

### ***Who are we? What did we set out to do?***

Kirsty May Hamilton and Eilidh Appletree are two disabled artists who, with the support of Social Action Inquiry Scotland, set out to explore how *unmasking* is positive action for social change. What we found was not so straightforward.

As two people who pass as able-bodied and neurotypical, respectively, our daily struggles are either invisible to society or misunderstood and trivialised. This ability to pass allows us a level of acceptance in society but requires us to be highly masked, the consequences of which can be emotionally, mentally and physically damaging. Through durational sculpture and a live art practice, we have created an experimental short film that explores why we mask and its negative consequences, as we attempt to shift where the responsibility for change falls.

### ***What is masking?***

We understand disability to be: those who are medically disabled, chronically ill and the social model of disability, which includes medically healthy people who are disabled by societal barriers.

Some disabled people engage in actions or coping strategies that hide their emotions, thoughts, physical pain, discomfort or other genuine challenges related to their disability. These techniques of suppressing your natural way of being is referred to as masking. Masking is a term commonly used to describe an autistic experience. Through our research and facilitated discussions with other disabled people, we began to understand the term more broadly as a survival strategy often employed by those viewed as *other* in a society shaped by ableism.

### ***How society forces us to mask and why is it negative?***

Social conditioning is so all encompassing that some people are unaware they are masking, meaning that it is not simply a personal choice. Rather, masking is, consciously or unconsciously, driven by stigma avoidance. This form of social performance hides traits that ableism has deemed unattractive, unintelligent or unlikeable. It is an action to protect other people's comfort but also our own safety, as many disabled people have learned that being true to themselves could lead to social punishment through: shame, seclusion or having their rights and autonomy taken away.

Although masking is often rewarded and facilitated by society, as it makes disabled people less confronting, the consequences of doing so can bring on feelings of existential turmoil and, in the case of chronic illness, can cause a severity in symptoms. It means many people struggle less visibly and their needs can go unacknowledged and unmet.

### ***Intersecting power structures***

Although any disabled person can present masking behaviours, it is recognised that ableism intersects with other power structures, such as patriarchy, racism and capitalism, in such a

way that they maintain and strengthen one another. On a personal level, we have found this to mean that our experiences of gender and the expectations that are placed on us as women, are inseparable from our experiences of ableism. Both forms of oppression require us to police and moderate our actions and to conform to the cultural norms. Both require us to sacrifice who we are in order to be safe.

### *How can we unmask?*

Through the journey of making this artwork, we have looked deeply within ourselves as individuals and divulged who we are with one another. We have found shared experiences and we have supported each other's growth. This safe space has allowed us to examine the behaviours we do for other people, that actually makes us uncomfortable. We have challenged our own internalised ableism and have learned to be kinder to ourselves in the process. We believe these are the first steps to untangling ourselves from our masks and learning to be comfortable when we are without them. Through community, there is hope.

However, we know that unmasking is not simply a personal choice: just because we want to live authentically, it does not mean it is safe to do so. A lack of disability visibility and positive representation merge with cultural expectations to create a vicious cycle that prevents people from, either, recognising they are masking or believing they can live unmasked. While disabled people face stigma and ostracisation from society, completely unmasking does not feel possible. For us to live honestly as who we are, requires systemic change.