

# The Aesthetics of Austerity: A conversation with Liz Crow

Liz Crow and Keren Zaiontz

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*Image 1: Anti-Atos armband: Atos Kills (2012). Photo: Molly Crow/Roaring Girl Productions.*

Keren Zaiontz: Let's start with the moment of the London Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012. You visited the Olympic Park in east London wearing a homemade anti-Atos armband and then circulated an image of yourself wearing the armband online. Atos was the French IT firm initially contracted by the Tory-led coalition government (to the tune of £112.4m) to slash disability benefits that included claimants diagnosed with terminal illnesses. Atos's morally suspect assessments and tribunals have resulted in serious distress and even death for thousands of claimants in the UK. Your simple gesture of (covert) protest in the Park was particularly important given that Atos was an official sponsor of the Paralympic Games.

Liz Crow: The armband was the product of my overlapping personal and political roles. I'm an artist-activist that works in public spaces. I do that work (and was also present in the Park) as a visibly disabled person, and an ill person, and as somebody receiving benefits. Knowing that the Games were probably a once-in-a-lifetime experience, I wanted to take my daughter. I booked the tickets with all

the qualms connected to the branding of the Games, but only then did the Atos involvement come to light. I had this push and pull between honouring the commitment to my child, and honouring myself, and my commitment to activism. I think there was a kind of unspoken assumption that anybody who went to the Games enjoyed themselves, and cheered on the athletes, agreed wholeheartedly with what was going on. There weren't many ways to both join in and object. In the end, I realized one way to square my ambivalence was to challenge Atos within the Park. That's how I came to the idea of the armband as a political statement, but also to resolving the ethics of my being at a Games sponsored by Atos. I confess, I didn't wear it the whole time. I was juggling the fact that it wasn't just me there. I was with my child and I had to respect what she could cope with too. But it enabled me to know that I had made some kind of statement, that I had taken some kind of opposition to what was happening. What I did in the Park was low-key, but my daughter's photograph captured the armband with the Olympic stadium in the background. Once posted online, the action came into its own, helping to subvert the tide of pro-Paralympic rhetoric within and beyond the Olympic Park.

KZ: The armband proved to be one of many actions in which you attempted to intervene in powerful images circulating in the print and online media that cast people with disabilities as either "scroungers" or "superhumans."

LC: At the time, what I was seeing was a collision of different images and ideas in the press. While the Paralympic Games network Channel 4 promoted the athletes as "superhumans" on billboards and other advertisements, other disabled people were being publicly castigated as scroungers and skivers. If we were, by definition, the opposite of the high-performance Para "superhuman," then that made us subhuman. Disabled people receiving state support were experiencing an onslaught of propaganda against them. The superhumans campaign exaggerated that division because it showed claimants, by contrast, to be even more lacking, even more of a drain on society. An incredible pressure on an already vulnerable group now became greater, and the response from the public, from insults to hate crimes, escalated as a result. I was getting accosted in the streets by people who didn't like the fact that I had a motor on my chair; who perceived me as being lazy in comparison to the athletes, telling me I should take a leaf out of their book. I think the propaganda made me and other people very much public property, being accosted in the street, inviting this open judgment. I'm talking about the athletes and people receiving assistance as two separate groups but there is, of course, a big overlap between the two. The majority of Para athletes also receive some sort of benefit, but that was written out of the narrative. There were these falsely separated communities: the good guys and the unspeakable other. The people needing some form of social support were automatically stamped as failures, whereas the other group, the superhumans, were also being set up to fail because they simply couldn't meet those kinds of pedestal criteria. They are human beings too, not überhumans. The moment they were out of their Paralympic uniforms, and returned to being ordinary disabled people, they too were subject to the same stuff as all other disabled people. When going down the street, they were just as much at risk of receiving insult or assault. Pitting the two groups against each other ultimately made it easier for others to avoid confronting the social structures, the top-down austerity measures, the propaganda coming from government and press, and the impact of all of those factors on the lives of disabled people.

KZ: Your description of "walking and rolling while disabled" shows just how little latitude there is for people with disabilities, but also how the Olympic movement itself determines who counts as "normal" and "productive."

LC: If you look at how the UK benefits system is structured—particularly the disability benefits

system—the model of the disabled person is in total accord with the model of the Paralympian. The classic Paralympian has a static, predictable, measureable impairment. Whilst not every athlete does, that is the dominant image, and the majority of Para athletes lean towards that type of impairment. That image or concept of impairment is built into the benefits system, but the majority of people who need the support of disability benefits, particularly those who need it to access their work and do their jobs, do not have that kind of impairment. By definition, when they— when we—go through an assessment process built upon that false model, we fall through the gaps. So while the very political superhuman/subhuman spectacle was going on during the Games, I was trying to capture it in my work, because I too have the kind of impairment that doesn't fit. I too was going through the appeals process, sitting in front of the judge, etcetera, to be able to manage my everyday life. The result of the mismatch is that the people who need the support most are those most likely to fall through the gaps—to the extremes of people dying because they aren't getting the support they very clearly need if somebody just pauses to look.

KZ: What is the status of your own benefits since all of these legislative changes?

LC: The tribunal found in my favour—until the next time. The problem is that I never ever know. The brown envelope can come... The post doesn't get delivered on Sunday, so Sunday is a good day. I've really noticed my heart rate goes up when the post thuds on the mat, as it has done for the past five years. That's a small consequence, but I think for me, for most of us, the really big changes are still lying in wait. The end of the Disability Living Allowance (DLA), which contributes to the considerable costs associated with living as a disabled person, and the switch to the PIP [Personal Independence Payments], is frightening. Not just because of the money it represents, but because it is a "gateway" benefit without which I cannot access crucial support. For me, DLA is a gateway to an accessible vehicle and, critically, it's a gateway to my personal assistance. I think the impact of benefits cuts has been seriously material for a lot of people, but there's another more hidden cost: the loss of security. The impact on people's health, their wellbeing, has been massive. Those people who have resorted to suicide have not necessarily done so because of huge material changes but because they do not have the personal resources to manage the scale of bureaucracy and distress associated with those changes.

KZ: The Olympic movement insists that legacy is its greatest impact upon a host city and nation. However, one of the unspoken legacies you are describing is a collective fear of how to keep body and soul together in the face of a precarious future.

LC: Five years on, into the sixth, the cuts and propaganda have been unrelenting. The battle against austerity and its associated fears becomes harder and harder to sustain. A lot of activists, we go through cycles, there's burnout but, despite that, activism can be an incredible survival strategy for the individual in the midst of an onslaught. Not that I think people go into it in order to assist their own situation; it's more like a side effect of doing the work.



*Image 2: Bedding Out (2012-2013), Crow in conversation with participants. Photo: Trish Wheatley/Roaring Girl Productions.*

KZ: In the months following the Games you staged a durational work, *Bedding Out* (2012-2013), in art spaces across the UK and US. In many ways *Bedding Out* is evocative of a history of bed actions from Yoko Ono and John Lennon's 1969 "bed-in" to Tracey Emin's iconic *My Bed* (1998). Your own piece is at once a bed-in for political action and an art object that challenges where we can lie still and with whom. Can you describe the nature of this durational piece and why it was important for you to lie down in public for up to 48 hours at time?

LC: I knew I needed to do something to counter the image of the skiver, so I turned to my own life. I spend a lot of time lying down, or in my bed, in order to manage the activities that I do, including the work I do from my bed. It's a very central part of how I manage my life. But because I concealed it so thoroughly, there were people who had known me for as much as ten years who had no idea I did that, who didn't even know that I'm ill. In *Bedding Out*, I took a bed into a gallery for three consecutive days, in blocks of time, and then, in a subsequent performance, for 48 consecutive hours. The idea was to just live out a version of my bed life, in a public space, so that people could recognize how some people live. There are significant consequences to keeping that private side so hidden. To witness only my public image potentially contradicts what I might state about my impairment as a whole, and that makes me very vulnerable to the propaganda narrative of claimants shirking the system. In making that side of my life visible, I wasn't saying that as disabled people we should be obliged to demonstrate impairment, but that others should not presume they know more than is visible. Equally, I realized that if I conceal very significant parts of my own life, then people who actually know me well, and would want to be supportive, can't because they don't have enough information. So that was my starting point, creating a counter image that in turn created a platform for conversation about lives concealed behind closed doors.



KZ: The documentation of Bedding Out shows you sitting with small groups of people, sharing stories, and speaking on particular topics.

LC: The people who got the piece most thoroughly were those who slowed down to my pace and just stayed observing for a while. People caught up in the frenzy of the Spill Festival in Ipswich stuck their head around the door, saw this woman in a bed, and moved on. It's a slow durational existence. In Bedding Out, I had intermittent conversations. Members of the public would come in and be seated around the bed. I would introduce them to my bed-life, give this same background we've discussed, and open up the conversation. The conversations were incredibly wide-ranging, across topics such as benefits, equalities, art, activism, broader austerity conversations, and questions that extended to what kind of society do we want to be? What do we do to move towards that? How do we do it? I don't think the profundity or depth of these exchanges was accidental. There was something about my being in the bed over an extended time, the kind of integrity that brought and the openness of it, that enabled discussions to go incredibly deep very, very quickly. I don't think I could have achieved it outside that performance context.



*Image 3: Bedding Out (2012-2013), sign language interpreter perched on bed. Photo: Matthew Fessey/Roaring Girl Productions.*

KZ: Who was drawn to the bedside chats?

LC: There was an incredible range of people drawn to them. In some cases, participants had themselves experienced forms of discrimination. Different identity groups felt connections with me as a disabled person, and saw connections with each other across the bed. One session included a woman wearing a hijab, a gay man, and me, and it was profound to map our experiences across each

other's. I think, as a disabled person, other political groups and identity groups don't necessarily see themselves as connected to disabled people. But, there were others who were witnessing that and I could see them absorbing it, and changing their ideas too.

KZ: Increasingly, social media is a place where intersectional political priorities can thrive. Can you describe how this politic was carried forward in the social media linked to Bedding Out?

LC: During the Spill Festival, when I would return to my accommodation each night, there would be e-mails waiting for me, and a message from somebody saying "I really love what you're doing, you're representing my life, I just wish I could be there to see it." So the next time I performed the work, I integrated Twitter and held Twitter-only conversations. We got an incredible following, live streaming to 10,000 people in 50 countries. The conversations were extraordinary. People who were incredibly isolated were making connections with other people. People whose understanding of what was happening to them as individualized and medical-model based were grasping the larger social-political context shaping their lives. People who were very new to the issues were starting to be introduced to them. People who hadn't understood what was going on in benefits changes or austerity measures were starting to learn about what was happening. We were fielding questions on all these different fronts, but also, once I'd analyzed the Twitter feed, I realized that we seeded conversations that went off in their own directions. I found that very exciting, that it just spun off.

KZ: In addition to the conversations on social media, what I really appreciate about Bedding Out was the way it took us into disability time. That person you described earlier who popped her head in the door, running from one event to the next, during the Spill Festival obviously does not inhabit the same temporality as you.

LC: There is something incredibly pleasurable about the expressions "disability time" or "crip time." I suppose, as a disabled person, or anybody from a minority or a sidelined group, there's an awful lot of time spent accommodating other people's time or ways of being. It's really quite unusual if it happens the other way around. When somebody joins me at my pace for a project like this we both get something from it. There's something very respectful about the person who lingers and is prepared to spend time with me. Some of the Spill Festival organizers had concerns at what they saw as a very inactive work. My argument is that Bedding Out was deliberately inactive. I did nothing most of the time intentionally. But it was incredibly active when it came to meeting an audience. For them to understand it required them to be active, not me as the performer. And I think that's a really different focus from a lot of live art. The audience was categorically not in a spectator role if they wanted to understand the piece. They were the ones who had to work to come into disability time.

KZ: It seems particularly important to place that demand on the spectator in a heightened political context that constantly requires Deaf and disabled people to explain themselves in the formal space of tribunals and informal taunts on the streets.

LC: Ultimately, I wanted to show through Bedding Out that life's complicated. What appears to be a contradiction—"Oh she did that today, but then the next day she says she's too ill"—that's not a contradiction at all, that's just the ordinary complexity of life. One of the key themes is that everybody's lives are pretty complicated, and the lives of disabled people are made even more so, not only by the body, but by social structures and cultural assumptions. We allow for complexity in most people's lives, but when disabled people butt up against any kind of social and political structures, they're denied that right to be more complicated, and the consequences can be particularly severe.

KZ: You certainly enabled people in Bedding Out to work through that complexity in ways that do not always register as traditional activism but ultimately engage audiences as activists. I'm thinking specifically here of your 2015 mass-sculptural, durational performance, *Figures*.



*Image 4: Figures. The River Thames foreshore in central London was the primary site of making and dialogue in the Figures project. Photo: Claudio Ahlers/Roaring Girl Productions.*

LC: I think that a possible strength of my creative approach is that it enables people to come to activism sideways, to find themselves having conversations that were not their initial reason for approaching the work. My performances are seeding, trying to set something in motion. They are the trigger for conversations, and then the conversations become the site of primary activity. In *Figures*, I had conversations about austerity with people who would never have set out to have such a dialogue. I reached people I wouldn't have been able to reach with more orthodox forms of activism. I think the arts have a very significant role in the areas that traditional activism cannot readily reach.

KZ: Can you take us back to the site of the performance, the place where you dug up and sculpted 650 figures in central London?

LC: The performance process began with the digging of mud from the riverbank in my hometown. That took place without a particular audience because it was not a majorly peopled area. I had a number of volunteers involved in the digging, including people coming to it without a political perspective but who began to recognize themselves in conversations about austerity and discover a context for their own experiences. This resulted in some of the project team increasing their own confidence so that, in subsequent phases of the work, they were able to take part in and support austerity-related conversations with members of the public. During the making phase on the River

Thames foreshore, where I sculpted the figures over eleven consecutive days and nights, some members of the public saw me at multiple points of the work when the durational and endurance-based aspects were very much at the fore. I think a lot of people were as drawn by that as they were to the figures I was making, and the work intentionally became about the process far more than about the objects.



*Image 5: Crow sculpted 650 figures by hand over a period of eleven days. Photo: Claudio Ahlers/Roaring Girl Productions.*

KZ: You yourself became a kind of local figure that drew participants from every walk of life.

LC: The making sessions took place on the foreshore, so when the tide went out I went down there and sculpted figures for a three hour block before the tide came back in. Twelve and a half hours later, I would be back for the next low tide to make the next batch. One morning, there were three blokes on the foreshore who had spent the night sleeping there because they hadn't anywhere else to sleep. We had a really good conversation about how austerity was impacting their lives as well as just looking at the sunrise and starting out the day like that. Later the same day, I had a conversation with a guy who worked in the city—very, very smartly and expensively dressed. He talked to some of the team up on the walkway and insisted on coming down to talk to me, which he really wasn't dressed for, but he came and crouched next to me for half an hour and we just

chatted. He really had been oblivious to what was happening and part of me just thought, wow, how could you be? But in that half hour, he really listened and was incredibly thoughtful. What seed it's planted, I don't know. There's no way of knowing whether it will be tiny or whether other things will happen to help it grow, but the project reached very different people and it didn't only reach the people who had already worked out their position on cuts to social supports.

KZ: I'm struck by how this smartly dressed urbanite had to crouch down and approximate your physicality in order to be with you as you were making this work. The whole durational endeavor must have been very hard on your body.

LC: Yes. I'm still recovering. But I think he was really touched by it, actually. When I did disability equality training many years ago, there was a particular exercise I did, probably halfway through the first morning, that led people to separate disability from impairment. Previously, they had seen all of the barriers as being intrinsic to disabled people's bodies, then they would suddenly realize that the impairment was just one part of the person, and all this other structural stuff, this social construction—what we call "disability"—was something separate that they had the power to influence. I would look at people in that room and there would be a moment when they would get it



and, I kid you not, I would see the light change in people's eyes. Now, I don't know how you would begin to measure that, but it made a difference.

KZ: I've been doing a lot of thinking about when activism doesn't look like activism. When you're not holding a protest sign or asking people to sign a petition, but doing something that opens up the very possibility of what activism can be.

LC: If you came across me on the foreshore, this stranger (and strange person) making these clay figures, you wouldn't have known what the project was straightaway. Once you knew it was about austerity you wouldn't have instantly known what my position on austerity was, nor how politically informed it was. The public came to Figures on their terms. That was quite often difficult for me because I might be having a conversation that was much more softly liberal than my politics. If that was their starting point, however, then I had to join them there. It didn't mean that I let go of my positioning or my intent for the project. But it meant that I worked with them, rather than pushed them or told them what the right thinking was. In that way, my work is never quite satisfactory to either the live art or activist communities. It's about working with the people I'm trying to reach, supporting them to shift towards a different position, and that requires a really different way of working.

KZ: What you're attempting not only demands material, but psychic resources.

LC: At the end of our eleven-day run on the foreshore, a man who runs a flower shop near the OXO Tower by the river presented me with an orchid. He said, "At the beginning, I thought it was ridiculous. But I've watched you at all times of the day and night, keeping it going, listening to the stories." He was completely with us by the end of it. He was there in his world and was open just enough that even though he thought it was ridiculous at the start, he was prepared to give a little and, happily, his opinions changed. But he certainly didn't start out as open in his curiosity.

KZ: If the artist or artist-activist is the person who puts herself on the front lines in this kind of durational way in order to create an opening for someone else, like the shopkeeper or well-heeled urbanite, what does that mean for the sustainability of the artist?

LC: I am interested in the idea of creating what, at the moment, I'm calling dwelling space activism. It's a space that supports and nurtures change, it's a space where you practice the change you want to see. I think it's possible to aspire to create a dwelling space that models the values that you're working towards even as you work towards them. I think it has huge potential for the sustainability of activism and the change brought about through activist activity, but I've also realized, impairment-wise, that my own art-activism places me outside the dwelling space because of the extreme demands it makes upon me—a paradox I've yet to resolve.

KZ: Our cultural context doesn't take into account that some of us have limited reserves, and yet we have to keep going. As part of Figures, you also assembled a collection of stories. These stories function as an empirical accounting of what austerity does to people.

LC: The austerity narratives were about rooting the sculpted figures in real lives. Each figure could be symbolic of any number of people on the sharp end of austerity, but they could also be, you know, Freda, whose family home is under threat. I wanted people to be able to make both general and very specific connections—to recognize both the common humanity and individual life on the line. The

figures were everyperson, the stylized human form, so that viewers could relate it to themselves. There was no readable ethnicity or gender or impairment. They didn't have clear limbs, for example, so you couldn't look at a figure and know whether it did or did not have an impairment. I read a really interesting piece on how abstract you can make a figure before it ceases to be recognizable as the human form. I wanted to take the figures back and back and back in form to achieve that sense of everyperson. But through the 650 stories, I also wanted to be able to say these are real people, this really is happening, so each individual figure is rooted in a specific narrative taken from traceable stories in the public domain. I used information that was already out there, which ranged from newspapers to academic reports to blogs to parliamentary reports, so lots of different sources.



*Image 6: The River Thames foreshore in central London was the primary site of making and dialogue in the Figures project. Photo: Claudio Ahlers/Roaring Girl Productions.*

KZ: How did you go about collecting these accounts?

LC: I read through thousands of stories. In the final collection, there were 650, one for each of the 650 electoral constituencies of the UK parliament. I wanted to show that the impact of austerity is felt across the UK. You can point to specific places that have been hit particularly hard, but you won't find an area of the UK where austerity has not had an impact. I also wanted to demonstrate a range of impacts. The primary coverage in the public domain was probably of people on benefits, but I didn't want it to be only about benefits, partly because it isn't, and partly because for a lot of people that's quite distancing and risks being about "that other group" of people. So it was important to me to make sure that there were narratives of people worrying about their pensions or lost childcare or inflated tuitions fees, and so on. I also wanted to make sure that there was a clear representation of different

ethnicities, different ages, different impairments. It should be possible to take those stories to anybody and have them find some link to themselves. Even if they're not directly affected by austerity, they should be able to find some level of representation of their own experience. It's another way to open as many doors as possible for people to approach the subject.

KZ: I should say that you have continued to make all 650 narratives available as an ongoing open resource on your project site [roaring-girl.com/work/figures](http://roaring-girl.com/work/figures). Some of the accounts have also been reprinted as part of this issue of PUBLIC as foldout. What, in the end, did you do with the sculptures?

LC: After the election, when it was clear that the Conservative majority meant a continuation and escalation of austerity policies, the figures were ground to dust, then scattered out at sea as a symbolic distress call to the global community. When we toured the sculptures from London to Bristol, before returning them to the original foreshore for a memorial firing, we read the narratives aloud in a

six-hour performance. Initially, I was going to read them all. I knew that my voice would disappear relatively early on, and that would just become part of the process and the performance. But actually, after the making, I realized that there was no earthly way I could sustain it. And it seemed right to bring in members of the team because they had been through a lot to bring the project to that point. The project was an endurance exercise for me, that was clear, but actually it was an endurance exercise for everybody involved, because of the hours we kept, the emotional impact of it, and the physical work. So we read the narratives aloud, streaming them online to a global audience. That was the night before the 2015 UK general election, which gave the performance an extra urgency.

KZ: I can't help but see a large-scale project such as *Figures* as an anti-mega event that uses many of the same tools as the "big show" such as social media and spectacle, but with the aim to construct a politically efficacious "legacy" archive.

LC: I think it's an interesting way of talking about the work. I wanted to record the cumulative impact of austerity, not so much in statistical terms, but through flesh and blood. I think, as a legacy, my intent was that it become a kind of bearing witness, and maybe a galvanizing of other people's responses, or a re-energizing of their commitment or ability to keep responding. So, where *Figures* takes place through the clay and landscape, the narratives and the reading aloud, the performance and conversations, people can connect to its ideas through that range of media and activity. Bearing witness is an important part of the project. It's not the sole part, since it's also about triggering other people to take the ideas and the facts of what is happening, to act upon them and shift their opinions and other people's minds, and so on. But I also think that it has a role as a memorial—not to the past but events in progress. Typically, memorials relate to events that have already happened, looking back upon them (perhaps with regret), but they aren't often used as mechanisms to change outcomes. The figures and the narratives are a memorial— but of events already in progress and process. It is my attempt to arrest that process.