

Spilling The Beans

Telling the truth about mental health discrimination,
exploitation and gaslighting in the arts

In 2018 I was a supported artist with an NPO and part of their Critical Friends Group. Mental health access and inclusion was never on the agenda (unless I put it there) which I challenged when they called a meeting to discuss their Equality Action Plan. I received 2 responses: one from another group member saying she didn't consider mental health to be an equality issue; the other from the CEO saying we'd talked about mental health before and including a list of everything the organisation had ever done for me (I read this as her demonstrating how inclusive they were, suggesting I should be grateful and maybe that I should shut up). Turns out they weren't really interested in critical friends - just weird, arse-licky, transactional tick-box relationships. I resigned from the group. 15 people blanked my resignation email. No-one thanked me for my volunteered time.

Soon after, I had a residency booked in their space to work on a show about my lived experience of childhood sexual abuse - work I needed to feel very safe to do. As the residency approached, I felt increasingly anxious. My producer called the CEO and lead producer to ask if we could meet to talk things through - they agreed but didn't respond to our date suggestions. I rearranged the residency costing me £700 of a small funding pot I had to make the show. Additionally, therapy to process the anxiety caused by the interaction cost £300.

The following year I was on a development scheme led by the NPO and my anxiety resurfaced as a weekend event approached. My producer asked again for a meeting that never happened. I've no idea why I went on the weekend but I spent a lot of it in tears - its hard to explain to someone who hasn't faced a lifetime of discrimination what it feels like to be ignored because you have raised an issue, the sheer rage of seeing the bullshit tagline about inclusivity on their conference banner, the humiliation of feeling emotional in a space that is not safe - where you are stigmatised as being "difficult" or "irrational" read "mental" and "unprofessional". Over the weekend 2 other artists on the scheme approached me angry and upset at their own experiences of discrimination at the hands of the organisation. The icing on the cake was when their entire staff left the room during an active listening exercise saying they'd "done it before". It would be funny if it hadn't cost me another £300 in therapy, sleepless nights, a missed opportunity to connect with peers on a level playing field and my sense of dignity.

I no longer work with that organisation - I just won't put myself in that position anymore. Objectively I can see they are nice people doing good work. It's a constant

mystery to me how many nice, progressive people in the arts find it hard to listen, be humble, say sorry and make changes. If I've learned one thing working in disability arts contexts for the last 20 years, it's that it's impossible to get it right all the time for everyone. Disabled people are not a homogenous mass who all agree on what equality looks like - beyond some basics, access is very individual - accessibility and inclusion are all about relationship, listening and responding. What happened in this case wasn't initially that bad but it became terrible because no-one was prepared to listen - if they had it could have been sorted in 20 minutes.

I've never spoken out about it before and never outed them because naming and shaming just isn't my bag - noone here is bad - just unaware of the impact of their actions. In any case it's systemic. This example highlights the difficulty of challenging a whole organisation as an individual artist - even one with producer and access support. Organisations often don't understand the power they hold - to support you or not, to employ you or not, to book your work or not, to champion your art or not..... The money, resources, buildings, networks, job security and organisational structure they possess give them power. This power imbalance is, in itself, incredibly triggering to anyone who has been raised with abuse, inequality and discrimination. In order to call yourself an inclusive organisation, you must be willing to be conscious of your power, to learn and reflect on feedback about how your approach is replicating oppressive cultural structures and to make a commitment to change. If an artist comes to you with a problem, they will have overcome significant barriers to do that. That means the issue is important enough to warrant that effort and deserves to be heard. What was it they said in the active listening training again?

Experiences of mental health discrimination, exploitation and gaslighting are alarmingly commonplace. Another NPO chief exec questioned whether it was safe to allow adults with mental health needs to mix with other adults on a project and could not see this as discriminatory. Artists with mental health needs (probably all marginalised artists) are asked constantly to volunteer to speak at events, sit on panels and committees as if we should be grateful to be included (sometimes this is actually stated) which devalues our professionalism and expertise. If we get angry we get tone-policed. If we get emotional we are stereotyped and made to feel deficient.

There's some interesting conversations in the Freelance Taskforce about how we reduce the burden on individuals to navigate these experiences alone with all the emotional labour, financial costs and potential career disruptions that come with that? More coming soon. It amazes me that funders don't have a way of monitoring this as funding criteria increasingly emphasise diversity? Shifting a whole arts ecology towards equality is not a numbers game but a subtly nuanced journey that

requires time, kindness, honest communication and a mitigation of risk for artists who feel able to call out their experiences of discrimination.

If you're a freelance artist with mental health needs who has experienced discrimination, exploitation or gaslighting please do get in touch on vivgordonco@gmail.com. I'm collecting stories to call this out and bring it into the light. I'm also interested in ideas for new approaches and hearing stories of good practice that can be shared.

These are your options:

1. Share your experiences of discrimination, exploitation and gaslighting with me in writing, video, voicenote, social media post or any other way that feels good to you.
2. Let me know you'd like to chat about your experiences - I will have limited time to do 1-2-1s so apologies in advance if I run out of time.

Please get in touch if you need other options to make this conversation accessible to you. All information will be treated as confidential. Our stories will be collated and used to advocate for freelancers.