise, it can be likened to challenging the place of the silent voice in public discourse and in the world in general. His piece at the *Freak Show* echoes this by challenging normative notions of communication.

In the following act, Babcia, dressed as a dancing doll and wearing rabbit make-up and a white floral lace dress, danced to "Why Do I Cry?"—a song by Margo Guryan. Babcia drank from a container labelled with a carrot sign. The scene darkened, the space was illuminated by red light, and the music became distorted, with images of white rabbits projected onto the screen, one of which was later presented after being skinned. When the artist fell to the ground, the light returned to white. Babcia pulled a red object resembling an intestine from under their clothes, from which they drew a gun and fired into the distance. The music started again, and the artist resumed their dance, while images of a happy white rabbit eating carrots were projected onto the back screen. Babcia underwent several surgeries during their childhood and later adolescence, which aimed to improve their life, as their parents and doctors often told them. Therefore, they adopted the character of a rabbit. (In Polish, "królik doświadczalny/experimental rabbit" [Eng. guinea pig] means a person on whom medical experiments are performed.)

Babcia made an important commentary on a society in which disability is perceived as an illness or a dysfunction that needs to be corrected and cured. This connects with Eunjung Kim's concept of "curative violence," "the exercise of force to erase differences for the putative betterment of the Other" (27). Explaining further that "[c]urative violence occurs when cure is what actually frames the presence of disability as a problem and ends up destroying the subject in the curative process," Kim, a gender and disabilities studies scholar, describes the perception of disability as an enemy, a concept that defines the body as the Other (ibid.). This idea resonates in Babcia's words:

[4] For a critical take on sign language, particularly, sign language interpretation, in contemporary mainstream media and culture, where it tends to be exoticized or ridiculed, see also Robinson.

> It sounds like I were angry about these experiences, but I'm not. I'm just a little concerned that social norms about the body put children and their parents in these situations. That they think it's necessary to be cut, altered, surgically changed to be safe in the world just because you look different.

Babcia's performance offers a valuable personal reflection on ways to appreciate physical differences, rather than suppressing or treating them—a mindset that can leave a person feeling like an outsider and lonely in a society that views disability as a problem:

> Since childhood, I knew that I "had to" undergo surgery, so I was constantly preparing for it. . . . My parents were very involved and caring. I always felt safe. Especially my mom, who was always with me. That was the visible part, the important part. But then there was something else, a hidden part that wasn't easily visible. I thought the surgery was necessary, and it was expected that I would undergo it. I felt like it was [my] destiny, and that's how it was. I didn't feel like I had a choice. The expectations became my own, although I feel like I inherited this emotional state. I am still grateful, the care was important, and I live well now, but I still remember the sword that hung over my head in my teenage years. There is a certain norm that really puts pressure on you when you have a body like mine.



Fig. 2. Babcia performing in *The Freak Show*. Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2024. Photo by Dominika Jaruga. Copyright by Madants sp. z o.o.

Babcia, as a conceptual drag performer, often creates horror- and gore-inspired performances addressing themes such as emotional pain, rejection, violence, and interpersonal relations: "I like to challenge the audience with ugliness and trauma; I think ugliness needs more space."

Babcia's act shows how *The Freak Show* created a shock effect and offered a space where the artists shared their personal stories and experiences of disability. This was frequently done indirectly as they often remained somewhat hidden behind the comfort of humor, music, dance, and visual metaphors. These metaphors were part of the performance's camp aesthetic, which is characterized by a love of "artifice and exaggeration," "Being-as-Playing-a-Role," and "the metaphor of life as a theatre" (Sontag 1, 9, 10). Camp can be understood as a style characterized by irony, exaggeration, anti-seriousness, and theatricality, and has often been associated with homosexuality. However, as Susan Sontag argues, even though "homosexuals have been its vanguard" (12), camp is not exclusively homosexual but, one might argue, queer in a broad meaning of the term. Judith Butler, for instance, sees queer as "a site of collective contestation" which should remain "never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage" (228). Its epicene qualities, anti-seriousness, exaggeration, and excruciation, rather than a focus on tragedy, could all be found in Babcia's act.

The connection between crip and camp aesthetics is crucial in Babcia's piece: "Drag is to me about being big, too much, camp, and over the top, so whatever topic I decide to portray, I want the performance to be big" (Babcia). Furthermore, Pawlak and Kotowski are openly gay and share experiences of being pathologized because of their queerness and d/Deafness or short arm. The idea of finding enjoyment in what might be termed "certain passionate failures" (Sontag 13), which is evident in *The Freak Show*, is also echoed in Jack Halberstam's conceptualization of *Queer Art of Failure,* in which he notes that "the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic" (96). Halberstam distinguishes between the camp that is a response to "the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heteronormativity," and that which is a form of queer aesthetics drawing from failure, mess, impoliteness, resentment, and shock (110). Following this line of thinking, Kotowski's performance of meaningless noise can be interpreted as an example of the queer art of failure—grotesque and absurd, rather than deeply tragic—precisely because of his inability to make people fully hear him. Camp can thus help us redefine the aesthetics of the freak show through its anti-seriousness, theatricality, and rejection of tragedy, redefining lowbrow entertainment as high art and unlocking its critical potential.

The next artist, Agata Wąsik, performed as Lady Picassa. Her face, covered with colorful geometric makeup, alluded to the modernist cubist style of painting popularized by Picasso, which merges multiple perspectives on figures and objects and breaks them down into geometric shapes. Wąsik used this convention to emphasize her own face, shaped by Treacher Collins syndrome, which she describes as an "exhibition of [a] living painting." This strategy can be seen as reinterpreting modernist fragmentation as crip aesthetics. The approach appears to allude to disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers's conceptualization of disability aesthetics. His 2010 book theorizes the role of disability in modern art and argues that "the disabled body and mind [have been] playing significant roles in the evolution of modern aesthetics" (2). Siebers uses the example of Picasso's *Maya with a Doll* (1938) by referencing its description by philosopher Anita Silvers, who compares the painting "to the irregular features of a friend affected by osteogenesis imperfecta, a disfiguring bone disease, confessing that she finds the same irregular face beautiful in the painting and ugly on her friend" (85). As Siebers further notes, Silvers argues that "we must learn from art how to view disabled bodies and minds aesthetically, making the ideal of beauty more expansive and inclusive" (ibid.), which is crucial to his argument that disability is an integral part of modern aesthetics. In his book, he considers how modernist and contemporary artists and artworks challenge normative aesthetic assumptions. In a similar way, Wąsik used her own face to reinterpret modernist fragmentation as "crip aesthetics" and expand the standards of aesthetic beauty.

An important difference between *The Freak Show* and modernist works lies in the artists' positionality. Wąsik spoke from her personal perspective and experience. The works by Picasso and some other modernists, by contrast, often reflected their fascination with the "primitive," non-Western "other," from whom they appropriated elements for their art (Leighten). In a similar fashion, Polish critical art of the 1990s focused on the body and corporeality. This trend in art, represented by artists such as Artur Żmijewski, drew inspiration from people with disabilities, often using them instrumentally. Challenging such an approach, Markiewicz states: "My disappointment in how disability was represented in 90s art in Poland directly influenced my sense of urgency of showing this topic from within the experience. I wanted to add to this narrative what I felt was lacking—a subjective perspective, but also historical context" (qtd. in Tomková 116). Wąsik aimed to achieve a similar goal by using cubism to emphasize the aesthetics of her own face and reinterpret modernist aesthetics from her personal perspective and through her corporeality. In *The Freak Show*, the artists used their own experiences to offer a new, critical perspective on ableism

and body norms, thereby empowering audiences with "extraordinary" bodies. Making disability visible from a personal perspective was a key goal of the performance. In a dimly lit space, Wąsik sang the song "I've Seen That Face Before" to electronic music inspired by Astor Piazzolla's "Libertango," played by a DJ in the background. In her makeup, she delivered a poignant portrayal of crip aesthetics.

The piece by the final performer, Nadia Markiewicz, entitled "Ballad of the Withering Rose," was created a few months after her best friend Carolyn died of Juvenile Onset Huntington's disease. In Markiewicz's act, the audience was presented with the story of two characters: the moon (projected onto the screen in the background) and the rose (performed by the artist), whose bond served as a metaphor for Carolyn and Markiewicz's friendship. The artist recited her eponymous poem, which describes her relationship with Carolyn. Markiewicz explains: "I emailed botanical garden academic employees to ask about what could be considered an analogy to disability in the plant world. It turned out that these mutated roses, called sports, were quite the celebrities in botany, highly regarded and multiplied to form new species." A sport is a genetic mutation that makes a specific part of a plant different from the rest in terms of both genetics and appearance. In this case, some of the flowers have a different color and shape from others. These roses can be compared to "extraordinary" bodies, showcasing the generative potential of disability. While they can be described as "abnormal," they are highly valued in horticulture. Markiewicz's act thus provides an alternative perspective on human and more-than-human genetic otherness.

As the audience learned, roses smell strongest at night when the moon is shining; however, the moon changes shape and appears thinner in some phases, which served as a metaphor for Carolyn's impairment. The artist explains:

> At the end of the performance, the rose, after secreting a strong fragrance, starts losing its petals. I wanted to show the peak and the decay of my character as well. Embracing one's mortality and showing it in a poetic way are strongly influenced by the Gothic approach that I learned from Carolyn, whose acceptance of her own death stemmed from what I could describe as crip knowledge.

Through visual metaphors, Markiewicz's work spoke to the transience of life and the fragility of human existence, and showed how much we could all learn from crip experiences related to mortality and grief. Her performance was a tribute to deep crip friendship and the importance of community.



Fig. 3. Nadia Markiewicz dressed as a red rose in her act entitled "Ballad of the Withering Rose" in *The Freak Show*. Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2024. Photo by Dominika Jaruga. Copyright by Madants sp. z o.o.

AGAINST CRIP LONELINESS

The neoliberal narratives of happiness and loneliness deeply affect queer and disabled subjects. This mostly concerns "a neoliberal fantasy of perfection" that assumes a "capable, able-bodied" individual to be "happy, optimistic, and always concentrated on future economic and social success" (Carroll 243). Analogously addressing the structural pressures of success and positivity in a heteronormative society, Halberstam argues in favor of failure, which "provides the opportunity to use these negative a ects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3). Carroll suggests that "the directives and regulations that determine health and happiness are driven and supported by scientific ideologies and a social body that punishes queer subjects for being lonely" (305). Such a perspective assumes that happy, healthy people do not feel lonely. Consequently, "[t]he loneliness label is used to isolate and mark the queer subject as questionable" (306). Carroll, therefore, problematizes the structural perception of relationships in Western society.

A similar idea can be found in Sara Ahmed's concept of the "unhappy queer," who is "judged to be unhappy" (*The Promise of Happiness* 93).

However, Ahmed proposes that "unhappiness offers a queer kinship" in which subjects share "the unhappy consequences of being the cause of social and familial unhappiness" (101–02). The same concerns disabled individuals. Feminist, queer, and disability theorist Alison Kafer discusses the structural isolation of disabled people and proposes that a "relational model of disability is intended to speak to this reality" (8) "as a potential site for collective reimagining" (9). In Kafer's model, disability is not categorized as an essential characteristic, but rather as a trait of individuals who are defined by society as such. Thus, many disability scholars, like Piepzna-Samarasinha, suggest that mutual aid and care webs could be a queer/crip strategy for combating isolation under ableist capitalism (41).

In light of these theories, I have identified two elements of *The Freak Show* that combat the loneliness and isolation experienced by disabled and queer individuals. Firstly, I believe it is important to consider the impact that the visibility of the artists' non-normative bodies had on disabled audience members. Whether this was successful is a matter of speculation at this point, since this study does not analyze audience responses; however, we can argue that this was the effect the artists intended to evoke in the audience. As Pawlak states, "The mere presence in public space of bodies of a different shape, fitness, non-normative appearance allows people similar to 'us' to have the spontaneous thought—'I'm like that too, I'm not the only one in the world (although maybe I often feel that way).'" Kotowski also explains: "The deaf community is strong and really needs . . . a place where they can meet and use their sign language. Examples include events or festivals organized for deaf people, and similar initiatives." Wąsik adds:

> I was born with a congenital syndrome (Treacher Collins syndrome) and when I was growing up, I didn't know many people with this syndrome and certainly didn't know people like me who made art, were on stage, were visible. I recently experienced how difficult, but also important, visibility is. . . . To see people who are different, non-normative, who show other possibilities, ways of self-realization. So if my presence in the arts, or just visibility, helps me come out of the shadows, then by all means it's worth it.

In a similar fashion, Markiewicz notes:

> I know that visibility does not always empower. But I do know that, growing up, if I had seen more people with a body like mine, it would have felt less lonely. In my practice, I am not hopeful for any type of direct action, but I am aware that once an image is produced, it has the ability to circulate. Maybe someone will see it and grow more accustomed to the fact that unusual bodies are among us. And maybe someone with an unusual body will feel less shame. (qtd. in Tomková 117)

The artists created an intimate atmosphere by sharing their experiences of disability on stage through visual metaphors. Their performances and the stories they shared raised important visibility issues and could empower audience members who identified as disabled.

Secondly, creating *The Freak Show* fostered friendships, intimacy, and a sense of belonging among the performers with "extraordinary" bodies. This could be compared to what Mia Mingus describes as "access intimacy," the "feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs." According to Mingus,

> Access intimacy is also the intimacy I feel with many other disabled and sick people who have an automatic understanding of access needs out of our shared similar lived experience of the many different ways ableism manifests in our lives. Together, we share a kind of access intimacy that is ground-level, with no need for explanations.

Markiewicz describes her experience with *The Freak Show* in a similar way:

> Disability is a very isolating experience. I never had much opportunity to interact with people with similar bodies to mine. Filip was the first person I met in real life that resembled me. The experiences we share are quite particular and were grounds for bonding and understanding, and this applies to all members of the group in one way or another. Our work sessions would turn into the exchange of ridiculous interactions with doctors. I felt a great sense of comfort in asking for assistance when I needed it.

In this way, the artists who created *The Freak Show* cultivated a sense of friendship and community, combatting the loneliness and isolation experienced by disabled and queer individuals.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the performance, with the audience's consent, Pawlak named the auditorium after Stefan Bibrowski. By returning to the site of the original circus and taking over the space within the state-funded contemporary art institution, *The Freak Show* claimed a place in the history of Polish performance art for crip artistic practices. Not only did the artists reappropriate the freak show as a genre, but they also countered the loneliness and isolation experienced by queer and disabled people. Firstly, they achieved this by making non-normative bodies visible within an art institution. This was an important step towards empowering non-normative artists and audience members. Secondly, the entire process

of creating the performance fostered friendships and "access intimacy" among the artists who created the show. *The Freak Show* combated their loneliness and created a "sense of crip space, a communal belonging, a deep *rightness*" (s. e. smith qtd. in Kafai 179) for queer and disabled presence and experiences, which comes from not having to justify one's existence. By collaborating on the project, the Polish artists developed a space where they could experience comfort, communal support, care, and recognition, inviting the audience to join them and share these feelings.

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