

# *Figures*

## An artist-activist response to austerity

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Published in Berghs, M, Chataika, T, El-Lahib, Y & Dube, K (2020) The Routledge Handbook of Disability Activism, 1st edition, Routledge, Chapter 4

### Abstract

Timed to coincide with the 2015 UK general election, *Figures* was a mass-sculptural durational performance by artist-activist Liz Crow that made visible the human cost of austerity and urged action against it. Using excavated raw river mud and taking up residence on the Thames foreshore every low tide for 11 consecutive days and nights, Crow sculpted 650 small human figures, each one representing an individual at the sharp end of austerity. In this illustrated essay, she describes the multi-phase performance and how it interacted with members of the public and the political context, and explores how its qualities (time, space, indirectness, symbolism, embodiment as a disabled person, etc) generate an activist work.

### Introduction

*Figures* was a mass-sculptural performance that set out to make visible the human cost of austerity and urge action against it.<sup>1</sup> Performed in early 2015, across the four months leading up to the United Kingdom (UK) general election, the work was an activist response to five years of austerity enacted by a Conservative-led coalition government in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis. With huge cuts and reforms to public services, the policy had taken - and continues to take - a heavy toll.<sup>2</sup> Initially applied to social security - where disabled people became the first to be hit – the austerity programme expanded to government departments and local authorities, with an onslaught on home care, hospital treatments, funding for student tuition, school building programmes, emergency services, libraries, public sector wages, road maintenance, and so on, through the whole spectrum of social infrastructure (O’Hara, 2014; Cooper and Whyte, 2017).

The effects of austerity have been experienced unequally across the population. The poorest and those in the most precarious social circumstances have borne the earliest impact and greatest hardship, worsening as cuts have accrued across multiple services, but austerity's reach has extended over time to a much broader public. Beyond material consequences, the cumulative impact of austerity has been marked through worsening inequality, deteriorating mental health, deaths of disabled benefits claimants, and increases in hate crime and nationalism (Burnett, 2017; Stuckler & Basu, 2013; O'Hara, 2014; McRuer, 2018). By the time of the 2015 election, with further austerity threatened by all the main political parties (Crawford et al, 2015), it was clear that the harm could only increase and, alongside other activists, it had become imperative to make it a very public election issue.

It was out of this that the *Figures* project was born. This chapter describes the project and how it performs as a work of activism. Extending beyond the representation of disabled people alone to examine the sweep of austerity across the UK, disabled people were nonetheless disproportionately highly represented because of the excessive injury undergone by that community. Through the work, I set out to lay bare the stark human cost of austerity, in order to create a point of entry, for a range of audiences, to the complex structures and injustices behind it.<sup>3</sup> My intention was to communicate viscerally its impact upon ordinary people, beginning with a simple avowal that any policy causing such hardship is wrong and needs to be rejected. The audience responses that ensued gave a starting point for dialogue, encouraging complex questioning and moving members of the public towards a search for solutions.

### **The *Figures* project**

Emerging from thirty years in activism, and a shift into creative work, and intertwining with my own experience of austerity as a disabled person, *Figures* was the third in a series of performance works I undertook to protest austerity.<sup>4</sup> I took up residence on the Thames foreshore over a period of 11 consecutive days and nights, working with mud dug from my home river, the Avon, to sculpt 650 small human figures, each one representing an individual at the sharp end of austerity.

At every low tide, twice daily and in all weathers, I sculpted the figures. As the incoming tide encroached, the newly-shaped figures were moved to a nearby exhibition space, so that returning members of the public could watch them amass as the days progressed.



*Figure 4.1 Making sessions took place at low tide on the Thames foreshore.*

*Credit: Matthew Fessey/ Roaring Girl Productions*

Though shaped in the same form, each figure differed in its detail, representing both collective humanity and the individual. Their number echoed the 650 electoral constituencies in the UK throughout which the effects of austerity could be found, as well as the number of Members of Parliament whose policy decisions determine the future of austerity and the opportunities of those they are elected to represent.



*Figure 4.2 Each of the 650 figures represented an individual at the sharp end of austerity.*  
*Credit: Claudio Ahlers/Roaring Girl Productions*

Every figure was paired with a short narrative of a person at the sharp end of austerity, written to convey both the human cost and the humanity of those it harms. Collated and edited from press and parliamentary reports, research, and policy and campaign materials in the field of social justice, each time a new figure was made, a story was released via social media and displayed in the exhibition space. Narratives were drawn from all electoral constituencies, demonstrating the far-reaching impact of austerity, and represented a wide spectrum of themes, across benefits reform, local authority spending, homelessness, malnutrition, underemployment, NHS budget restrictions, and so on. Single narratives depicted the impact of austerity upon individuals in a range of circumstances, whilst the combined weight demonstrates its collective and cumulative impact. My intention was that the symbolism of the sculpted figures would create a visceral connection with audiences, and a gateway to the harsh reality and real-life stories of austerity.



*Figure 4.3 The figures amassing during a making session.*

*Credit: Claudio Ahlers/Roaring Girl Productions*

The siting of *Figures* on the south shore of the Thames placed the performance in geographic opposition to the UK's primary institutions of austerity: Parliament, the old Fleet Street of journalism, the legal district, and the financial centre of Canary Wharf. By locating the work below the iconic Oxo Tower, an everyday space of both gentrification and rough sleeping, rooted community and transient populations, it was able to reach a diverse audience: local residents and workers who encountered the work daily, families on the Easter school break, tourists and international travellers who shared experiences of austerity from home, people insulated from austerity, and those who had slept the previous night on the foreshore for a lack of shelter. In its encounters with audiences, the work enlarged beyond exposing the human cost of austerity, to a quiet sustaining of some of those at the sharpest end.

Curiosity was key to drawing audiences in, a 'sideways approach' that prompted participation from people who would not intentionally approach a project on austerity. Volunteer stewards and members of the project team supported the conversations that

ensued and, as my presence on the foreshore became more established, increasing numbers of people came down from the raised riverwalk to watch at close hand and talk to me. Social media amplified the reach of the performance and accompanying conversations and, as word of the performance spread, some people visited the foreshore specifically to experience the work.

The project's position on austerity was evidently oppositional; conversations, however, were deliberately open-ended, beginning from the experience and knowledge of the participating public in order to encourage involvement and keep it relevant. An exchange might begin with questions about sculpting or the tides, but then extend to the real people represented by the figures, to shared accounts of the impact of austerity on friends, neighbours, strangers and themselves, and on to the deeper political questions raised by the work: the architecture of austerity; the values we want to underpin our society and to live by; and the roles we might each have in bringing that about. In contextualising the stories of individuals, *Figures* became a representation of human loss and societal failings, a naming of the collective work we need to do to.



*Figure 4.4 Drawing members of the public into conversation.*

*Credit: Matthew Fessey/ Roaring Girl Productions*

Once the completed figures were dried, they were toured *en masse*, in the week before the election, in a mobile exhibition that stopped at cities from London to Bristol, in order to continue the conversations that began on the foreshore. Our first scheduled visit was to a London borough ranked high on the economic deprivation index, and low for voter turnout. Council officials cancelled our site booking at short notice, citing ‘election purdah’, while another local authority barred us on grounds that our tour vehicle was not ‘attractive’ enough for their town centre. We turned the tour guerrilla, joining the international labour movement rally in Trafalgar Square in celebration of May Day and parking up outside Prime Minister David Cameron’s constituency office.

Reaching Bristol on the eve of the election, the figures were returned to water’s edge and built into a bonfire. As the figures fired, the narratives of austerity were read aloud by the project team, broadcast via livestream in a six-hour performance, until the returning tide doused the flames. The figures, fired, burned and broken, were reclaimed, gathered and ground down to dust.

The final phase of the performance took place after the election, timed to coincide with the State Opening of Parliament. Despite the years of communities alerting population and government to the impact of austerity, the election had brought another downturn in the political landscape. A Conservative majority government was returned, with a pledge to extend and amplify the austerity programme, and it was clear that we could not be heard at home. Following an entreaty to the UN by disabled activists to investigate the cumulative impact of the UK’s austerity programme<sup>5</sup>, I sailed out into the Bristol Channel, scattering the remains of the figures into open waters as a symbolic distress call to the global community.

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<sup>1</sup> Full documentation of the project (stills, video, press coverage, etc) and legacy materials can be found on <http://www.roaring-girl.com/work/figures/> (Accessed on 8 August 2018). *Figures* was funded by Arts Council England and National Lottery Awards for All.

<sup>2</sup> The full impact of the austerity programme is projected to unfold for many years after its official end (Clark, 2014; Cooper and Whyte 2017).

<sup>3</sup> The reasons behind austerity are enormously complex - a tale of global banking systems gone wrong, public finances being used to bail them out, with debts being repaid via cuts to public services. The result is that ordinary people are tasked with paying for the banking crisis, through an onslaught on public services and personal hardship, whilst the causal structures go unchanged. Whilst presented as a necessary 'commonsense' solution to the deficit, there is increasing consensus that austerity does more harm than good (Ostry, Lougani and Furceri, 2016; McRuer, 2018) and that the programme has served a larger, and global, neoliberal agenda to cut back the role of the state in favour of privatisation (Blyth, 2013; Krugman, 2015). For McRuer (2018), the UK is the world's austerity 'ground zero'.

<sup>4</sup> Other works in the series are *Bedding Out* (Crow, 2012b) , a 48-hour durational performance in response to the current benefits overhaul, in which Liz took to her bed in a gallery, livestreamed to almost 10,000 people in

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over 50 countries, and the *Atos Protest Armband* (Crow, 2012a), in which Liz wore a mourning band with the text 'Atos kills' into the Paralympic stadium to protest its sponsorship by the company that was overseeing the notorious Work Capability Assessment that was causing such hardship to disabled people.

<sup>5</sup> In response to a 2013 submission from Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) to the United Nations (Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), 2015), in 2016, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) charged the UK government with 'grave' and 'systematic violations' of the rights of disabled people through its welfare reforms (Pring, 2017; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016) and, in a separate report, the Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights expressed serious concern about the adverse effect of broader austerity measures upon disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups (Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, 2016). In 2017, the Chairperson of the CRPD stated that 'social cut policies have led to a human catastrophe' in the UK (Disability Wales, 2017). The government subsequently rejected the Committees' findings.