

From the Cripple-Power-Festival to Independence Days: Disability Culture in Germany

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Abstract: The German cripple-power-festival is an initiative which promotes disability culture in Germany. The fourth festival of this kind took place in September 2003 as a part of the European Year of Disabled People. Ottmar Miles-Paul, a free-lance journalist based in Kassel, Germany provides insight about this initiative and the changes disability culture is making in the area of general disability politics in Germany.

Keywords: Cripple-Power-Festival, Germany, disability culture

When Christian Judith presented his idea of a Cripple-Power-festival the first time in the mid 1990s many people didn't believe that it could ever happen. They doubted he would be able to organize and finance such an event in Germany.

Today the German disability rights movement has already seen four such events. Christian Judith, who uses a tricycle to move around because of his bodily short stature, formed the non-profit organization "roll over" which organized these festivals and promotes a new disability culture in Germany by organizing cultural events with disabled people.

The Roots of the Cripple-Power-Festivals

Christian Judith's dream of a Cripple-Power-festival has two roots. First, it is based on a phase of the history of the German disability rights movement. A part of this movement called itself in the 1980s for quite a while the cripple movement in order to provoke society with the term many people still used about disabled people and to show the real status disabled people were facing around that time in Germany. This was especially the case around the UN Year of Disabled People in 1981 when many celebrations took place in Germany. The cripple movement criticized the so-called helpers and politicians they believed used this year mainly to celebrate themselves, while nothing really changed.

Disabled people were basically the focus of pity and exclusion in special schools, institutions and sheltered workshops, which were widely seen as the best solution to "help those disabled people". In this situation the cripple movement shocked many people in Germany with demonstrations and provocative actions against the celebrations of the UN-Year. The movement made mainstream news headlines when an activist hit the German president with a cane on his leg to prove that disabled people were not taken seriously in 1980s Germany. He never faced any criminal charges.

This was a time of a new self-awareness, self-confidence and pride of disabled people and helped to create their own culture and pride. Many different cripple groups around the country were formed around that time. They provided a space where disabled people for the first time had a chance to share their experiences of being different. They discussed discrimination and developed a sense of having their own culture without non-disabled people telling them what to do or what to think. The second root of these festivals was based in the growing desire of the

disability rights movement in Germany to create and support their own culture around disability with a spirit of disability pride and to showcase more disabled artists.

Even though Germany has some disabled people who made it into the mainstream of musical performance, the theatres or the movies, Germany still lacked a culture of disability pride. Therefore the cripple-power-festivals were also designed to bring not only disabled people on the stage to perform, but also to support the culture of being different and of disability pride.

The idea of these festivals was a good addition to other cultural events with disabled artists, which in Germany are traditionally organized by different disability related organizations, like exhibitions by organizations for people with mental disabilities or performances for deaf organizations.

The cripple-power festivals provided a cross-disability approach and a main focus to bring people with different disabilities together in a common spirit of empowerment.

Get together

The idea of the Cripple-Power-Festivals was to combine disability culture, with the inclusion of well-known non-disabled artists, to draw non-disabled people, who never would show up at a festival which included only disabled artists. Therefore discussions and panels around issues like bio-ethical questions, equal rights legislation and accessibility were also included in the festivals, as well as kids programs and basketball courts, where non-disabled people could use a wheelchair, and play together with disabled people.

This focus towards including the non-disabled public was also a question of survival. The idea of disability culture is still not grounded enough under disabled people themselves in Germany to run such a business, with the main focus on disabled participants at such festivals. Even though there was always quite a crowd of people with different disabilities, the majority were always non-disabled festival visitors who wanted to see the better-known bands. While the first festivals drew between 2,000 to 5,000 participants, the Independence Days festival from 2003 drew 10,000 people.

The Artists

Mat Fraser, from Great Britain, with his provocative lyrics and powerful beats was certainly a must during this year's Festival because he is already well known from former festivals in Germany. He symbolizes what's still missing in Germany— good songs around issues which are important to disabled people themselves. Heart 'n Soul impressed the festival visitors also with their music and performance. Klaus Kreuzeder from Germany is probably one of the most well known musicians who uses a wheelchair. He plays saxophone like hell and impresses every time with his energy and long breath. Many other disabled artists like BKey – a woman with a great voice who uses a wheelchair – or Mike Al Becker, who rocks, were present at the last festival.

Marla Glenn was probably the most well known non-disabled artist. While she did a photo-shooting for the posters before the Festival with Josef Stroebel – a leader from the German People First movement – she asked him to join her on the stage and tell people why the People First Movement is so important. As one can imagine Marla Glenn has now a growing fan club in the German People First Movement.

The European Year of Disabled People Provides New Opportunities

The first three festivals took place in Kassel, which is a city with about 200,000 inhabitants quite in the middle of Germany, and is known as a main center of the disability rights movement in Germany. The fourth festival took place from 12th-14th September 2003 in Muelheim, which is in the west of Germany.

The last festival, which was called “Independence Days 2003” was a part of the official events for the European Year of Disabled People 2003 and took place with support and close cooperation from the German Ministry for Health and Social Security.

The history of the funding of these festivals are a good mirror for the development of the German Disability rights movement as well. While the first and smallest festival was organized and funded quite independently by common sponsors, the second Cripple-Power-Festival was already supported by a main welfare organization for disabled people who started to change their image and funding strategies around that time. In March 2000 this big welfare organization, which runs a lottery, changed its name from “Action Sorrow-kids” to “Action human” and is also funding cultural projects of disabled people because of the pressure of the disability rights movement.

The close cooperation with the federal Ministry for Health and Social Affairs during the last festival symbolizes also that the former cripple movement has moved from the opposition to the mainstream and that at least the outer face of disability politics in Germany has changed. The head of the office for the European Year of Disabled People in Germany in the Ministry for Health and Social Security for example is now Horst Frehe, a wheelchair user who was a leader of the protests against the activities of the government around the UN Year of Disabled People in 1981. He stormed and occupied the stage, for example, with others, to prevent the German President from speaking at the main event more than 20 years ago. In 2003 he put a big priority on funding the Independence Days festival and on supporting disability culture and disability studies.

Despite the criticism of the disability rights movement during the European Year of Disabled People that politically nothing really has changed, it definitely provided a good platform for a changing perspective on disability culture. Many events featured disabled artists who played a main role with performances and exhibitions that introduced new perspectives from the view of disabled people.

Summer University Disability Studies

The first summer University on Disability Studies, which was organized by the Research and Training Institute on Self-Determined Living, took place at the University of Bremen for two weeks in July 2003. It was a fantastic forum for disability culture. A wide program with workshops for creative writing, contact dancing, disability culture, theatre performances, exhibitions, presentations of movies with disabled people and big parties with disabled musicians with different disabilities impressed not only the over 10,000 participants, but also gave the city of Bremen in general for two weeks a new spirit of disability culture.

What some people called “the main event of the last decade” gave the German disability rights movement a new push because during that event one could experience the spirit of empowerment and a culture with the right to be different very strongly. Especially a conference

on the cultural perspectives of disability studies this summer showed universities how wide the field for research and expression in this area is and how neglected disabled people and their culture has been in the Germany of the past.

From a Culture of Disabled People to a Disability Culture

Even though Germany mainly still has a culture of disabled people who try to perform their art in the mainstream rather than a spirit of disability culture with all the expression of our differences and pride, the last years have shown t there is a good basis for a growing movement towards new approaches in this area.

The spirit of the events during the last years and especially during the Cripple-Power festivals and the European Year of Disabled People provide a good basis for further empowerment in this area and for a powerful disability culture in Germany.

Especially because of its history of segregation, discrimination, sterilization and the mass-killing of disabled people during the Nazi-time Germany probably needs such a culture more desperately than many other countries in order to move on towards a culture of self-determination and equal rights of disabled people.

More Information on the Internet

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Information around the Independence Days Festival www.independence-days.de and www.roll-over-ev.org.

Information about the summer university on disability studies www.sommeruni2003.de.

OTTMAR MILES-PAUL is 39 years old, visually impaired and works as a free-lance journalist in Kassel, Germany. He has a Master's in Social Work from the University of Kassel and spent 1989/90, one and a half years, in Berkeley, California for his studies, where he caught the spirit of equal rights and self-determination of disabled people. In the 1990s he served for many years as director of the German Council of Centers for Self-Determined Living and fought together with many others successfully for the first anti-discrimination law in Germany. Currently he coordinates a campaign for another equal rights law in Germany and is the president of a main online-disability magazine in the German speaking area with daily news around issues concerning disabled people under www.kobinet-nachrichten.org.

