Art as Advocacy.
Exploring curatorial practice by learning disabled artists as a site for self-advocacy.

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October 2017

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend thanks to the many people who so generously contributed to, and supported the work presented in this thesis.

Abstract

Over the past 40 years within the UK the concept of self-advocacy has gained momentum by enabling learning disabled people to speak out in order to affect change. In the same period, inclusive approaches have been taken up both in research and in the arts, reflecting a growing recognition of learning disabled people as researchers, artists, performers and communicators. Yet curation has rarely been used as an inclusive practice and then principally in museums dealing with history rather than in the context of art galleries.

Via a practice-led research approach, Art as Advocacy addressed this gap by exploring the potential for curatorial practice by learning disabled artists to act as a site for self-advocacy. It brought together members of self-advocacy group Halton Speak Out and members of Bluecoat's inclusive arts project Blue Room, to curate a visual arts exhibition titled Auto Agents. These curators developed an exhibition theme, collaborated with artists, commissioned new artwork and designed accessible interpretation for audiences.

Through curating Auto Agents, the purpose of this research has been to produce a rich account of the ways in which curatorial and self-advocacy practices intersect. This intersection, whereby tools found in self-advocacy were carried over into curatorship, provided new methodologies that enabled curating to become an inclusive practice. This attention to process results not only in curating becoming more usable by more people, but also more transparent and rigorous. By achieving this, this research delineates to understanding the processes and practices by which our cultural spaces can become democratised.

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Introduction

"I went from an artist who makes things to an artist who makes things happen" (Deller, 2012).

I am an artist-facilitator who has been running participatory and inclusive arts projects since 2009. During this time, I have worked almost exclusively alongside learning disabled people to explore the intersections of art, disability and social change, often examining constructs of access, agency and inclusion. My work has primarily taken the form of art exhibitions and workshop programmes but I have also produced a number of collaborative book projects, films and zines. As this type of work typically involves vast networks of people, places, organisations and institutions, it has a myriad of possible labels. Whilst I choose to describe myself as an artist-facilitator, this practice is also akin to that of an inclusive artist, relational artist, community artist, collaborative artist, participatory artist and socially-engaged artist to name a few of the possible descriptors.

My label of choice 'artist-facilitator' is used to define an artist whose role requires them to enable others, often acting as a mediator, translator, catalyst and synergist. At the core of this practice artist-facilitators use their own "knowledge and skills to facilitate and enable other's creativity" (Pringle, 2011, p. 37), often employing creative ways of looking at and engaging with art through a process that is active, experiential and one that has the capacity to scaffold learning. When effective, it is hoped that this learning is mutually beneficial and able to travel beyond 'those in the room' to stakeholders, and furthermore, out into the public realm.

For me, the journey to this PhD began staring into the window of a temp agency. I had moved to London in 2009 after undertaking a photography degree. To support the many unpaid internships at galleries and museums, I needed easy, flexible, paid work. *Do you need flexible working hours? Can you support someone with everyday tasks? Can you offer flexible approaches to support? Apply Within*. Not only was this my first job as a support worker, it was my first experience of learning disabled people all together. Needless to say the job wasn't easy, but it was unique and challenged me creatively which spurred me to seek out more opportunities like it. A year or so later I began working for a self-advocacy organisation and was asked to run an art group, and so my two seemingly separate lives collided; art and advocacy.

Eager to simultaneously consolidate and unravel this practice in aim to think more critically about my work, in 2011 I undertook an MA in Inclusive Arts Practice at the University of Brighton. During my MA, which focused on collaboration and studio practices in the context of learning disability arts, I discovered that there was little engagement with curatorial practices in inclusive arts contexts and specifically, how to involve learning disabled people into this process. This concept became my dissertation project for which I facilitated a group of learning disabled women from Barnet Mencap to curate an exhibition in East London's Hoxton Arches, titled *You Are Artists, I am Curator* (2013), laying the foundations for this PhD study. For my MA I focused on what practices were required to enable this group to curate. But it quickly became apparent that there was potential for this practice to speak to issues of self-advocacy and potentially contribute new approaches to curatorship.

After my MA I was keen to continue exploring this idea. After searching for funding models which were able to support collaborative research, I came across the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) scheme which has been specifically designed to support collaborations between universities and non-academic organisations. I decided to instigate an application and began by contacting a self-advocacy group I had previously worked with called Halton Speak Out. As well as fulfilling many of the usual roles of a traditional self-advocacy group, Halton Speak Out also runs an established performing arts group called Ella Together. Ella Together has a clear agenda - via public performances - in using the arts to challenge perceptions of its largely disabled cohort. This resonated strongly with my research interests and the organisation remains keen to develop this strand of their practice.

However, as the focus of the project was curation, I was also keen to collaborate with a second organisation to draw in additional expertise in Inclusive Arts and curatorial practice, ensuring the broadest reach and impact for the exhibition and research. The second partner I approached was Bluecoat, an iconic arts space in Liverpool. Bluecoat was approached not just because of its well-regarded art gallery and engagement programme but primarily because of Blue Room, an award winning inclusive arts project for learning disabled people. Whilst the Blue Room members create a breadth of art work, they had yet to engage with curatorial practices which presented a key area for the groups development.

Helen Graham, Associate Professor in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies at

the University of Leeds took the lead in supervising along with Fine Art Lecturer Emma Rushton, and drawing upon these partners' expertise resulted in a successful bid in March 2014.

Summary

Over the past 40 years within the UK the concept of self-advocacy has gained momentum by enabling learning disabled people to speak out in order to affect change. In the same period, inclusive approaches have been taken up both in research (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003) and in the arts, reflecting a growing recognition of learning disabled people as researchers, artists, performers and communicators. Whilst this has resulted in a proliferation of work by learning disabled people in the performing and visual arts (Fox and Macpherson, 2015), curation has only rarely been explored and then principally in museums dealing with history (Open University, 2008; Museum of Liverpool, 2014; Access All Areas, 2017) rather than in the context of art galleries. This gap in the practice led me to develop this research; Art as Advocacy. Via a practice-led approach, this research explores the potential for curatorship by learning disabled artists to act as a site for self-advocacy, examining whether curating can be an effective way for this group to communicate collective political concerns out into the public realm.

Importantly, Art as Advocacy is underpinned by collaborating with two organisations: Halton Speak Out and Bluecoat. From these organisation's memberships I recruited five learning disabled people who had all applied to take on the role of a curator; Hannah Bellass and Leah Jones from Halton Speak Out, and Tony Carroll, Diana Disley and Eddie Rauer from Bluecoat's Blue Room. By strategically recruiting the curators from both of these organisations, I was able to bring together knowledge and skills in self-advocacy into dialogue with knowledge and skills in artistic expression. Once the research team was in place, myself plus two support workers met the curators weekly at Bluecoat over the course of a year in order to curate an exhibition.

The result was Auto Agents, a visual arts exhibition which opened at Bluecoat on 26th November 2016 to 15th January 2017, and then went on to be displayed at The Brindley in Halton between 4th March and 15th April 2017. Significantly, both the participatory process of curating and the exhibition theme itself came together to address an issue that is at the heart of advancing the rights of learning disabled people; autonomy. Autonomy, or in the words of the curators "what it means

to be independent by making your own decisions", is a central concern for self-advocates and emerged from the curator's personal experiences gained through research around the continued lack of autonomy faced by many learning disabled people. With the support of an Arts Council England grant, Auto Agents featured two new commissions by local artists James Harper and Mark Simmonds made in close collaboration with the curators. In addition to these commissioned pieces, work by London-based artist Alaena Turner was also included. As well as developing an exhibition theme and commissioning and selecting the artwork, the curators planned the install and designed accessible interpretation for audiences.

Curating Auto Agents presented an opportunity to bring the two seemingly disparate fields of self-advocacy and curatorship into dialogue, investigating if there were practices and discourses which could cross over and move in between. Through the research, we experienced how ideas of autonomy and authorship are complex and contested for both self-advocates and curators, and throughout this thesis I draw out how this became lived and visible during Auto Agents. By devising accessible and inclusive approaches to curating during this project, this research demonstrates that curatorship can be broken down to include a wider demographic of people. It is this process, developed using approaches and tools found in self-advocacy, that not only makes curating usable by more people but also more transparent and rigorous. I hope to demonstrate that there are ways to critically engage a wide demographic of people with what is often considered an exclusive job for the privileged few. By achieving this, it is hoped the research has contributed to understanding the process and practices by which our cultural spaces can become democratised.

Thesis Structure

It was important to me to write the thesis in a way that best reflects the practice. As I often use storytelling and narrative as a facilitation tool in my work, I wanted to draw upon these approaches in the written work. The structure of my thesis is premised on a play, utilising the structure of Freytag's Pyramid (2012). Gustav Freytag was a 19th Century German novelist who saw common patterns in the plots of stories, plays and novels and developed a theory to analyse them. Freytag's Pyramid identifies five key moments or 'acts' to a story which I have used to underpin the five key chapters in this thesis. Aside from the use of storytelling and narrative in my own work, there are other benefits to using this approach. This attention to narrative approaches is part of a growing

trend in which narratives are regarded as an important means of access to knowledge in human and cultural sciences (Polkinghorne, 1988). More specifically, by presenting this research in a predominantly narrative form I intend to offer a rich descriptive account showing the ways in which the practice was filtered through my own perspective, and how I elicited meaning from particular interactions. Like other scholars in disability studies, the integration of the artists and curator's literal voices and actions via the scenes is a method by which to capture a more robust picture of people's lives and crucially, to explore and illuminate relational dynamics (Roets, Goodley and Van Hove, 2007; Roets and Van Hove, 2003). Additionally, story approaches - namely life story, have been a key method in including learning disabled people into research (Hewitt, 2003), and furthermore, are often used in self-advocacy contexts as a way to engage learning disabled people in social and political work (Open StoryTellers, 2017). By employing a story-telling approach in my thesis, it is also hoped that it will enable this research to be reconfigured more easily into useable inclusive formats.

However, before the 'play' begins we must first introduce the **Cast.** This section of thesis outlines the network of participants involved in this study which includes two organisations, five learning disabled curators, two support staff and the three artists whom exhibited in the exhibition.

Act 1: The Prologue acts as a review of the literature. Traditionally prologues are the opening to a play or story that establishes context and gives the audience a sense of history and background in order to contextualise the main events of the drama. For this thesis, The Prologue begins by **Setting the Scene.** Here I have identified Inclusive Arts as the 'backdrop' or landscape in which this research took place. The Prologue then introduces the critical 'characters' of the play, The Self-Advocate and The Curator, and examines them in relation to autonomy and authorship; identified as the 'golden threads' running between the two sites of self-advocacy and curatorship. The following three acts then set out and reflect upon the methodology.

Act 2: So, What Is a Curator Anyway? explores the first phase in the field work in which I worked with the group to think about what a curator does through visiting art galleries across Liverpool. Here we encountered different approaches to curatorship across different types of institutions and through collaging and zining practices, identified a collective theme which was taken forward as the starting point for their exhibition.

Act 3: The Commissioners and The Commissioned details how we networked with, interviewed, selected and collaborated with artists to produce commissions. Many collaborations take place in this phase of the research and questions of interdependency, authorship and agency emerge as key themes of this project. In Freytag's Pyramid, the third act is described as the climax; the moment of greatest tension, realisation or conflict where there is a critical turning point.

Act 4: Auto Agents explores the development of the exhibition's interpretation which took the form of a collaborative film rather than traditional textual interpretation. This act also describes and explores the completed artworks in the exhibition, as well as the groups reflections on the final show. It also explores the exhibitions move from Bluecoat to The Brindley and several of the engagement events organised as part of the exhibition.

The final act, **Act 5: Epilogue**, is the conclusion and lessons learnt or an attempt "to tie the many dramatic, political and didactic threads together" (Ping, 2006, p. 177). This presents the means by which autonomy and authorship have been explored in Auto Agents and wider project research, as well as drawing attention to the value of risk taking.

Data Collection

Included within all five acts are scenes. These scenes are real moments taken from the practice which aim to act as vignettes; windows into the process, giving the reader a sense of what took place 'in the room'. This data was collected during workshops via recorded interviews or group conversations and then later transcribed. In addition to these transcribed interviews and conversations, data was also collected via the artworks generated in the workshops, my own observations recorded in writing after every workshop, as well as zines created by the group.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

This study gained ethical approval from the University of Leeds ensuring informed consent was gained from all those whom participated in this research. Many aspects of participating in research such as interviews, copyright forms and photography waivers, relies on the idea that individuals are

able to give consent and that consent is informed. Informed consent means understanding what is being asked, understanding the consequences of involvement, freely giving agreement and documenting this agreement. While traditionally this was seen as a simple form signing exercise, increasingly informed consent is understood as something built over time and, therefore, as a process (Graham, Nayling and Mason, 2011, p. 7).

With this in mind, the curators on this project were recruited over several months. The recruitment process was important with regards to building informed consent and was undertaken in stages to firstly build up knowledge, and secondly to provide potential participants with time to think about what is being asked of them. Firstly, I spent three months at both Halton Speak Out and Bluecoat's Blue Room getting to know the staff and members. During this time, I developed accessible information sheets about the project and with the support of staff, circulated them to the members and invited them to apply. All those who applied to take part in this study (nine in total), were invited to attend a 'taster' workshop. This was a day-long participatory workshop hosted at Bluecoat that gave those who had applied tangible experiences of what the project would be like. Staff from both organisations also attended. The potential curators had the opportunity to meet the team, to visit the research location, to hear more about the study, to meet others who may be taking part, and to try out some of the activities they would be expected to do during the research. This taster workshop was important as it provided people with real experiences to base their decisions on as opposed to imagining what research might be like. After the taster workshop two people withdrew their application, leaving seven candidates remaining. With the support of staff from both organisations, five people were selected as curators for this research. The selected participants were then given an accessible information sheet containing all research information such as timetables, how to withdraw, my supervisory arrangements, contact details and how the research will be stored. This sheet was given to the curators and their support in person before the study began in order to give them opportunity to ask any questions and have it explained to them face to face.

Throughout this research informed consent was viewed as an ongoing process, whereby 'checking back' with participants was vital to ensure that they were still informed and willing to take part, understanding that consent may vary activity to activity. Crucially, the curators were only able to withdraw their data up to exhibition phase of the project and therefore much work was undertaken to explain during recruitment process and throughout that once the exhibition has taken place, it

would not be possible to withdraw their data as their input would be part a public exhibition.

Project Website

I have created a website for this project **www.artasadvocacy.co.uk** which is a portfolio evidencing the practical work of this practice-led research. The website features this written thesis alongside an archive of project material organised via the thesis chapters. Together with the text, each chapter on the website contains images, videos, transcripts, workshop plans, zines and hyperlinks illuminating the projects networks, as well as the inclusive and participatory approaches underpinning the research. Post-submission of this thesis, the website will be further developed through the addition of a summary film created by the curators and artists. This video will aim to summarise the completed study in an inclusive and accessible way.

The Cast

Halton Speak Out

Halton Speak Out are a self-advocacy organisation based in the borough of Halton, Cheshire. Its primary function is to support individuals with learning disabilities living in the borough through a range of services including peer-advocacy, person-centred planning, training, the People's Cabinet and the Bright Sparks kite marking campaign. Halton Speak Out was founded in 2001 by its current manager Mal Hampson who has supervised this PhD. Its slogan 'the right to have a life' reflects the ethos of the organisation as it continues to address inequalities facing individuals with learning disabilities living in Halton. The organisation came as a result in a change in policy; following the publication of the Valuing People white paper (Department of Health, 2001). Mal Hampson saw a gap in the lack of user-led services and set up Halton Speak Out. The organisation began with a staff team of two young people with learning disabilities, the manager and an income of £10,000. Since 2001 the organisation has grown year on year. In 2017 its turnover was £180,000 and was primarily funded via the Local Authority and The Big Lottery.

Currently Halton Speak Out runs five projects. Each of these projects has a project lead and co-workers. In 2007 Ella Together was formed, a sister organisation of Halton Speak Out. Although run by Halton Speak Out staff, Ella Together is distinctly separate and came about from the organisation's broader interest in promoting social inclusion. As Halton Speak Out is a registered charity specifically for people with learning disabilities, this excludes people on the autistic spectrum, people labelled with behavioural issues and importantly people without any additional support needs taking part in projects. In contrast, Ella Together's aim is to promote social inclusion by fostering an environment where a range of people can practice performing arts together, now boasting a membership of 89 and sell out performances.

Bluecoat

Bluecoat is Liverpool's centre for contemporary arts based in the most historic building in the city centre, celebrating its 300th birthday in 2017. In 1708, the rector of Liverpool Reverend Robert, and

Bryan Blundell, master mariner, founded the Liverpool Blue Coat School; an institution "dedicated to the promotion of Christian charity and the training of poor boys in the principles of the Anglican Church" (Bluecoat, 2017). A Latin inscription of this text above the main entrance is a reminder today of the building's original function. However, in 1927 the building was purchased and subsequently transformed into the UK's first dedicated arts centre. A year after the school relocated, a group of painters and sculptors - seeking a new home following the demolition of their studio space at Sandon Terrace, opposite the Anglican Cathedral - moved to Bluecoat. Artistic activity has been at the heart of the building ever since and it was the efforts of the Sandon Studios Society, inspirationally led by Mrs Fanny Dove Hamel Calder, that secured the Bluecoat's future as a centre for the arts. In 1968 The Bluecoat Gallery was formally established as a place to exhibit work by contemporary artists.

After a significant re-development in 2008, Bluecoat now houses four galleries, a creative community of artists and businesses and runs a participation programme with local communities. Since the refurbishment, this programme has included Blue Room, an inclusive arts project for adults with learning disabilities. This has since expanded to include Out of the Blue, a project whereby Blue Room artists support after school clubs for local children across the city. Key staff on this study include Bec Fearon, Head of Engagement, who has been instrumental in the development of Blue Room and Out of the Blue, and has supervised this PhD along with Becky Waite, Blue Room's Lead Facilitator, Kat Shock, the Participation Coordinator and Laura Yates, the Participation Manager. In addition to the participation staff, Head of Programme Marie-Anne McQuay has supported this study along with Adam Smythe, Bluecoat's in-house curator.

Curator: Hannah Bellass

Hannah Bellass's arts practice spans both visual and performing arts. In college Hannah gained a GCSE in art. Since 2008, Hannah has been a member of Halton Speak Out's performing arts group Ella Together, as well as taking part in national performing arts projects such as 11 Million Reasons to Dance by People Dancing. Hannah is also a keen illustrator and in 2015 the MacInyre Charity's art prize for one of her drawings.

Curator: Tony Carrol

Tony has been a member of Blue Room since 2008 and has collaborated with other artists including Wendell McShine and in 2015 was involved in a commission for the front courtyard of Bluecoat working with Danish artist Anne Harild. Tony represented Blue Room at an award ceremony in London when the project was shortlisted for a Local Government Chronicle award for innovation. Tony supports its Out of the Blue after school art clubs for children on a voluntary basis every week. Tony's practice includes drawing, painting, printmaking and sculpture and he is currently a member of the INHABIT contemporary dance group.

Curator: Diana Disley

Diana has been involved with arts projects at Bluecoat for the last 15 years and is a member of Blue Room. She has collaborated with other artists on commissions across a range of media including an artist's film, The Journey, with Leo Fitzmaurice and a range of animation, drawing and sculpture for an exhibition with international artist Wendell McShine. Diana has a keen interest in textiles and embroidery and has shared her skills by leading sessions for other Blue Room members. Diana's practice extends to dance and she has been involved in international events with Liverpool Improvisation Collective. Diana supports Out of the Blue after school art clubs for children.

Curator: Leah Jones

Leah Jones is a founding member of self-advocacy group Halton Speak Out. During 17 years at the organisation, Leah has worked in a range of roles including peer advocate and person-centred facilitator. Leah is a passionate advocate for the rights of learning disabled people and those with Down Syndrome. She currently designs and delivers her own training Positive You, which aims to give people with learning disabilities confidence and self-esteem through art making; transforming attitudes about disability along the way. Leah was awarded a Lead The Change grant in 2015 for Positive You and has presented training across the UK including iJADE conference at Tate Liverpool in 2014. In 2016 Leah was a finalist for the Halton Business Awards for Best Social Enterprise for Positive You.

Curator: Eddie Raurer

Eddie is a founding member of Blue Room, taking a leading role in the steering group. He has collaborated with other artists including Leo Fitzmaurice, Sonia Boyce, Wendell McShine and in 2015 was involved in a commission for the front courtyard of Bluecoat working with Danish artist Anne Harild. Eddie has also collaborated with Tmesis Theatre to develop several physical theatre performance pieces for Physical Fest. Eddie has represented Blue Room on numerous occasions including in London and Dublin as part of exchange projects with other learning disabled artists. Eddie supports Bluecoat's Explore activities for families and children on a voluntary basis every week. In 2017, Eddie was included in Bluecoat's exhibition Art at the Heart at Bluecoat.

Artist: James Harper

James Harper is an artist, curator and writer based in Liverpool. His work, often using curatorial devices, makes comparisons between the social, congregational nature of the art gallery and that of social clubs and places of worship. Furthermore, through video, sculpture and performance, James' practice draws on how audiences interact and engage with artworks and with the gallery, its structures and its mechanisms. James uses performative actions and staged interventions to engage the audience, often elevating them to the role of performer. A former director of The Royal Standard, James' practice leans heavily on curatorial frameworks. As well as working on his own projects, he co-directs the artist development agency Tzuzjj and is curator of PERICLO project space in Wrexham. James graduated from Chelsea College of Art & Design in 2012 with an MA in Curating.

Artist: Mark Simmonds

Mark Simmonds is a typographer and artist based in Liverpool. Interested in recovering and repackaging lost or incomplete cultural information his work touches on aspects of graphic design, often through autobiographical references and artefacts. Recent works include an unscripted lecture on the cover of an Iggy Pop biography, a children's geometric sticker pack remade as a large scale installation, and saving damaged library books by rebinding and improving their covers. He is a 2012 graduate of Masters programme Werkplaats Typografie, Arnhem, the Netherlands.

Artist: Alaena Turner

Alaena Turner studied Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art and Design and completed an MA at Slade School of Fine Art in 2008 specialising in Painting. In 2009 Turner was awarded an Emerging Artist Residency from Kingsgate Workshop Trust and in 2016 she was awarded the A.P.T Curatorial Fellowship from A.P.T Trust. Turner contributed to the materials research project of Slade School of Fine Art through her appointment as Honorary Research Associate in 2012-13. In this role she developed a collaborative project exploring art and food, Dinner with Picasso, which was awarded a research grant from the Institute of Making. Turner is currently undertaking a practice-based PhD at the University of Leeds, School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies department, funded by a White Rose College of Arts and Humanities scholarship.

Support: Abi Burrows

Abi Burrows is a Fine Art graduate of Oxford Brookes University. She predominantly makes sculptural pieces and works on paper, and has volunteered at Bluecoat since 2014. Abi supported the project on a voluntary basis each week, and gained experience in facilitation; eventually leading her own sessions with the group exploring her own arts practice.

Support: Donna Bellass

Donna Bellass is Hannah's mother and provided one-to-one support for Hannah on a weekly basis during the project. Donna has a wealth of experience in support, working for Warrington Collegiate for a number of years supporting learning disabled people in education.

Act 1: Prologue

Prologues are traditionally the opening to a play or story that establish context giving the audience a sense of history and background. The following chapter acts as a review of the literature and aims to position this research within the fields of inclusive arts, self-advocacy and curatorship. Crucially, intersecting between these three genealogies two key themes emerged; *autonomy* and *authorship*. This chapter explores these themes across the context of inclusive arts, self-advocacy and curatorship, and the thesis itself exploring how the curation of Auto Agents made the themes of autonomy and authorship lived and visible.

Autonomy remains a key objective for self-advocates but, as we come to explore, autonomy is being increasingly questioned and reconceptualised within self-advocacy; with models of interdependency now emerging. Via the practice, we see how the curators on this project all require unique and complex networks of support to enable autonomy in their everyday lives. This is explored in relation to how artworks and exhibitions are often not the work of a lone 'genius' but are in fact configured through a matrix of equally complex relationships and networks. Autonomy is also queried within the field of inclusive arts; varying models of this practice grapple with how ideas of artistic autonomy relate to artists whom require facilitation and support to create their art.

Authorship - the state or act of writing, creating, or causing - has also been a central concern for self-advocates who vie for more control over their lives. This has increasingly manifested in terms of academic research where learning disabled people have campaigned to have greater involvement and recognition in authoring research (Aspis, 2000). Similarly, in a completely different networks of sites and literatures, learning disabled artists have sought for their own artistic authorship to be recognised and celebrated within mainstream arts contexts (Creative Minds, 2017). Authorship within curatorial contexts has continued to be a topic of interest as curators, artists and institutions have historically worked together to commission art, but how authorship is negotiated, and what is at stake during these negotiations, is explored across these sites.

Setting the Scene: Inclusive Arts

To review the emergence of Inclusive Arts I began by broadly exploring the history of art by disabled people. What is evident is that for centuries disabled people served as objects to be depicted, rather than active creators of culture. Whilst disability is artistically represented at different points in history[1], the earliest literature found relating specifically to the art work made by disabled people is in reference to 'Art Brut', promoted by Jean Dubuffet, in the 20th century. Art Brut is defined by qualities such as rawness, spontaneity, and individuality and requires that the artist be "socially isolated" and exercise his or her creativity in "complete isolation from external cultural influences" (Davies, 2009). Over time, Art Brut evolved into 'Outsider Art', a term coined in 1972 by British art historian Roger Cardinal. Outsider Art is considered a more inclusive coinage for Art Brut, applied more broadly to people on the margins of art and society: the disabled, the homeless, ethnic minorities, migrants, folk artists and the self-taught. Notably, Outsider Art is also commercially successful, reflected in its annual dedicated art fairs and collectors, international studios and the many large-scale exhibitions appearing at powerful institutions.[2]

Whilst Art Brut and Outsider Art are genres in which some disabled artists continue to practice, 'Disability Art' emerged in the 1980's and is now regarded as a distinct genre, described as the last remaining avant-garde movement (Bragg, 2007, no pagination). It is intimately connected to disability politics and as disabled poet and activist Alan Sutherland describes; "disability arts would not have been possible without disability politics coming along first" (Sutherland, 1997, p. 159). In short, the radical socio/political interpretation of disability entered the political arena in mid-1970s following the "groundswell of political activity amongst disabled people" across the world (Barnes, 2003, p. 4). Specifically, the emergence of the social model of disability which foregrounded how society is geared almost exclusively to the needs of a non-disabled ideal, filtered through to the art created by disabled people. Armed with this re-interpretation of disability, what resulted was unease over the prevalence of negative imagery and lack of genuine authorship by disabled people

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[1] Depictions of disability date back as far as 1050 through religious depictions of healing. See the Disability History project by Historic England https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history/

[2] Massimiliano Gioni's Venice Biennale titled The Encyclopedic Palace (2013), the Museum of Everything at London's Tate Modern (2010), Souzou: Outsider Art from Japan at the Wellcome Trust (2013), Alternative Guide to the Universe at The Hayward Gallery (2013) and Outside In at Manchester's Castlefield Gallery (2016).

in popular culture and the arts. Mainstream art and culture was not only perpetuating attitudinal barriers, it did not reflect the experiences of disabled people (Masefield, 2006). What emerged was politically fueled artworks by disabled people now articulated as the Disability Art movement. In an interview I conducted with Tony Heaton, a prominent disabled artist who spent 10 years as the CEO of Disability Arts organisation Shape, he stated;

> Disability Arts is a clearly defined genre. The generally agreed definition of Disability Arts, the one that the disability arts movement have found most accurately reflects what we are doing, is that it is art made by disabled people which reflects the experience of disability. (French, 2014)

The Disability Arts Chronology published by Disability Arts Online in 2008, which is currently being developed into the National Disability Arts Collection and Archive (2018), is a valuable source for tracing the practices of disabled artists and disability arts organisations. The archive aims to map and collect artworks and associated materials produced by disabled artists over the last 30 years, recognising they are an important part of the history of disabled people in the UK. From reviewing the interviews, it is clear that early on in the Disability Arts movement disabled artists expressed that they do not wish to be *just recipients* of art but also *creators* and *producers*; emphasising their right to authorship and representation. This concern highlighted new barriers within the arts in terms of education, as few disabled artists were able to obtain any training in order to pursue an artistic career. This prompted several Disability Arts organisations to develop their own training (Graeae, 2017; Shape, 2017; Carousel, 2017). Disability Art is therefore not just about exposing disabling imagery, but also the processes and structures of society and is therefore positioned as playing a key role alongside conventional political activities:

> Arts practice should also be viewed as much as a tool for change as attending meetings about orange badge provision[3]... Only by ensuring an integrated role for disability arts and culture in the struggle can we develop the vision to challenge narrow thinking, elitism and dependency on others for our emancipation. To encourage the growth of a disability culture is no less than to begin the radical task of transforming ourselves from passive and dependent beings into active and creative agents for social change. (Morrison and Finkelstein, 1992, p. 11)

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[3] 'Orange badges' (replaced with 'blue badges' in 2000) are a type of parking permit for disabled people and their support.

With developments within disability politics[4] proving useful in understanding and articulating issues of access to services, for example transport and public places, it was then applied to identify accessibility issues in places of arts and culture. 'Access' has been useful for galleries, museums and heritage sites in conceptualising barriers to their participation. There has been previous research into accessibility of art galleries for disabled people and the majority of this early research investigates best practice solutions into making cultural institutions *physically* accessible (Rayner, 1998; Earnscliffe, 1992). However these debates swiftly developed and further barriers were identified in terms of institutional access as disabled people vied for better representation within funding bodies, boards and employment within institutions (Culbard and Daly, 2009). On this Masefield (2006) writes; "Ultimately neither the creation nor the training, employment nor funding of Disability Arts will be possible, unless we are fast tracked onto the Arts Boards". Arguably, this remains a persistent struggle. After attending a Disability Arts congress organised by DaDaFest in 2014 and 2016, many of the speakers and delegates remain dissatisfied with current representation of disabled people in roles such as directors, funders and curators. Throughout this project Leah in particular was very aware that curators are rarely, if ever, learning disabled, and that being a curator denoted a position of importance. "People don't think we can do a job like that" Leah commented whilst creating a zine page. "That's why it's important we tell people we're curators" she explained whilst producing a striking collage featuring the word 'status' in response to 'what is art?'. For Leah, it appears there is potential in the role of a curator to bring about change, but for others, these 'gatekeeper' roles are seen as barriers to their expression and autonomy. It has been suggested that until gatekeeping roles are undertaken by a wider range of people and manifested in ways that invite new thinking and 'non' traditional representations of what a leader is, the playing field will remain uneven (Marsh and Burrows, 2017). Therefore by enabling learning disabled people to curate through devising an inclusive and accessible process, this project potentially contributes towards addressing this identified gap in the representation of disabled people in the arts as cultural leaders.

But the heavy politicization of Disability Arts has been called into question. As Disability Art placed such importance on the political dimension of the work, it has been suggested that this has been at the expense of technical artistic competence. Roland Humphrey, the editor of the first Disability Arts Magazine (DAM) during the early 1990s, speculates that the structures handed down from the political movement to the artist have effectively narrowed and restricted the practice and that;

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[4] Namely the social model of disability discussed further on page 34.

"Disability Arts has to be good art first and foremost otherwise it will be ignored" (1994, p. 66). He proposes that there is a cost to ignoring mainstream criteria of what constitutes `good' art. Whilst Disability Arts has certainly constituted an empowering `voice' for disabled people, its dislocation from mainstream contexts has arguably delayed its recognition in cultural theorisation.

Furthermore, the politicization of the genre has also been accused of excluding learning disabled people. It has been argued that learning disabled people are left out of disability politics (Campell and Oliver, 1996, p. 97) and Disability Arts has been accused of inheriting this issue through excluding learning disabled artists from the movement. Dan Goodley and Michelle Moore explored this in their book Disability Arts Against Exclusion stating that "people with learning difficulties in disability arts in Britain mirrors the shaky position held by self-advocates with learning difficulties in the disability movement" (2002, p. 16). Whilst Disability Arts brought the difference in human bodies to the attention of audiences, this did not widely include learning disabled people. Many learning disabled artists require support, often in the form of facilitation, in order to produce their art work. Consequently, this inclusion of non-disabled people via facilitatory roles complicates the Disability Arts paradigm which has sought to "free itself from the domination of able-bodied professionals" (Oliver and Barnes, 2012, p. 104), muddying the waters around autonomy and authorship. Therefore the artwork produced by learning disabled artists is rarely labelled as Disability Art or found within Disability Arts contexts.

Instead, 'Inclusive Arts' developed as a new distinct genre. This field aimed to account for a spectrum of collaboration that enables authorship by learning disabled artists through facilitation. This term is generally used to describe a "facilitated artistic collaboration between people with a disability and people with no disability" (Perring, 2005; Calvert, 2009) but in the UK, Inclusive Arts has particular currency for specifically defining the practice of working with learning disabled people in a facilitated collaboration model where "professional artistic practitioners collaborate with individuals with intellectual or learning disabilities to create new art work" (Austen, 2014, p. 11). Leading Inclusive Arts practitioner Alice Fox[5] (2010, no pagnation) defines the term as;

> Supporting creative opportunities between marginalised and non-marginalised
> people through artistic facilitation and collaboration as a means of challenging

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[5] Alice Fox developed the MA Inclusive Arts Practice at the University of Brighton as well as Side by Side, an international exhibition of learning disability visual art at Southbank Centre in 2013.

existing barriers and promoting social change.

The collaborative approaches used within this category varies widely, with some practitioners favouring "improvisational or participant-led models" across creative forms and others utilising more "structured frameworks of direction in which an auteur or director figure seeks what they are after" through scripts, sequences or dramaturgical design (Austen, 2014, p. 11). Throughout this project I was clear to define my own role as a facilitator to the curators, artists and broader networks, and not an artistic director. I explained that my role was akin to a support worker who was there to help them keep track of the exhibition, to work and communicate effectively with people, and crucially, to support them make critically-engaged decisions. But ultimately, the decisions and trajectory of the exhibition were theirs to make. Therefore, the position of facilitator required a reflexive approach; ensuring my personal opinions and preferences did not influence the group's decisions. This was particularly tested during the artist's recruitment process, whereby I was required to enable the curators to interview and assess potential artists for the commission, but crucially, keeping my own views out of the mix explored further in the chapter Act 3: The Commissioners and The Commissioned.

Inclusive Arts is also understood to be related to a range of practices, but notably, it has similarities to the participatory arts which place emphasis on 'process' rather than 'product' (Bourriard, 1998; Kester, 2004; Lacy, 2010; Helguera, 2011). But the term 'Inclusive Arts' can be traced back further in the UK to the Social Exclusion Unit's Policy Action Teams (PATs), and specifically to PAT 10: Art and Sport, which describes the arts as "being an integral part of the Government's policy to combat social exclusion" (Hoey, 2001, p. 130). This policy articulation led to a wide range of initiatives, funding streams and job roles which aimed to explore how arts and culture might relate to social inclusion.[6] Perhaps the most ambitious – and one through which the term 'Inclusive Arts' gained greatest momentum – was the flagship Creative Partnerships Policy for Education introduced by New Labour in 2006. In this context, the term was applied to arts practice that championed social inclusion with an emphasis on the enjoyment of cultural participation for all, rather than the arts being used for any form of social critique.[7] The connections that Inclusive Arts has to social inclusion agendas has come under heavy criticism for being neither good art or good social work on

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[6] Examples include; Arts Council England's two-year social inclusion research programme (2000), Department for Culture, Media and Sports report on museums and galleries as 'centre's for social change' (2001).

[7] This is not a phenomenon limited to the UK. The shift towards an instrumental cultural policy, is also a wider European trend, as well as evident in Australia and Canada (Vestheim 1994, p.57-71).

the grounds that the 'art' somehow has been compromised (Belifore, 2002; Bishop, 2006; Thomson and Hall, 2007). In 1997 François Matarasso wrote one of the first large scale evaluations on the evidence of social impacts arising from participation in the arts which considers the arts impact upon a variety of areas including autonomy, empowerment, local image and identity and social cohesion. Building on this in 2004, John Holden's report suggests that the adoption of inclusive arts into cultural policy has also fed into notions of quality;

> The arguments seems to have got stuck in the old tramlines very quickly: instrumental vs intrinsic value, floppy bow ties vs. hard head-ed 'realists', excellence vs. access. Worse still, the instrument/intrinsic debate has tended to polarize class lines: aesthetic values for the middle classes, instrumental outcomes for the poor and disadvantaged. (Holden, p. 24)

However, artistic quality and social engagement, or viewing art as either instrumental or intrinsic, are not necessarily in opposition as some of the literature suggests. My concern as an artist-facilitator has always been how to convey the quality of the process to wider audiences, which raises bigger questions for me in how we understand where the 'art' is primarily located in this type of work. This question arose during the curation of Auto Agents and prompted exploration in how to capture the curatorial process and furthermore, how we could reveal these to audiences as a way of identifying alternatives to the quality being defined only by people who 'know' about art. This resulted in the exhibition's interpretation taking the form of a collaborative film, making visible the shared notions of authorship inherent in exhibition making, further explored in Act 4: Auto Agents.

Using Fox's definition, Inclusive Arts places emphasis on the approaches to collaboration with 'marginalised' people with the ultimate aim of facilitating creativity and expression in order to promote social change. However this definition of Inclusive Arts is problematic and characterising people as 'marginalised' raises further questions and concerns. Who decides upon the label of 'marginalised'? What problems does labelling people as marginalised create? Some suggest marginalisation is closely related to 'othering' which is a "way of defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatisation of an 'other'" (Agelides and Michaelidou, 2009, p. 38). Whatever the markers of social differentiation that shape the meaning of 'other' - whether they are racial, geographic, ethnic, economic, or ideological - there is always the danger that they will

become the basis for a self-affirmation that depends upon the denigration of the other group creating an 'us and 'them'. Over the years, social scientists have become increasingly aware of how their disciplines construct, legitimize and perpetuate 'otherness' (Andersen and Collins 1998; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fine 1998; Sampson 1993) and so researchers have acknowledged the importance of reflexivity when undertaking research when participants are marginalized in ways they are not (Traustadóttir, 2001).

In my work, I have become more drawn to approaches that do not set up binaries. The work of Anna Hickey-Moody for example explores how the term 'inclusive' is linked to 'otherness' and is questioned on the basis that it is grounded in a binary power relation model. Models situating 'inclusion' as an aspiration that sets up notions of *exclusion,* which can lead to right/wrong, ability/disability comparisons. Hickey-Moody also reflects on how discourses of inclusion in education have largely become a system of 'othering' that can only be dismantled by developing new methods for thinking about identity and embodied difference (2009, p. 43).

Throughout this research I have been keen to seek out instances of curatorship specifically by learning disabled people. There are very few examples within contemporary arts contexts, however an example in 2009 by arts organisation Project Volume. Visual Voices was a visual arts exhibition curated by Project Volume's learning disabled artists at The Old Truman Brewery from 30th October to 5th November 2009 in response to modern London architecture. The exhibition was funded by The London Development Agency's Cultural Skills Fund to address a gap in provision for artists and dancers with learning disabilities so that they can gain greater skills and become "cultural leaders" (Project Volume, 2017). A part of their skills development was to "encourage the true voice of the artist through nurturing their artistic vision and beginning to instil in them the skills for curating" (ibid). Unfortunately, there is no published literature on this project but through interviews via email with Susan Norwood the director of Project Volume in 2012, I was able to learn somewhat about the approaches the group used in curating and the organisation's motivations to explore curatorial practices. In this interview Norwood took me through the process of supporting the group to engage with curation. This began with a day-long workshop at Tate Modern with their educational team where the group "gained an introduction to curating". Norwood elaborates;

> I divided the group into smaller groups, asking them to select different works
> from the exhibitions and group them together, and say why they had grouped

them together and chosen them.

Following this workshop, the group then spent two weeks working out of a studio in East London. Here, the artists had space to experiment with display, and began to "critique each others work" by grouping them and "looking for similarities between each other's work, and work which contrasted and added something to each group of pictures". For the final exhibition, the artists were "divided into sub groups for the curating. There was a fine art, and photography sub group". Using the comparative skills practiced during their studio time, the group made their selection and began to "play with what may go where in the space with the technician".

Throughout the interview I conducted with Norwood, she places much emphasis on the traditional curatorial approaches of aesthetic comparison and relationship between works, but interestingly, throughout her description of the curatorial process, she makes no reference to labelling, interpretation, marketing or engagement with audiences. However, Project Volume's aim for the project was not necessarily to 'train' people as curators, but to support artists in their membership to retain artistic autonomy over their work; sharpening their professional skills to work more effectively in the arts.

> I think as any artist, disability aside, it is important to understand the whole process, so that artists have greater power over their work and can either curate or learn the process so that they can collaborate their ideas and thoughts when working with an outside curator… it is about retaining at times control over the vision and integrity of your own work.

Another example of curatorship I encountered by learning disabled artists was Side by Side: Learning Disability, Art and Collaboration, an exhibition and symposium at the Southbank Centre in March/April 2013, directed by Alice Fox. Fox employed an inclusive approach to the curation of the exhibition to include the Rocket Artists, a learning disability arts group based in Brighton. In her book, Inclusive Arts and Research: A Critical Manifesto, Fox discusses how the exhibition was curated and highlights the importance of enabling choice making in her approach; "Curating can be viewed as a series of choices to be made and problems to be solved. So in order to support inclusive curating with learning disabled people, we needed to support people to tackle those choices" (Fox and Macpherson, 2015, p. 47). Whilst choice making certainly plays an important role in curating,

the experience of designing a process to enable curation for learning disabled people on this project revealed that it is not just about choice. As Lucy Worsley, chief curator of Historic Royal Palaces, warns; "People think curating just means choosing nice things. But this is only half of it". Curating involves much more than the act of selection and requires "building up real knowledge of the items" (The Guardian, 2016). Fox continues to elaborate on how choices were enabled without really expanding on how the curators developed approaches in being critical or how the curators *understood* and *related* to the artwork.

Similarly to the Project Volume's Visual Voices exhibition, I sense that the learning disabled curators on these projects were not supported to challenge and reimagine what curatorship is, therefore missing out on the unique contributions they could bring to the practice. Facilitating the curation of Auto Agents revealed to me that curation involves many of different types of actions other than choice making, and breaking them all down enough allows curation to be not only accessible, but open to fundamental change. For example in terms of Auto Agents, I did not anticipate the curators bold approach to challenging and rethinking the exhibition's interpretation. For example, had I set the project up in a way that defined the role of a curator as only choice making, we might never have explored alternative possibilities to interpretation which resulted in abandoning the dominant mode of text in favour for a collaborative film.

This section examined the emergence of Inclusive Arts and its close linkages to the broader Disability Arts movement. It is evident from both the literature and the practice that learning disabled artists have in the past been excluded from the Disability Arts movement. Their use of non-disabled facilitators has not fit a model that has emphasised a hard-won fight for independence and autonomy from able-bodied professionals, and thus a new genre 'Inclusive Arts' was articulated that aimed to account for artistic authorship that requires support.

In the following two chapters I shall explore the role, scope and tensions of the 'self-advocate' and the 'curator', continuing to trace how autonomy and authorship intersecting between these fields.

The Self-Advocate

Citizens Not Victims

The more formalised self-advocacy movement developed in the late 20th century and is intimately related to de-institutionalisation and the conceptualisation of new viewpoints which redefined learning disabled people as citizens with rights, rather than victims (Kugel and Wolfensberger, 1969; Williams and Schoulz, 1982).

The first of these new viewpoints to emerge was the principle of normalisation, originating from Scandinavia by Karl Grunewald, Bengt Nirge and Nils Bank-Mikkelsen and then further developed by Wolf Wolfensberger and Susan Thomas from the 1970s in Canada (Cocks and Stehlik, 1996). This principle rejects segregated institutional life and proposed that learning disabled people should be exposed to tasks and activities based on the social norms of their culture and "patterns of life and conditions of everyday living which are as close as possible to the regular circumstances and ways of life of society" (Nirje, 1980, p. 33). Whilst this principle has had a significant effect on the way services for learning disabled people have been structured throughout the UK and other parts of the world, it has also been criticized. Firstly, the civil rights movement for learning disabled people took a significantly different turn from other liberation movements such as Black activism, feminism and LGBTQ rights, as the normalisation principle was developed by non-disabled academics and professionals *without* the participation of learning disabled people (Wolfensberger and Tullman, 1989). This aspect has been criticised as being uninformed by disabled people themselves and places the responsibility for change on others (Oliver, 1990). Secondly, academics (Allan, 1999; Culham and Nind, 2003; Jenkinson, 1997; Peters, 1995) have raised further issues suggesting that the normalisation principle promotes the denial of visible difference. The assumption that to be 'normal' is the aspiration of learning disabled people, and not just of the professionals on their behalf, is recognised and strongly challenged (Morris, 1991).

Nirje disagreed that the aim of normalisation was to make people 'normal' (1985), however this principle has left practitioners thinking that difference is not something to be valued, while conformity is (Brown and Smith, 1992). This perception to conform was an issue that

Wolfensberger also disputed. In response to criticisms, he further developed normalisation into Social Role Valorisation or SRV (Culham and Nind 2003; Wolfensberger, 1983). This, he argued, was intended to separate the controversial moral interpretations of normalisation, and to clarify its true intentions, which were about using culturally valued means in ''the creation, support, and defense of valued social roles for people who are at risk of social devaluation'' (Wolfensberger, 1983, p. 234). The *SRV* set new benchmarks on issues such as rights, autonomy, social integration (Felce et al, 1998), which allowed for judgment on the extent to which services met the standards of SRV.[8]

From segregation in the form of institutions the 19th and early 20th century, to normalisation and SRV (Race, Boxall and Carson, 2005), what these have in common is the denial of difference and expectation that learning disabled people should conform to standards decided by non-disabled people. Whilst modern approaches agree that segregation from society is wrong, asserting learning disabled people should be included in every day 'normal' life, it can be argued that learning disabled people still have little voice in what is accepted as 'normal'. This intersects debates on the inclusion of learning disabled artists into mainstream arts. Whilst the arts strive to include learning disabled people via initiatives like Arts Council England's Creative Case for Diversity (2017), similarly, it is argued learning disabled people also have little voice in defining or influencing 'legitimate' notions of art form quality. During this project I was asked whether I, Bluecoat or other stakeholders were concerned that the curators would select 'bad art'. For me this line of questioning draws attention not to the perceived skills, knowledge or discernment of the curators, but rather who gets to decide what 'bad' art is in the first place.

The second of these new viewpoints is the social model of disability. In 1974 the Britain's Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) proposed a radical new approach to understanding disability in the clear distinction between the biological (impairment) and the social (disability). This approach is based on the understanding that society is geared almost exclusively to the needs of a non-disabled ideal (Barnes, 2003), which has led to the re-interpretation of disability and the facilitation of the 'social model' (Oliver, 1983) or 'social barriers model' of disability (Finkelstein, 1991). These models focus on the various barriers: economic, political, cultural and attitudinal, encountered by people with impairments, meaning disability is not a product of individual fault but is a socially created phenomenon. The social model of disability has provided a

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[8] Facilitated by a comprehensive programme of training for professionals (PASS and PASSING). This was widely disseminated in the UK from the late 1970s and "by 1989 over 3000 people in the UK had attended the 6 day PASS programme" (Sullivan and Munford, 2005, p.21).

vital theorisation distinguishing between 'impairment' and 'disability', therefore in this instance, disability is redefined as "the outcome of an oppressive relationship between people with impairments and the rest of society" (Fickelstein, 1980, p. 47). This idea became central to the British disability movement as it enabled the identification of a political strategy, namely barrier removal. If people with impairments are disabled by society then the priority is to dismantle these disabling barriers through "collective political action" in order to promote the inclusion of disabled people. (Oliver and Barnes, 2012, p. 22)

Whilst the social model of disability has proved incredibly successful, contemporary academics and activists alike have identified issues. Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson (2002) suggest that the social model dictates rigid notions of disability and does not allow for the viewpoint that we are all in some way impaired, therefore disability is a universal condition which affects us all. They suggest that everyone is vulnerable to limitations and will, through the ageing process, inevitably experiencing functional loss and morbidity (Sutherland, 1981; Antonovsky, 1979; Bauman, 1992). In addition, others have argued that the personal experience of their impairments are downplayed by the social model, criticising the failure of the model to reflect personal bodily experiences of pain which is often a part of living with an impairment (Crow, 1996; French, 1993).

But how has the social model of disability influenced the lives of learning disabled people? Anne-Louise Chappell (2010) has argued learning disabled people were an afterthought with regards to the social model of disability and they have also been excluded from the wider disability political movement. Simone Aspis, a self-advocate and political activist, commented that there is a tendency among people with disabilities (without the label of learning disabilities) to identify the problems of learning disabled people as inherent to their impairments, rather than resulting from issues of access and social barriers (Campbell and Oliver, 1996, p. 97). In other words, an individualised model of disability is applied to learning disabled people with Goodley arguing that people with 'severe' learning disabilities are at risk of being "left in the realms of static, irreversible, individualised biology" (2001, p. 213).

However, it is important to remember that the social model of disability is a simplified representation of a complex social reality, and although it has been linked to various theories of disablement (Priestly, 1998a), Oliver and Barnes maintain that "it is not a social theory" (2012, p. 23). What is striking to me, is the impact of the social model across a range of originations including

our central and local government. Whilst its literal application implies that "every dysfunction in our bodies can be compensated for by a gadget, or good design" (Vasey, 1992, p. 44), the social model successfully facilitated a different set of questions being asked about disability which brought about change in many people's lives, including increased autonomy and subsequently, improved access to the arts.

'Speaking Out'

With changing viewpoints on disability which highlighted that learning disabled people had rights to autonomy and a voice, the self-advocacy movement gained momentum. It is not easy to write a brief chronology of self-advocacy because there is no established history in print, however self-advocacy and its spread from Sweden and the USA to the UK, has been previously documented (Goodley 1996; Goodley 2000; Buchanan and Walmsley, 2006). Self-advocacy in the UK Is said to have started in 1984 when the People First London Boroughs was founded, following the attendance of a small number of learning disabled people at the International Conference in the USA (Buchanan and Walmsley, 2006). Equally, defining self-advocacy is difficult and it continues to grow in complexity. From my own experiences working for self-advocacy groups I am aware that self-advocacy is understood and used differently by different people. From reviewing the literature, in its most basic understanding self-advocacy can be defined as speaking or acting for oneself or "those skills an individual uses to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights" (Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker and Deshler, 2002, p. 1). It means standing up for your rights in order to make decisions about what is best for you and taking responsibility for those choices. That said, not many people without learning disabilities talk about 'self-advocating', therefore self-advocacy has been applied to account for minority groups who have been historically denied a voice (Bhavani, 1990). In this context, self-advocacy can describe individual or collective self-determination against discrimination, and "potentially useful for all citizens who find themselves in marginalized positions" (Chapman, 2013, p. 45).

But crucially, how do you *do* self-advocacy or *be* a self-advocate? During the first year of this study I spent several months with Halton Speak Out working alongside self-advocates on a range of projects. I learnt that there are common themes in Halton Speak Out's work which are universal to many self-advocacy organisations. For example, self-advocacy work typically includes campaigning

by or for an individual such as initiatives urging learning disabled people to develop awareness of autonomy and skills in 'speaking out'. Secondly many self-advocacy groups run community-based projects such as improving access to local services such as shops, transport and housing, and finally most groups also participate in national campaigns such as Stay Up Late, the right to vote and initiatives against hate crime.

Early manifestations of self-advocacy campaigns tended to focus on individuals learning the skills of 'speaking for yourself' (Atkinson, 1999; Simons et al, 1993). In the offices of Halton Speak Out there is a large bookcase filled with books, videos and DVDs made and circulated by self-advocacy groups dating back to the 1980s. These items focus on how to do self-advocacy and often "lay a heavy emphasis on education and skill development in areas like taking part in meetings and using the phone" (Buchanan and Walmsley, 2006, p. 135). Many of these earlier campaigns tended to focus on the individual self-advocate in a bid to build skills to support them to assert their voice, for example "Oi! It's My Assessment!" produced by People First in 1993. Whilst undeniably these skills are vital for self-advocates, one criticism rose to this individualised approach to self-advocacy in that by confining it to a personal context, it fails to address the wider political, cultural, economic and social contexts of people's oppression. Therefore it is claimed that learning disabled people remained ignorant of the political and economic factors which lead to their lives being controlled (Aspis, 1997).

However, self-advocacy groups are rarely focused solely on the individuals, there is often a collective focus. For example, self-advocacy groups often aim to affect their local communities. This is demonstrated in Halton Speak Out's Bright Sparks kite marking project. The Bright Sparks kite mark project supports children and young people with learning disabilities[9] to review venues and facilities in their borough for their peers. Funded by the local authority, in 2014 they have checked out 27 venues and facilities with 22 awarded the Bright Sparks quality kite mark award highlighting that they are good places for young learning disabled people to visit and use. Self-advocacy campaigns often explicitly look towards seeking change regarding how their communities perceive them (Pennell, 2001). Specific campaigns of this type include hate crime awareness, employment awareness and the 'label jars, not people' slogan.

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[9] 14 young people trained as kite markers in 2017 according to Halton Speak Out's AGM report.

Stay Up Late is an example of a national campaign Halton Speak Out supports. This originally began as a campaign, but due to widespread success has since turned into a registered charity. Stay Up Late aims to increase learning disabled people's autonomy by promoting their rights to live the lifestyle of their choosing, including the right to enjoy a late night out clubbing, attending gigs or friends. Stay Up Late grew out of the observations and experiences of Heavy Load, a punk band from Brighton consisting of people with and without learning disabilities. During their gigs they noticed an "exodus at 9pm" where learning disabled audiences would leave early due to their support workers "inflexible shifts". (Stay Up Late, 2012). Heavy Load decided to challenge this and began raising awareness using their gigs about the right to stay out late despite shift patterns. The campaign has been adopted by many self-advocacy groups across the UK, and since changing is status into a charity, Stay up Late began awarding grants to self-advocacy groups to support nights out for learning disabled people. What has been successful about Stay Up Late is its dual functions of raising awareness of inflexible support, as well as providing direct grants to ensure late night entertainment can be enjoyed by learning disabled people. Stay Up Late is an example of self-advocates challenging more broadly the lack of autonomy they have regarding their lives. Instead of planning gigs, parties and social events earlier, they looked at the system and saw that it was the way their support was administrated as the real barrier. I believe this indicates that self-advocacy can be a powerful tool and possess real weight in shaping services 'from the outside' (i.e. when not employed by agencies).

In the UK, self-advocacy proliferated with the publication of Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century in 2001, the first White Paper responding specifically to learning disabled people in 30 years. This cross-government strategy aimed to establish a framework for the delivery of health and personal social services for learning disabled children and adults. The four basic principles of Valuing People; rights, independence, choice and inclusion; were also at the heart of the governments strategic thinking concerning all disabled people in Britain. Valuing People highlighted the importance of personalisation in achieving increased autonomy and better lives for disabled people (Department of Health, 2001), and described it as everyone who receives support, whether provided by statutory services or funded by themselves, would be empowered to shape their own life though increased choice and control over the shape of that support (Carr, 2008). In other words, personalisation supports that individuals should have maximum choice and control over the services that affect their lives.

The personalisation agenda in the UK was propelled by two key features; direct payments and person-centred planning. Direct payments, first introduced in 1997, allow disabled people in the UK eligible for adult social care to be able to opt to receive 'direct payments' (a cash sum in lieu of directly provided services). While direct payments can be used to purchase services from a voluntary or private sector agency, many people choose to use the money to employ their own personal assistants (PA), essentially becoming their own care managers. From the beginning, the campaign for direct payments was seen as part of a broader struggle for greater autonomy and independent living, with disability re-defined as being the social, cultural and attitudinal barriers to disabled people participating as equal citizens (Duffy, 2012).

The second key feature of personalisation is person-centred planning. This is a set of approaches designed to assist someone to plan their life and support, and is used most often as a life planning model to enable individuals with disabilities to increase their autonomy, improving their own independence (Department of Health, 2010). Put simply, person-centred planning is a way of discovering what people want, the support they feel they need and how they can get it. It is an evidence-based practice that places emphasis on people's skills, experience and abilities, as appose to what they cannot do, unlike previous social care assessments which has been claimed to have negative effects (Hunter and Ritchie, 2008).

Personalisation was influential in central government, describing it as "a cornerstone of the modernisation of public services" (Department of Health, 2000, p. 4). Whilst traditional modes of social delivery have been argued to produce the dependency of individuals, rather than promoting autonomy, preventing disabled people from obtaining full citizenship rights (Morris, 2006), personalisation seeks to shift power balance. For example, person-centred planning can be described as both an empowering philosophy and a set of tools for change at an individual, a team and an organisational level, as it shifts power from professionals to people who use services. However, Scourfield (1995) argued that changes such as the Direct Payments Act only represent a "qualified form of empowerment" (p. 470) as they do not alter the basic needs-based and means-tested basis of the welfare system. Therefore, a limitation of direct payments is that they have often been bolted on to existing traditional systems with varying degrees of success (Duffy, 2012).

Autonomy… It's Complicated

There is no doubt that self-advocacy and the personalisation agenda made strides in not only challenging the slanted assumptions of the medical paradigm, but also in enabling learning disabled people to adopt a lifestyle of their choosing (Barnes 2004, p. 7). However, the critical concepts underpinning them; *autonomy, independence, self-determination* and *personhood*, are problematic (Burton and Kagan, 2006; Graham, 2010). The liberal principle of autonomy is referred to as vital for learning disabled people (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test and Wood, 2001; Skouge, Kelly, Roberts, Leake and Stodden, 2007; Wehmeyer and Schalock, 2001), and has often been linked in British policy statements; one relating to the "collective rights" of groups of citizens to be self-determining, and the other relating to the "individual's control" over their own life (Williams et al, 2015, p. 107). But some argue autonomy is an unattainable concept, both practically and philosophically (Shakespeare, 2000; Magnus Reindal, 1999; Kittay, 2011; Leshota, 2015), and practitioners and scholars alike have instead drawn attention to the interdependency of all people, claiming "interconnectedness, kinship and relationality" are really the "defining features of what it means to be human" (Leshota, 2015, p. 4). This position is echoed by Steven Smith (2013, p. 29)

> It is better to describe all persons, whether or not impaired, as 'interdependent', rather than either independent or dependent, which then allows agency, autonomy and choice to be promoted as a matter of degree for everyone, recognizing how complex social structures and institutions facilitate this process for all.

Work within disability studies seeking to problematize autonomy has acknowledged the importance of interdependence in resisting binary definitions (McRuer, 2006). Here, there are no singularly 'dependent' or 'independent' bodies but a diverse range of body/minds that exist as a series of complex relations (Davis, 1995; Memmi, 1984). And although the pursuit of autonomy and independence remains a key aim for self-advocates, this sits alongside contemporary concerns regarding its colonization by neoliberal social policies promoting independence as a vehicle for reducing state and social responsibility (Goodley, 2014).

To further understand this question of autonomy and interdependency, disability scholars (Goodley et al 2014) have examined logics of individualism, relationality and interdependency through the

theories of the posthuman condition, primarily theorised in Rosi Bradoitti's seminal text (2013). According to Goodley et al, like poststructuralists and postmodernists before her, Braidotti is clear: "the idealisation of the unitary, rational, independent, dislocated, solitary, able-bodied human subject has been revealed as a fiction" (Goodley et al. 2014, p. 5). The self, subject, person, citizen or human is now firmly "interconnected in an ever growing whirlpool of capital, technology and communication" (ibid). Here, Braidotti describes the need for "critical distance from humanist individualism" (2013, p. 39), and instead stresses the importance of "radical relationality, non-unitary identities and multiple allegiances" (p. 144).

Inclusive Research

As learning disabled people increasingly gained a voice driven via self-advocacy, their involvement in research also became increasingly debated (Nind, 2017). When looking towards how research is conducted with learning disabled people, Anne Chappell (1997) has argued that their views and experiences have not been conveyed in the disability research to the same extent as those of people with physical/sensory impairments. Chappell questions whether it is the very "nature of intellectual/developmental impairment that makes it more likely to create restrictions on the ability of people with learning difficulties to gain positions, for example, as researchers" (p. 56) and become independent changemakers. This is partly due to the barriers in which involvement in academia presents such as lack of accessible media and accreditation. The affect is that the views and experiences of learning disabled people have not been conveyed without the involvement of non-disabled people as 'allies', 'supporters' or 'facilitators', which Chappell believes presents an obvious danger in that non-disabled sympathisers will assume a dominant role, potentially reducing the autonomy of learning disabled researchers. A key issue then emerges, if learning disabled people do require allies to enable them to author research and convey their experiences in a way which is acceptable to universities, researchers, examiners, editors, publishers and other gatekeepers, how should the integrity of their accounts be safeguarded? And what practices can their allies employ to accomplish this? This raises important methodological considerations in how research with learning disabled people is designed and conducted, but also in how it is disseminated and made useful to those 'outside' of the academy. How this research will be made accessible and useful to self-advocates has been a key concern. Whilst an easy-read thesis will be produced via collaborative workshops with the key participants, the research itself has naturally produced methods to enable the work to be more readily used such as zines and collaborative

films.

However, 'Inclusive Research' emerged in response. It can be defined as "research in which people with learning disabilities are active participants, not only as subjects but also as initiators, doers, writers and disseminators of research" (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003, p. 9). Inclusive research emerged as a key aspect of the self-advocacy movement as it aspires the inclusion of learning disabled people in in all stages of research. This supports participants to be active in all aspects of research, changing the nature of power relations in the research, reflecting a turn towards the "democratization of the research process' (Nind, 2014, p. 1). This 'turn' has much crossover with the struggle of disabled artists who sought not just to be recipients of culture, but active authors and makers too. The first generation of inclusive researchers have established the need for learning disabled people to do research, they have worked out how it could be done and established what essential challenges inclusive researchers face.

The Curator

The 'Autonomous' Curator?

Many decades ago the role of curator conjured up images of a singular figure in a museum's basement; tending, caring, and cataloguing collections and artefacts attentively. However, the term 'curator' has moved beyond any singular definition and now occupies a much broader scope of activities, practices and professions. The term 'curator' has its origins in the Latin: 'cura', meaning 'care', and in the Late Middle English: 'curate' as one who has 'a cure or charge'. Whilst this mode of curation still exists, the role has greatly expanded from this behind-the-scenes 'caring' figure whom "tended ground", to one which actively secured, organised and "landscaped it" (Hickey, 2014, p. 40), becoming the visible culturally central figure we know today.

Historically however, curators designed and executed exhibitions alone and this practice was closed to 'non-curators' (Taxén, 2004; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). In the mid-15th century, Italian nobles begun to arrange privately collected artworks, primarily from ancient Greece and Rome, with the specific intention of displaying them to invited guests holding valued social positions. A known example of these kinds of displays is the wunderkammer or 'cabinets of curiosities'. Ferrante Imperato's *Dell'Historia Naturale* in Naples is one of the earliest cabinet of curiosities represented in a wood cut and painting of the same name dating to 1599 (Mauriés, 2002, p. 12). The wood cut depicts a densely packed embellished room of objects, featuring books, shells and marine creatures, and a large stuffed crocodile. Accumulation, definition and classification was the threefold aim of cabinets of curiosities. But display panels, bespoke cabinets, drawers and cases were a response not only to a desire to preserve and classify items but also to "slot each item into its place in a vast network of meanings" (p. 25). Such groupings of objects began the notion of storytelling and narrative within displays and the "construction of a temporally organised order of things and peoples" (Ferguson et al, 1996, p. 101)

As time passed and the cabinets of curiosities evolved and grew in importance and the small private cabinets were absorbed into larger ones. In turn these larger cabinets were bought by gentlemen, noblemen and royalty for their amusement and edification and merged into cabinets so large that they took over entire rooms (Tate, 2017). After a time, these noble and royal collections were

institutionalised and turned into public museums. A well known example is of the *Ark*, the cabinet of curiosity of John Tradescant Senior (1570-1638) and John Tredescant Junior (1608-1662), which became the Ashmole Museum's collection. The Ashmolean Museum is now known as the oldest public museum, and the first purpose built museum in the world.

With the emergence of the public museum in the mid-19th century the group art exhibition format flourished and the curator became an influential figure of knowledge who could draw together artists via master narratives. The curator became a gatekeeper and responsible for "upholding divisions between art and artefact, "high" and "low", practitioner and spectator" (Ault, 2007, p. 38). As Pierre Bourdieu describes, curators evolved into "specialized agents who shaped the economy of cultural goods… capable of imposing a specific measure of the value of the artist and his products" (1993, p. 204). This shaping of cultural goods as Bourdieu describes, involves processes whereby art is "filtered and legitimized" (McIntyre, 2004, p. 4). This process is described by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre as the "subscription process" (ibid). "Subscription" recognises that a series of 'gatekeepers' and 'stakeholders' namely curators, who by interacting with the artist and their art work, add to its critical value and provenance and could be understood as an implicit act of authorship. But some have argued that this traditional mode of curatorship became a standardised, homogenized, institutionalised and object-dominated methodology; the dynamics and activities of which paralleled the art market (Vidoke, 2010). This type of curatorial practice "worked within" (DeLara, 2014, p. 4) the institution and therefore has been accused of creating a distance between the audience and actions of the curator by upholding ideologies, certain systems or value or hierarchies, which are not made apparent to audiences (ibid; Ramirez, 1996).

But it was in the 1960s and 70s that the curator's prominent role was cemented. The wake of conceptualism paved the way for bolder custodial scenarios described as "curatorial expression" (Ventizislavov, 2014, p. 87). This is exemplified in the work of curators Harald Szeemann and Lucy Lippard who undertook "ground-breaking" curatorial projects (Fotiadi, 2014, p. 29) which had similarities with the work of some conceptual artists at the time, for whom the idea of a work takes precedence over traditional aesthetic, technical, and material concerns. In other words, the avant-garde movement among artists was met by an avant-garde movement in curating (Acord, 2010). For instance, *Documenta 5* (1972) is considered a major highlight in the history of contemporary art curating and the "first major exhibition project in which a curator can be seen as creative 'author'" (Fotiadi, 2014, p. 27). Documenta is a major international contemporary art presentation that takes

place every five years in Kassel, Germany. Documenta 5 is considered pioneering due to its radically different presentation that was conceived as a 100-day themed event comprising of performances and happenings, as opposed to static displays. In the shift from the curator as master planner, 'super-curator' Hans Ulrich Obrist (2008) articulates how exhibitions have shifted from a historical approach of order and stability via static displays to a place of flux and instability; the unpredictable. This blurring of lines between artist and curator during this period characterises the conceptualist moment, but this was not always an amicable change. In the case of Documenta 5, artists were "hostile to the powerful Harald Szeeman on more than one occasion" (Balzer, 2014, p. 46), and later a manifesto was signed by artists such as Donald Judd and Sol DeWitt which accused "Szeeman and his co-curators presenting work in themed sections without the artist's consent" (p. 47).

As themed exhibitions formats like this proliferated, the curator's autonomy grew, and subsequently they began to be criticised for superseding the work of artists through the reinforcement of their own authorial claims "that render artists and artworks merely actors and props for illustrating curatorial concepts" (Vidoke, 2010). Implicit here is the idea of autonomy as a zero-sum game; that one person's gain must be equivalent to another's loss, or in other words, as curators gained autonomy the artists' capacity for autonomy was diminished. Paul O'Neill (2012) explores this issue of whether contemporary curators can be recognised artists in their own right. In support of this claim, O'Neill cites theorist Hans-Dieter Huber who believes curatorship has been transformed into "something like a signature, a specific style, a specific image" and "what once was characterised the work of an artist, namely his style, his signature, his name, is now true of the work of the curator" (p. 126). Developing this idea further, curator Jens Hoffmann argues an understanding of the author-curator's work as constituting individual practice due to a "strong creative sensibility" and "apparent artistic development over time" (ibid, p. 97).

However not all agree on the curator's claim to artistry and authorship. Robert Storr, an artist, curator, critic, and educator, wrote a series of articles for Frieze magazine on the subject of curators as artists. He finds the idea that curators as artists to be seriously mistaken, and he traces this mistake back to the various philosophical challenges to authorship, citing Oscar Wilde's The Critic as Artist and Roland Barthes' The Death of the Author discourses. In Barthes' seminal text he rejects the idea of authorial intent, and instead develops a reader-response critical theory, or in his words "the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination" (1967, p. 148). Building on this, Storr

asserts that the curator is not in the business of having aesthetic experiences but of facilitating these for end users. He uses the analogy of a curator "being akin to that of a good literary editor, who may justly take pride in spotting ability and fostering accomplishment but who is otherwise content to function as the probing but respectful 'first reader' of the work" (Storr, 2005). Similarly, Sue Spaid wrote an engaging response to Rossen Ventzislavov whom made the case in his widely-cited thesis that "curating should be understood as fine art" (2014, p. 83). While Spaid agrees that curatorial ideas offer (though only temporarily) a genuine contribution to the life of the artworks involved, she identifies a crucial distinction in that she considers curatorial ideas to "contribute *cognitive* value, not *artistic* value" (Spaid, 2016, p. 87, my italics).

This disagreement was of interest to me during this project as it questions the capacity and role of a curator and their autonomy over exhibitions. I find Spaid's distinction of curatorial ideas adding 'cognitive' and not 'artistic' value to exhibitions most useful in defining the curators' contribution in Auto Agents. The curators on this project worked to alter or add to the work of the artists in Auto Agents through their interpretation and overarching theme. Whilst the artists contributed their own distinct works to the exhibition, they were drawn together and their cognitive meanings transformed through the curator's framework of autonomy. Prior to Auto Agents for example, Turner's Secret Action Paintings had been previously displayed in other exhibitions, however its meaning changed when included in Auto Agents. Turner elaborates;

> Previously the 'Secret Action Paintings' had been included in exhibitions which were specifically orientated towards painting, and consequently tended to be discussed in terms of ideas relating to painting, such as gesture or experimental composition. As far as I know these paintings haven't been discussed in such personal terms of constraint/risk in everyday life before as they were in Auto Agents.

Tuners's physical work had not changed, however the curators' exhibition theme did change the 'cognitive' meaning and interpretation of the work. The theme of autonomy meant her work was now being discussed in terms of personal risk, drawing the piece into new meaning, demonstrating the curator's contribution to the exhibition.

No Curator Is An Island

The enduring question of a curator's authorial and artistic autonomy is revisited and debated. However from reviewing the literature, the image of the curator as single-author is often to some degree a construction. More often than you would expect, and even in the cases of some exhibitions which have been strongly linked to an individual curator's name, innovations in curating have actually resulted from collective or collaborative endeavours. This position intersects with debates in disability studies. In the section, Autonomy…It's Complicated, I demonstrated how autonomy in self-advocacy contexts is also viewed as being enabled not through the individual, but via collective support and action.

For example, the instance of *Documenta 5* (1972) described in the previous section is almost never remembered as a team project but an individual curatorial achievement of Harald Szeemann (Fotiadi, 2014). Though on further research I found this to be not entirely accurate. Bazon Brock, who could be catergorised as co-curator on Documenta 5 described the process of curating the renowned exhibition as; "All the participating artists were named by the different curators, but chosen by collective decisions and of course Harry Szeemann was the moderator-in-chief" (Pesapane, 2009, p. 135). Brock presents the exhibition as a group endeavour with shared decision making, or in other words, as collective or collaborative curatorship. In Individual Methodology where the interview with Brock was published, it is clearly maintained that Documenta 5 had been the most important and complicated curatorial project during the first fifteen years of Szeemann's career. But it is also demonstrated in the same publication through interviews with those working on the exhibition that both in terms of the conception, as well as in its delivery, it was the product of a collaboration with a number of individuals. Here we gain insight into how Szeeman's autonomy as a curator was in fact enabled by a number of individuals. So why is Documenta 5 universally acknowledged as an achievement of Szeemann? Eva Fotiadi believes that it is due to the lack of systematic research on the history of curating that "allowed practitioners in the art world to create a curator's persona as it was more convenient for the professional art world" (2014, p. 27).

But with the increase of new biennials and other large international exhibitions, the 1990s provided new sites where curatorial and artistic practices converged, explicitly blurring the distinction between artist and curator (O'Neill, 2012). Curating became an expanded methodology; emancipating the role of the curator from previous notions of "divine power" (Robbins, 2005, p.

150) and authorship through opening the possibilities of curatorial action. This approach to curating is relational, offering new possibilities of multilateral thinking across disciplines, fields, and so on, inviting dialogue across and between "without any need for any singular author" (De Lara, 2015, p. 5), and crucially here, autonomy is not seen as a zero sum game but as distributed and shared. This shift away from a singular authorial voice was most likely aided by the 1990s and 2000s occupation with audience orientated art such as participatory and relational art practices. This reimagining of curatorship is famously advocated by Obrist who claims that to curate in this sense is; "to refuse static arrangements and permanent alignments and instead to enable conversations and relations." (2014, p. 25).

Obrist shifts authorship to authorship of the conditions for relations. A key example of this 'curatorial action' is the Serpentine Gallery's annual Marathon event. The Marathon format described as Serpentine's "annual festival of ideas" (Serpentine, 2017) was conceived and established in 2005 by the gallery's artistic director Obrist, with the first Marathon taking place in 2006 titled Interview. The Marathons have mostly been organised as annual intense two-day events during the month of October, where a huge variety of participants, (theorists, critics, artists, curators, politicians, scientists, anthropologists, poets, performers etc) from all backgrounds and disciplines are invited to give a short 'presentation' on that year's topic in front of an audience. They have since taken on the following themes: *Experiment* (2007), *Manifesto* (2008), *Poetry* (2009), *Maps* (2010), *Garden* (2011), *Memory* (2012), *89plus* (2013), *Extinction* (2014), *Transformation* (2015) and more recently *Miracle* (2016). On the Marathon events Obrist comments; "The 21st-century curator works in a supremely globalised reality… To keep art stimulating, it's important to open it up to new horizons, which includes showing it in unexpected contexts". Obrist describes the normal museum-going experience like "being on a ski piste: go left, go right… It's too linear, too homogeneous" (Smart, 2010). For Obrist, collaboration is used as a method to disrupt this "linear" museum experience and importantly because of its collaborative approach, the Marathons has no singular authorial voice or power but "a 'polyphonic interlacing', rich in possibilities" (Bourriard, 1998, p. 87). This lack of a singular voice could be interpreted that the format is also non-hierarchical and the actions of the curator, the artist, or the artworks in this context are "not individualized, rejecting the idea that art is autonomous from life" (DeLara, 2015, p. 8).

In 2015 Karen Gaskill undertook PhD research into the social practice of the curator. In this study

Gaskill identified the following characteristics of social curation; "curation as an active and working practice" which is "holistic and responsive". Social curation should also support the "relational, intangible attributes of works in equal measure to the physical, tangible aspects" (2010, p. 125). Her thesis concludes;

> Just as the relational practices of the late 60's and 70's contributed to a new participative aesthetic reflective of the cultural and political changes of the time, Social Curation is reflective of a more thoughtful and considered way of being and interacting with the world (p. 183)

From reviewing the literature, there are certainly similarities between Documenta 5 and the Marathons in that they draw together numerous voices through an expanded exhibition approach. However, Documenta 5, or at least the histories surrounding it, have been less open in regards to how this actually came about and by whom. The Marathons on the other hand, embraces and celebrates a similar format and collaborative approach, positioning it as the programmes core strength.

It has been explored how the role of the curator is contested as an individualised autonomous practice, but it is important to highlight that the same could also be said for the work of an artist, as similarly, art making is often mistakenly conceived as an individual pursuit. We think of the lonesome novelist or painter working in isolation in their studio; a gifted 'genius'. But this persistent myth of the 'genius' artist endowed with great individual insight and skill has been widely disputed from different viewpoints such as feminism (Battersby, 1989; Sousslof, 1997; Parker and Pollock, 1981). In her essay The Cult of the Individual Fran Cottell summarises; "the idea perpetuated by the art market that individual geniuses arrive out of nowhere… is convenient but untrue. Artists invariably arrive at artistic solutions as a result of… social influences as well as for intellectual reasons." (p. 87). In fact, many claim "art is always social" (Lord and Lord, 2010, p. 42) and equally, other have drawn attention to the "extensive divisions of labor" between numerous individuals and groups within art making (Howard Saul Becker, 1982, p. 13). But how explicit artists and curators are about this "divisions of labor" as Becker describes, became of particular interest to me during this project.

Curator as Commissioner

In addition to curatorial themes, curators have also been recognised to demonstrate capacity for authorship via commissioning. The commissioning of art is an age-old activity. For example, around 30 AD, the Roman emperor Nero famously commissioned Famulus to paint his epic 300-room villa as the artist was known for "swiftness and delicacy of touch" (Buck and McClean, 2012, p. 16). Early examples of commissioning such as this tended to take the form of direct patronage from an individual of status to an artist. Whether artists were commissioned for prestige, propaganda, celebration, commemoration or philanthropy, the act of commissioning art has traditionally been associated with status and considered "the highest level of artistic and cultural engagement" (ibid, p. 17).

Today, commissions are less frequently granted to artists by individual patrons and more commonly by curators via an institutional capacity, enabling artists to create new work by providing them with financial, institutional and professional support. There are many complex challenges entangled with commissioning new artworks: conceptual, authorial, cultural, ethical, managerial, financial, legal and even emotional. Equally, there is no single way to commission contemporary art, the approaches to commissioning are often as unique and specific as the artworks generated. It is precisely this element of being at the cutting edge of creativity that makes commissioning such an exciting activity. Often commissioners become "intimately involved in their artists' lives" through socialising and visiting studios, providing not only funding but also space, materials and feedback (Ryckman, 2007). For example, one of the world's most respected private patrons is Cincinnati car dealer Andy Stillpass, who for over a decade has invited artists to stay and make often modest works for his family home, declaring that: "By commissioning works, I feel that I am commissioning experiences. I love the works that have resulted … but just as important are the memories and the experience of working closely with artists" (Buck, 2012). Here we see an example showing that commissioning art is not simply an individual autonomous act by curators and patrons, but also a relational practice.

But *how* is art commissioned? Becker claims that in an efficient patronage system, artists and patrons "share conventions and an aesthetic through which they can cooperate to produce work, the patrons providing support and direction, the artists creativity and execution" (1982, p. 103). However, Becker makes this distinction deceptively straightforward. I discovered many models of

authorship in the arts. Co-authorship or "joint authorship" as Paisley Livingston suggests, requires uncoerced, cooperative activity between 'authors' involving shared intentions tied up in mutual beliefs held in common with regards to the work. Artistic collaboration amounting to co-authorship requires a coordination of art-making intentions and intentional actions. The difference between multiple authorship and co-authorship comes back to the issue of responsibility. Does an author take responsibility for just his contribution to the work or for the work as a whole? Where that work is made up of discrete, identifiable units of authorship, that work is multiply authored. And where that work is a "unified whole without discrete, identifiable units of authorship, that work is co-authored" (Hick, 2014, p. 153). Much (Lydigate, 2012; Buck and McClean, 2012) of the literature surrounding contemporary commissioning of artists addresses the issues of authorship and circles around best practice solutions in maintaining good working relationships.

To commission art for Auto Agents, I spent much time exploring how the authorial boundaries could be made transparent for the curators, which is further outlined Act 3: The Commissioners and The Commissioned. In Buck and McClean's comprehensive book Commissioning Contemporary Art: A Handbook for Curators and Artists, an entire chapter is dedicated to "Reaching an Agreement" (2012, p. 217). Here different models of agreements are discussed from informal agreements generated through correspondence, to legally binding contracts. Whilst legally binding contracts offer a solid sense of clarity and assurance, artist Jeremy Deller remains wary of signing binding agreements; "I try not to sign any piece of paper… to commit myself to this or that, or the other, or to stick to an idea… and why would you when the work is in progress?" (Buck and McClean, 2012, p. 218). The very nature of making art is often responsive and reflexive and therefore must require flexibility in agreements. With this in mind, it is becoming common place that commissioning contracts enable revisions to take place at different stages. But perhaps more complex is the issue of intellectual property rights. How should an artwork be credited, particularly if a collaborative commissioning process model was employed? Here 'moral rights of authorship' are articulated as separate to 'actual ownership' of the physical work.

Is Everybody a Curator?

The word 'curate' is not the museum specific term it once was (Balzer, 2015). During the period I was preparing this literature review, I happened to visit a restaurant in the 'hipster' part of

Liverpool. As I scanned the menu my eyes are drawn to towards a curious phrase; 'curated by the head chef'. This is not the first time I've seen 'curate' appear in unexpected contexts. Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow now 'curates' a weekly online lifestyle publication Goop[10], Firefly in Delaware became the first "fan curated music festival" in 2017[11] and you can even download an app to help you 'curate' your funeral[12]. It appears curatorship is becoming a concept increasingly dislocated from the gallery, but why? This shift also raises further questions; Should the term curator be used broadly or narrowly? Can it cover professional museum curators as well as Pinterest boards? And does this mean in some way, we are all curators?

The rise of the term 'curate' to describe the activities of 'owners' of social media spaces, blogs and wikis appears to reflect an "agentive turn to meta-authorship" among larger numbers of participants in online media (McDougall and Potter, 2015, p. 201). Michael Bhaskar's book Curation: The Power of Selection in a World of Excess suggests curation became a "buzzword" because it answered a set of modern problems; "the problems caused by having too much" (2016, p. 6). With increased productivity, resources, communication and data, the more 'stuff' we produce as a society, the more valuable curatorial skills are becoming. 'Curate' as a label with its "scholarly pedigree, is more prestigious and thus deserving of a high price" rather than 'selected' or 'organised' (Kingston, 2011) and thus is becoming synonymous with the act of a 'careful selection', with comedian Stewart Lee quipping in response to ambiguous 'curated events'; "it is reassuring to know that it has been curated, whatever it is" (Lee, 2016).

But where does this leave the gallery? In the art world, there are an increasing number of projects that transfer the curatorial responsibility over to the public. A notable example of this is Per Hüttner's project *I am a Curator* (2003) at the Chisendale Gallery, London. This exhibition invited the public to apply to be a curator for the day, and with over 70 artworks to select from, individuals worked with the gallery team for an afternoon in realising an exhibition. Other models invite the audience to select works via online possibilities. Do It With Others (DIWO), a project hosted by Furtherfield (2007). This drew reference from Fluxus's Mail Art projects in creating an e-mail art exhibition where users submitted their artworks and their own ordering and selection strategies for public consideration. Another event using online platforms is Click! at the Brooklyn Museum in

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[10] See Goop website: http://goop.com/whats-goop/

[11] See article 'Delaware festival Firefly to become first fan-curated music festival in 2017' (NME, 2017)

[12] See article 'Death apps promise to help people curate their afterlives' (The Guardian, 2016)

2008, defined itself as a 'crowd curated' exhibition, and invited the museums visitors, online audiences and the public to be responsible for the selection process. Click! asked photographers to submit their work with the public then being responsible for the final selection. The explosion of social media has also accelerated curatorial ways of thinking. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Tumblr and Snapchat enable users to collect and collate images and text for an audience of friends and strangers which "has become a ubiquitous, quintessentially 21st century act." (Borrelli, 2013). Even Sotheby's advises artists how to 'curate' an Instagram account for the art world[13]. In 2013, the Essl Museum in Klosterneuburg, Austria, hosted Like It, a permanent-collection exhibition based on solely on Facebook likes.

Some in the museum sector are unhappy about 'curate' being used in this way (Booth, 2012), but arguably this approach to curating is more democratic or inclusive as it allows a broader range of voices to be included in the valuing and recognition of art. But through the broadening of voices, the 'quality' of the exhibition gets called into question. The same critique is also applied to inclusive arts and participatory arts practices which employ audience engagement, on which arts journalist Ray Mark Rinaldi (2012, no pagnation) comments, "when audiences become a variable, the quality of art varies a great deal".

However an opinion poll of 'likes' or crowdsourcing art for an exhibition is not representative of curatorship. Curating is more than just choosing and displaying, it is about understanding and demonstrating how critically informed decisions fit into a wider matrix of linkages and publics. Curating is a critically-engaged rigorous process, and this study proposes that there are ways of engaging a wide spectrum of people with curating by reconfiguring the framework for critical decision making using inclusive and participatory approaches. Can anyone be a curator? I believe most people can. But to engage 'anyone' with this practice, it must be underpinned by a rigorous process to ensure a critical eye has been cast. Therefore for this project, I paid particular attention to developing ways to support the curators to be critical in their role.

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[13] See article 'Curating an Instagram Account for the Art World' (Sotheby's, 2016)

Act 2: So, What Is A Curator Anyway?

SCENE 1: SO, WHAT IS A CURATOR ANYWAY?

In the Makin Room, Bluecoat. Eddie talks to Jade whilst unpacking his lunch into the fridge as the first workshop is about to begin.

EDDIE: So, what is a curator anyway? I mean, I remember Sarah-Jayne [Bluecoat's previous curator], but she doesn't work here anymore. Couldn't tell you what she did.

A monumental question asked so casually, and at that particular moment, I had no answer. This brief interchange with Eddie on our very first workshop cuts to the heart of a key question within this study – what does a curator do, and why is there so much confusion about it? As discussed in Act 1: The Prologue, the curator's role has diverged, expanded, become professionalised, and is more visible than ever before. But still curators are perceived to be somewhat elusive. Described even by those working in the arts as "working behind the scenes in an opaque job" (Neuendorf, 2016) and moving in "quiet and mysterious ways… with something tantamount to divine power." (Robbins, 2005, p. 150). This 'opaqueness' surrounding the curator feeds into that sense of 'mystery' keenly observed by Eddie, and so it became my task for this study to demystify what a curator is by breaking down and interrogating the curatorial process itself.

In the first phase of this study which lasted for three months we focused on exploring what a curator is, but more importantly, what they do. Keeping in mind inclusive and participatory action research approaches, it was important for me as a facilitator and researcher to root exploration within 'doing' because for learning disabled people often "making sense has a lot to do with making" (Streeck, 1996, p. 383). Therefore our starting point was the gallery itself and for the first few months we visited as many examples of curator's work 'in action'. This meant meeting curators and visiting many exhibitions, galleries, studios, artistic interventions and a biennial across Liverpool. This included sites such as Tate Liverpool, FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), The World Museum, Museum of Liverpool, Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool Biennial (including temporary sites such as Cains Brewery and ABC Cinema), The Walker Art Gallery as well as regularly visiting the changing programme at Bluecoat. By doing this I wanted to support the

curators to research what artistically was happening around them and to observe different curatorial styles from different curators across different institutions.

Visiting Galleries and Museums

Whilst the group visited a range of exhibitions in this first research phase, I have chosen to discuss two visits in detail due to the central part they played in the project. Our first visit was to Tate Liverpool on 25th January 2016. At this time Tate Liverpool was exhibiting a large show from their permanent collection titled DLA Piper Series: Constellations in addition to a touring exhibition by Henri Matisse titled Mastisse in Focus.

The *DLA Piper Series: Constellations* (2013-ongoing) exhibition comprised of items from Tate's permanent collection. The exhibition was curated to present artworks in 'constellations' or clusters, with special works selected to act as the originating 'star' because of their "continuous revolutionary effect on modern and contemporary art" (Tate Liverpool, 2013). Each of the 'star' artworks were displayed among a group of artworks that relate to them, and to each other, often across time and location of origin, encouraging visitors to discover similarities between works of art that at first glance, may have seemed very different.

What interested me about this exhibition was in its marketing and interpretation there appeared to be an assumption that both the gallery and curator has a duty to 'educate' the visitor. In the exhibition's press release Tate Liverpool's Executive Director Andrea Nixon claims that the show is "broadening visitors' knowledge and understanding of modern and contemporary art" (ibid), whilst Artistic Director Francesco Manacorda stated that the exhibition will "encourage visitors to 'join the dots' between artworks" (ibid). Curatorial practices in 19th century galleries and museums (practices that dominated well into the 20th century) echoed this description, "perceiving visitors to be deficient, lacking knowledge and in need of instruction" (Robbins, 2005, p. 151). Although attitudes have changed (Hein, 2008), there is still a sense in which curators appear to be responsible for providing special insight and knowledge to gallery and museum goers who require cultural education. I wondered how the group would relate to this curatorial approach and whether an exhibition curated based on making links within genres - historic, genre, political - would present a barrier for them. In preparation for our visit to Tate Liverpool I had designed some activities for the

group. Responding to the exhibition's concept of 'joining the dots between art', I asked the group to find two artworks which they thought had something in common, to sketch and describe them. Here, I wanted to see if the Tate's curators' intention of presenting artworks in 'clusters' was successful for the group, and to see the connections they might make on their own.

Leah chose a series of nine black and white *Untitled* (1991) photographs by Victor Burgin and a piece titled *Walking Dream with Four Foot Clamp* (1965) by Jim Dine. At first she said they were both black and white and that was her connection. When I returned to chat to Leah after she had been sketching a while, she had then noticed that the two pieces both features legs (I had not spotted that one of the photographs in the Burgin series was a close up of a woman's legs). She also told me they both were "made up of parts". I was not sure what she meant by this at first but later I spotted that the painting of legs was actually not one canvas, but a triptych. Both artworks Leah had selected comprised sections of images arranged to appear as a whole.

Diana was very drawn to the more traditional art in the exhibition and selected two paintings because they both featured portraits of men and were displayed in "special gold frames". Hannah spent a lot of time drawing her first artwork which was a painting of a bedroom. Hannah struggled to understand the instructions to find something in connection to it and did not recognise the curators intended connection (described via text) regarding painting style. However, with one-on-one support she spotted a painting detailing the inside of a window, and so both of her selected artworks were paintings of domestic settings. When providing one-on-one support, often I am supporting someone to navigate a decision-making process. In this instance, Hannah needed support to break down the question of 'finding two artworks with something in common'. Both Hannah and Diana needed further support to think beyond what the artwork depicted to considering what it could mean or the context in which it was made.

In complete contrast, Eddie selected a Christo sketch titled *Christo's Valley Curtain (For Colorado)* depicting one of his famous swathes of material in a landscape. The similar artwork he chose was Man Ray's *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse* (1920, remade 1972), which essentially is a sewing machine wrapped in material and tied with string. Eddie was interested in the similar use of material but more so in the concepts of "hiding" and concealing. He asked a lot of questions about both of the artists' intentions behind using the material and I sensed that for him there was a real connection in the 'why' behind the artwork.

Tony had a slightly different approach and chose to sketch the first artwork simply because he really liked it. It was a modern sculpture made of plastic; which to him resembled a clock. After completing his sketch, he then decided to draw a wire and bronze sculpture. I assumed Tony had selected the second artwork because it too was a sculpture but instead he said that he chose as it was "futuristic" and modern "like the modern clock". Tony seemed to be placing his own narrative on the sculptures – deciding on what they looked like and what they could be from the future.

The concept underpinning the DLA Piper Series: Constellations exhibition is that art is connected; whether via artistic movements, time periods, politics, or technique; the underlying implication is this exhibition would offer visitors insight and education into these connections. Many curators employ this approach in that they curate work in a way that the art 'talks' to each other, so this was a key skill for the group to identify and develop. However, this desired curatorial approach did not entirely work for the group. The group made no connections between genres, times periods, artistic style or artist collectives as the exhibition intended. Instead the group focused on connections between materials, texture, colour and interestingly narrative; making interesting connections and not ones I would have necessarily seen myself as they were drawn from personal experiences. On the whole, their connections emerged from observable physical forms and stories which gave me a useful insight into how to approach working with the group. From this I sensed the group would successfully be able to relate to artists and their work if I used personal experience as the starting point.

We then headed upstairs to see the next floor of the exhibition for which I had a new activity planned. I asked the group to select and sketch one artwork – one artwork they *did not like* and would take out of the exhibition given the opportunity. I asked the group to undertake this activity as learning disabled artists are often asked to think about what they do like but not often about what they do not like. They all said that they liked everything and "everything is good". I found this hard to believe, I very rarely like *everything* in an exhibition, there is usually an edit, however small, I would make. Their reaction however, did not surprise me. I have often found this when working with other learning disabled groups – there is often difficulty in expressing opinions about things they do not like. But why is this the case? Is it verbal skills? Critical skills? Or because when dislikes or negative emotions are expressed they are sometimes dismissed under the umbrella of 'challenging behaviour'? Valerie Sinason, child psychotherapist and adult psychoanalyst specialising in learning disability, proposed a theory in the early 1990s called the "handicapped smile" (1992).

This term refers to the habit of compliancy, happiness and smiling despite pain or negative emotions, in order to be accepted and maintain the status quo. This "outward sign of a psychic defence" (Lloyd, 2009, p. 63) guards and disguises intense pain (for themselves and for others), "the body attempting to make a self-effacing apology for the mind within" (Fonagy, 1993, p. 118). Whilst I am not convinced that this is necessarily the case, it was clear that as we looked at the role of the curator we also needed to develop ideas of critical engagement, and with some support, everyone eventually chose something that they would take out of the exhibition. It was here I identified and learnt something important in terms of my facilitation for this study: I needed to think carefully on how to frame critical questions to the group. Instead of asking the curators what they did not like and polarising their opinions automatically, I instead asked; 'which one would they edit out?' or 'which one doesn't work for what you're trying to say at the moment?' I took this approach forward to the next phase of the study when the curators are required to make selections or edits as 'liking' and 'disliking' are too simplistic a concept for curating.

For the final activity of the day at Tate Liverpool we explored Matisse In Focus. The exhibition, curated by Tate Liverpool's Assistant Curator Stephanie Straine, displayed Matisse's famous The Snail from his later cut out works for the first time in any UK gallery outside of London. I was surprised to see that *The Snail* (1953) was the only piece from his cut out series with the exhibition predominantly showcasing his bronze works and paintings. The group also picked up on this, all choosing to sketch The Snail but none of the other pieces. After an initial look around I asked the group to write or draw in their sketch books what they saw in the gallery other than the art work. I gave them the example of the Matisse catalogue found on a bench which was there so visitors could look at his other work, or perhaps be encouraged to buy it from the Tate's shop. I asked the group to do this activity as I wanted to support them to take notice of what else is included in an exhibition and reflect on why it is there. An exhibition usually contains more than just the artworks themselves and the group would have to think about what they wish to include in their own exhibit.

This activity yielded some interesting responses. Leah was one of the only curators to record textual items including artist statements and the main gallery text, most likely because she is the only group member who is able to read and write independently. Most of the group drew a picture of the 'Make it Station', a trolley of materials in which the audience are invited to make their own Matisse cut out. At the time the station was mobbed by children and they were interested in the idea of making in the gallery. We all commented on the injection of fun and energy it brought into

the space, whereas for other gallery-goers it seemed an unwanted and distracting presence.

Diana had some interesting observations. She sketched the gallery invigilator whom she had been chatting to and next to her drawing wrote the invigilators name. When I asked Diana why she had recorded the staff member she said "the staff are important they can help you". This opened up lots of conversation with the group about how they may incorporate staff such as training them and tours, particularly if you are unable to read. For the group, this developed their ideas of curating. Here we gained an insight; curating is not just selecting and putting works on walls, it is entangled with the whole way the gallery works.

All of the group recorded that there was a projector playing a film in the gallery.

SCENE 2: THE FELLA WITH THE SCISSORS

At Tate Liverpool visiting the Matisse in Focus exhibition. The group are watching a video of Matisse who is creating his cut out artworks with the help of an assistant. There is no audio to the black and white projection.

JADE: So what do we think of the film then?

HANNAH: Good, yeah I like it, yeah, I drew it!

EDDIE: Yeah I like this, who's the fella with the scissors then?

JADE: It's Henri Matisse. That's whose exhibition it is and whose artwork is in the gallery. Can you see he's making a similar piece to that one over there?

[Jade points to The Snail artwork behind them]

EDDIE: Oh yeah! Yeah I like this, it says a lot doesn't it?

LEAH: Is Matisse disabled? He looks like he's getting help from that woman?

JADE: Yeah towards the end of his life, I guess he was.

EDDIE: I'd like one of these videos in our show. It just works doesn't it? Tells you everything.

This video[14] showed Matisse making his work and the scene above took place in response to it. The group were captivated. Eddie in particular raved about the use of film and wrote down in his sketch

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[14] [MATISSE], rushes. Director F. Rossif, 1950, colour, silent, 8 minutes. On loan from the Cinémathèque Française.

book that he would want something similar in his own exhibition. This scene was a pivotal moment for the curators and one that they frequently returned to in response to the question of interpretation and giving their own exhibition meaning and context for visitors. Throughout the project, they felt this was the most successful example of gallery interpretation they had come across. Further discussion on interpretation in Act 4: Auto Agents.

During the course of this study Halton Speak Out began increasingly using film. In 2014 Halton Speak Out's performing arts group Ella Together collaborated on a film titled We Are People Too. This short film, based on a poem written by Leah of the same name[15], features writing, acting, directing and filming by self-advocates. It follows a young woman over the course of an ordinary day experiencing discrimination and bullying for being 'different'. In this film the protagonist appears not to have a disability, whilst the rest of the cast does. The majority/minority is flipped placing the self-advocates in an empowering position and, as Leah describes, "being the ones doing the staring and not being stared at for a change". Halton Speak Out consider film a medium which is more accessible than easy read reports, as it does not rely on an individual's ability to read or write. The use of film within Inclusive Arts has also grown considerably, reflected in the success of Oska Bright Film Festival run annually by Carousel since 2004, as well as becoming more commonplace in research. An early case study on the adoption of film into research is titled Plain Facts which was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and was in circulation for over ten years, between 1995 and 2007. Plain Facts aimed to provide accessible research summaries for learning disabled people and two researchers in particular, Ruth Towson and Julian Goodwin at the Norah Fry research centre, considered the use of film. Goodwin (2015, p. 98) who identifies with having a learning disability reflected:

> I think that using film is something that we will keep doing in getting information
> to people with learning disabilities. I think that the films need to be on YouTube
> so people with learning disabilities can find them easily. People do have
> computers but they only use the websites they know, to find things.

However, the use of film to capture people's 'voices' to me implies that film is capable of capturing an authentic representation, but my professional background in photography leaves me sceptical

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[15] Leah's orginal poem can be found on her website: https://www.positiveyouwithleah.com/we-are-people-too.html

about this. Films relationship to portraying 'reality' is strained and to me it more accurately straddles "fact and fiction, art and document, entertainment and knowledge" (2004, p. 73). Just like other visual art forms, film is constructed, framed and edited by the film maker or photographer.

The second visit I shall discuss took place on the 22nd February 2016, four weeks after Tate Liverpool, to Museum of Liverpool. Having opened in 2011 replacing the former Museum of Liverpool Life, its purpose is to tell the story of Liverpool and its people, and reflect the city's "global significance" (Museum of Liverpool, 2017). Whilst not housing much contemporary art, I felt it was important for the group to visit as it is generally regarded as a key space in Liverpool for culture. Museum of Liverpool also presented an opportunity to experience and discuss multi-sensory exhibitions which from my own experience, museums tend towards more so than galleries. On display was The People's Republic, an exhibition all about people from Liverpool with a focus on social change.

During the morning of the visit, we explored the downstairs galleries which included The Global City and The Great Port. These galleries place a focus on Liverpool's historic past as a key port in Europe with many historical objects, photographs, recreated objects and some artworks. There are many display cases, projected films, and interactive objects for visitors. I asked the group to explore these spaces and find three different types of sensory objects; something they could touch, smell and wear. This exercise was intended to support the group to take notice more closely of what is around them and to record types of engagement not previously encountered at galleries. The entire group recognised how differently the Museum of Liverpool was curated in comparison to the Tate Liverpool and Walker Art Gallery, "it's much busier and full" commented Eddie, "there's stuff everywhere" - a stark comparison to Tate Liverpool's bright white walls and minimal display approach. Leah and Hannah really enjoyed the interactive aspects of the museum, particularly dressing up in the Kimono's found in the China Town section (with Hannah even acting in her costume!). Leah said it reminded her of being at Ella and that "getting involved is always more fun". Everyone managed to find items from my list in the galleries but Tony did comment that he felt like "it's for kids". I'm not sure whether that was because there was a school trip in the gallery or that he felt that the interactive nature was more aimed at children. How much audience interaction should be presented in their own exhibition was debated by the group. As we can see from this example, some felt that more interaction the better, whilst others felt it might be too childlike or deemed less serious. For their own exhibition, the group worked with the artists to negotiate the

level of engagement, and the conversation gradually changed. It became less about *how much or how little*, and more about *how does interaction help the audience connect with the ideas*?

In the afternoon we headed to The People's Republic. The group seemed to really enjoy this space; the mix of old historic pieces such as the women's suffrage case and newer creative pieces like the Liverpool Map (an artistic glass map created for Liverpool Biennial 2008). After an initial look around, I asked the group to find a piece which they "felt told an important story". With this activity I was trying to get the group to look beyond the visual appeal of the items to consider that the items represented. In the exhibition many different stories were told including unemployment, wartime Liverpool, Liverpool's changing housing, Gay pride in Liverpool, the historic architecture and the famous scouse accent.

All the group spent a lot of time in *Court Housing*. This installation aims to enable visitors to "experience life in 26 Court, Burlington Street, North Liverpool in 1870". This is in the Scotland Road area, one of the most overcrowded and neglected parts of Victorian Liverpool. Small houses built off dark, narrow courtyards provided cheap housing for the huge numbers of people moving to the city at the time. This was a really memorable piece for the group as they all spent quite some time in it sketching. There were soundscapes within the space which brought to life residents stories and were very popular with the group. It was also memorable as they all found the privy (and toilet related noises) totally hilarious! Lots of conversations ensued how the curator of this installation managed to make it fun even though it was dealing with the "sad" topic of poor housing conditions which people had to endure. Is it appropriate, we asked, to make light of a serious subject? Or is the fun element doing a great job of engaging people? This was a great example, and one I returned to throughout the project, to discuss how a curator's decision can be interpreted differently by different people. Some could find the toilet humour funny, others could find it distasteful.

Leah found this exercise particularly enjoyable and was quick to look around and pick her piece. She chose the women's poppy memorial, a small found room in the gallery with the walls decorated with veterans' names, medals and a sound scape. Leah spent a long time listening to the pieces and was able to describe the narratives to me. She felt like "the curator has made it of people's experiences of their family's pasts about those who were in wars/RAF fighting for their lives. I am passionate about the connection to this story as my poppa used to fly in the RAF…". Myself and Leah also talked about the bespoke structure the curator had designed. She felt like it had been

made as a place to retreat and reflect. Leah also commented that the idea of "important stories" is not new to her and is often used in her self-advocacy work. Often she has helped people "record their important stories" and I vividly remember Leah sharing her own life story book with me during my first year of this study.

Life story is a tool which has been adopted in self-advocacy practices (Atkinson 1997; Hewitt 1998, 2000), but has also played an important part in the emergent methodologies of inclusive and participatory research (Goodley 1996; Goodley, Lawtham, Clough and Moore, 2004). As Helen Hewitt suggests, there is no right or wrong way to compile a life story book, which only "emphasises their individual nature" (2003, p. 22). They can be a simple poster with photos that are important to the person, a scrap book that is continually added to or computerised document. It is thought that life story books originated in social services settings for use with children who were being placed for adoption and fostering (Ryan and Walker, 1985, 1993), but since then they have been increasingly used with learning disabled people (Bogdan and Taylor 1982; Walmsley 1995; Atkinson 1997; Hewitt 1998), particularly in care settings during transitions like changing accommodation, as there is a risk that the stories and experiences a person has had, could be lost (Ledger, 2012). This is especially true if staff who have known the person for a number of years do not move with them.

During my years as a support worker for Mencap, many of my warmest memories about my job are about people showing me their life story books. They enable you very quickly to see what is important to that person and as Hewitt (1998) suggests, they encourage people to see that person as an individual, moving beyond the parameters of care plans, where the information about the person is limited to that of a clinical nature and are very future-orientated, meaning there is a considerable risk that "the past is filtered out" (Moya, 2009, p. 136). Some researchers and practitioners also propose that life story books are not just a biographical account, but also a tool for self-advocacy (Meininger, 2006). Hreinsdóttir et al. propose that the telling of a life story is "in itself, an important act of 'speaking up'" as it gives a voice to a previously silenced and excluded group (2006, p. 159).

Reflecting On Visits Together

Back at Bluecoat, we began reflecting on our gallery and museum visits by making zines. Zines

(pronounced 'zeens') can be classified as self-published, low-budget, non-profit DIY (do-it-yourself) print publications. There are no hard and fast rules to what a zine should look like, but they mostly are photocopied or uniquely printed booklets, stapled or bound in a creative way, featuring text (typed or handwritten) and images (photos, cut and paste, drawings). As well as looking very different, the content and subject of zines also varies hugely. Originally zines were born out of fandom; particularly sci-fi, music, sport and reworking's of pop culture iconography. In the late 1970's punk zines became very popular in response to the rising popularity of the punk music scene, however these often excluded the voices of women and ethnic minorities. Thus a wave of zines emerged in the 1980's and 1990's around feminism, racism and "all variety of personal and political narratives" (Piepmeier, 2008, p. 214). Once created, zines are distributed in various ways. Sometimes zines are created and distributed with a small niche community of existing friends and other zinesters, other times they circulate in and beyond their original communities and can be traded or sold via zine distributors (known as distros), at zine fairs, record shops and also found in community spaces such as libraries. With no regular copy schedule, subscription list, international book numbers, or professional print quality, most cut-and-paste zines circulate through informal distribution networks, which for me, highlights not just the materiality of the object, but its unusual audience.

The decision to make zines with the group was primarily due to their flexible physical format. As zines are so visually diverse I felt that this opened up a wide scope of expression which could include text, images (both sketched and found), ephemera and mark making. However, in addition to the way zines look, I am also interested in how they speak to issues of inclusion and exclusion; key issues in both museological and self-advocacy contexts. On the one hand, zines can be seen as incredibly inclusive in that anyone can make one with less technical skill, specialist equipment or training. But on the other hand, zines can be viewed as exclusionary in that they are often made with the intention to be distributed amongst a very specific niche audience with little regard to attracting an 'outside' readership. Whilst this is useful in challenging notions of what 'knowing' might be and who gets to determine its legitimacy (as appose to more formal publishing routes which require an institutional review and approval of some kind), zine makers run the risk of limiting the social or political work their zines could achieve through intentionally excluding the majority. Janice Radway suggests a zine makers validation comes with not only finding an audience, but also "pursuing actual connections with those who read their zines, wrote back, and offered their own zines in exchange" (2011, p. 147). I believe this relationship also is also evident in self-

advocacy. Self-advocacy researcher Anne-Marie Callus claims, "there are two parties to making self-advocacy work: people with intellectual disability speaking out and other people listening to what they have to say" (2013, p. 1), emphasising the importance for expression not just to be made, but to be acknowledged. It strikes me that what zine makers and self-advocates appear to have in common is the desire to communicate their work to specific audiences. Whether a zinester reaching out to fellow feminists, or a self-advocate reaching out to care providers, both aim to spark dialogue to a targeted group.

In our first reflective workshop I showed the group a selection of zines from my personal collection. Many of the zines I have collected over the years feature artist zines, feminist zines as well as some disability themed zines. The group were amazed by the sheer variety and were all enthusiastic and curious about *who* had made them. I decided to use this particular reflective workshop to do a check back with the group, going over some old ground to see what they remembered and what was resonating from recent gallery and museum visits. I asked them to think about 'what's inside an art exhibition', based on the activity we had done together in Tate Liverpool. With little prompting the group came up with ideas; staff, artwork, information, and with the help of their sketchbooks, they were able to contribute more. We wrote down these ideas and from them created a zine. The group approached this task by selecting an idea such as 'gallery staff', and then searched through old newspapers and magazines to find images or words they felt corresponded with it. What is worth noting about zining using this traditional cut and paste method is that often what you create is very much shaped by the materials in front of you at that time. Once pictures and words were collected, they began arranging and editing them on a page.

Leah's first zine page was particularly striking. In response to the zine's topic of 'what's inside an art exhibition', Leah made a page around 'artwork' for which she selected an image of painted women and the word 'status' as mentioned in Act 1: The Prologue. This immediately caught my attention as 'status' is not a word I have witnessed Leah use before. I asked Leah why she chose to include the word status and she replied, "it means you're important". I was intrigued to know in what context she had encountered 'status', perhaps it was her role as a self-advocate? Apparently not. Leah had heard it "on TV somewhere". Here I am reminded of the power of TV and stories, demonstrating the role of storytelling as a crucial meaning making device for this project.

After lunch, we focused on thinking about our visit to the Museum of Liverpool. The group

discussed their most memorable moments which centred around the The People's Republic and in particular, the Court Housing installation. In response to this piece I asked the group to think about their own housing and living, and to tell a story by creating a picture. Alongside their picture like the Court Housing installation, they could also create a soundscape of themselves describing their picture and 'telling their story'. This activity really captivated the group and everyone was energized by the idea of combining both sound and images which for me was quite telling. Later in the project when we progressed to using moving image and sound to develop interpretation, I was confident that the approach engaged the group and it reflected their interests. I feel it is important to mention however that the group did not always respond as enthusiastically to all activities. Whilst always professional and obliging during the project, now and again their reaction would be lukewarm or someone would ask; "can we do something else now?". Comments like these were crucial markers for me. Just as when I noticed specific techniques resonated with the group – like combining images and sounds – it was equally important for me to gauge when an approach was less successful. This informed how to refine the ways in which to work with the group, and later, in facilitating the artists to effectively work with them too, which was important given the limited time frame of their collaboration.

During this activity, the group all produced very different work. Diana created a piece which resembled life story work. It detailed throughout her life all of the different places she had lived and the 'good' and 'bad' support she had received. Diana told the story of her multiple housing situation and how in care she was made to live in many places as a child from "with the nuns" to a "sort of boarding school which I didn't like". With her image which is a collage of small pictures, words and descriptions she made a sound recording.

Leah produced a drawing depicting what she recognises as the biggest shift in her living situation; moving from her home in Widnes, where she grew up, to her current home in Runcorn. On one side the page Leah drew her friends and family in Widnes and on the other, her family home in Runcorn and separating the two is the Runcorn Widnes bridge. "I have a social P.A now who helps me go back to Widnes and catch up with people" Leah explained, "he knows all the same people as me you see". It was interesting to learn that Leah specifically employs somebody to support her to stay connected to people in her past, as often we do not think of a support worker in these contexts. We think of support workers as somebody to assist with everyday tasks of living "an ordinary life" (Windley and Chapman, 2010, p. 38), but this connection surely supports Leah's pursuit of a 'good

life'? (Johnson, Walmsley and Wolfe, 2010).

An Exhibition Theme Emerges

After nearly three months of visiting galleries and museums, what was emerging was an interest in exhibitions or displays that related to personal stories or histories. In previous weeks we had been exploring the groups housing experiences based on the Court Housing installation at the Museum of Liverpool, and the group conversations coalesced around issues of independent living and levels of support. Building on this interest, I asked the group to make an artwork based on the word 'independence'. This idea came from a previous discussion around support and different types of support experienced by the group. I advised the group they could imagine that word in any way they wanted through any material in the studio.

Hannah created a large-scale mixed media image of a stage with herself on it. The stage is adorned with theatrical plush red velvet curtains and the Ella Together logo (Halton Speak Out's performing arts group of which she is a member) which she printed and carefully cut out. Underneath the stage, seemingly propping it up, are the names of all the people it takes for Hannah to be a performer in Ella Together. Discussing the piece with Hannah and her supporter Donna, Hannah feels that Ella is a place where she feels truly independent, however as Donna points out, it is also an area in Hannah's life where she requires many layers of support to make that happen. From her family providing transport each week, to financial support to pay the membership fees, to a one to one support worker to learn dance routines, stage directions and scripts, to the volunteers and the teachers at Ella Together; many people are involved to ensure Hannah has those feelings and experiences of independence. I feel Hannah's artwork provides a great visual example of the interdependency model of disability discussed in The Prologue. Independence is not always about barrier removal but enabling complex networks, which we all need. This image would become a useful tool in which to discuss and reflect on the network of support around the group as curators later in the project.

Tony created an artwork which resembled a map. It detailed places around Liverpool which held great importance to him - Bluecoat, his home, Goodison Park, the Albert Dock, his local pub – and woven between the various buildings was himself alone in buses, taxis and holding a key. Tony

explained how taxis were a recent addition to his life and very important to him as they have enabled him to come and go as he pleases. He also was learning to use a bus on his own and had recently been given his own house key to further support his independence which he was very excited about. For Tony, I sense that independence was underpinned by feelings of freedom which for him translated to freedom of movement at this particular time in his life.

Eddie's approach to the task was different. Instead of creating an artwork which celebrated feelings and examples of independence, his depicted a time in his life where he felt he had none. As an older man, Eddie spent many years in day services. "You did the same thing everyday" he explained, "you couldn't go nowhere, and you're not in it [referring to the city centre] you're just stuck away". Eddie created an image which portrayed himself "trapped" in the day service system. In the centre of a black box, is a simple white line drawing of himself which seems to peer out of the darkness. Surrounding this is a black frame labelled 'day service', which perhaps represents a building. Around the edges of the image are handwritten words in different colours which read; "claustrophobic", "frustration", "a box", "unsociable", "sad", "not individual", "confine", "trapped", "bored", "the same" and the list goes on. Eddie began with the words trapped and bored and used the computer to research words to expand the piece. The younger members of the group; Hannah and Tony were upset by the piece, as was Donna and Abi. This piece reveals how the social aspect of Bluecoat is incredibly important to Eddie. In February 2017 to celebrate the building's 300th birthday, Bluecoat exhibited Art at the Heart of Bluecoat. This exhibition explored the central role of art at Bluecoat which started over a century ago, through key personalities, exhibitions and organisations that found a home in the building. Eddie is one of the 'key personalities' featured in this exhibition via a video The Eddie Rauer Spectacular. In the video interview Eddie discusses how many friends and acquaintances he has at Bluecoat have helped him lead a happier and more independent life.

In the afternoon of this workshop I decided to change the planned activity, which was going to be around brainstorming in a more formal way for the exhibition theme. Instead, responding to the changed energy in the room after difficult discussions around Eddie's past, I asked them instead to collage as a group some ideas for the exhibition theme. This was intended to move away from oral discussions which the group seemed weary with, into a task which was more about making.

In truth, I wasn't entirely sure how this would pan out. I first told the group they had twenty minutes to look through all of the materials (flyers, magazines, newspapers, etc.) and collect

pictures, patterns, words that they thought suited the exhibition theme. By the end of the twenty minutes, there was a lot of stuff on the table. Too much. So I asked the group to take turns editing it down, which is a really useful skill to practice as curators. "Do we have any which are the same?", "Are there any you wish to take out", "Are there any that confuse you?", were questions I asked to support the editing process. I then put the group into pairs and asked them to find their favourite pieces of material. I noticed there were some obvious favourites and some arguing began to happen on what would be included. I tried to frame this as a good thing – this material really works! Let's not argue but put it in the yes pile. This brief exercise flagged up that when we come to making bigger decisions, I need to think carefully on how to frame questions and what to do when there is a disagreement.

Another issue that the collaging activity flagged was around text. I found it surprising how many words the group wanted to include despite their difficulties in reading, which I suspected may be because they struggled to think what independence could look like pictorially. Although the group had so far expressed that they wanted to do an exhibition about independence, to me, many of their conversations about independence actually circled around notions of autonomy. 'Being your own boss', 'making your own decisions', 'deciding what's best for you', speaks directly to issues of self-governance. Autonomy and independence can be considered as synonymous on one level, although there is a subtle difference between the two words. With the term 'autonomy', the main focus is on individual power. With the term 'independence', the main focus is on not being dependent or influenced. Autonomy focuses on the 'self' which is also reflected in the terms etymology from the Latin 'autos'. As we have seen in the literature discussed in Act 1: Prologue, the concept of autonomy is contested both in the context of self-advocacy and in the context of curating and art making. However, I was faced with a dilemma. Do I as a facilitator introduce the group to new words in an attempt to broaden their self-expression? Or is that putting words in their mouths? And, does it really matter what word is used? Or will their choices of words have a direct affect on the type of artists selected and artwork developed for exhibition? However, an answer emerged.

SCENE 3: IT'S FATE! THAT FUNNY WORD AGAIN…
During a group collaging exercise, Donna has an interesting find in one of the magazines and shares it with the group.

DONNA: [Laughs] Guess what I've found

DIANA: What, what?

DONNA: That word Jade was talking about before

EDDIE: What's that?

DONNA: Remember that funny word Jade was talking about before? Autonomy? Look what was in my magazine!

[Donna shows the group a cut out of a title 'Autonomous Agents', taken from an article about robots].

EDDIE: Oh yeah! Look at that!

DIANA: Oh my god!

ABI: That's so cool!

EDDIE: [Sings] It's meant to be!

LEAH: It's fate! We need to put that in the yes pile

HANNAH: [Claps and laughs]

In this scene we see the emergence of the group's exhibition title. The 'autonomous agents' clipping was found by Donna in a lifestyle magazine as part of an article about the use of robots in the future. Donna, who was also unsure of the word autonomy before our discussion that day, was surprised to find the word in a lifestyle magazine. The group really liked the serendipity factor of the clipping and they all agreed that it should be the title of the collage, and intriguingly placed it at the top of the piece, even though the majority of the other words clustered at the side of the page. "Could this be the name of the exhibition?" I asked, "It looks very important as it's at the top of the page?". "I think it's a good exhibition name" replied Leah, "autot-y-nomis agents, or however you say it". "Yeah I like that one" replied Diana, "thingy agents". I could see an issue emerging; the group had difficulty pronouncing 'autonomous' and some members refused to say it all together. "Is it a good idea to call your exhibition something we struggle saying?" I enquired. "That's a good point" said Eddie, "We don't want to look stupid" he said with a laugh. I felt this was a conscious effort on Eddie's behalf to bring to the surface the 'elephant in the room', their learning disabilities and the stigma that is attached to it. Eddie's perceived risk of 'looking stupid' was of particular concern to him throughout the project. He seemed more aware than others in the group that his exhibition would be viewed and 'judged' by not just visitors, but people he knew. For me it was clear that the group understood the meaning of the word autonomous, there were simply difficulties in pronouncing it which was causing some awkwardness. In self-advocacy contexts

simplifying both spoken and written language through "plain language, the use of keywords, short words and sentences" is key concept for promoting access for learning disabled people (Godsell and Scarborough, 2006, p. 64). "If you find it a mouthful, then we could just shorten it?" I suggested, "How about Auto Agents?". "Yes I like that!" said Tony, "better".

The arts, however, have appeared reluctant to embrace the same approach to using accessible language. Galleries have been accused of disguising information in overly complicated, specialist art languages. In 2012, the controversial essay International Art English by David Levine and Alix Rule attempted to scientifically prove that "The internationalized art world relies on a unique language… This language has everything to do with English, but it is emphatically not English". Here they identified a language subsequently dubbed 'artspeak' which is littered with "pompous paradoxes" and "plagues of adverbs", and mainly serves "as ammunition for those who still insist contemporary art is a fraud" (Beckett, 2013). One of their conclusions is that International Art English is used by its proponents to both identify each other and signal their insider status and authority within the art elite. But, this pervading artspeak phenomenon has long been critiqued by artists. The *Fax-Bak* project by BANK (Simon Bedwell, Milly Thompson and John Russell) saw gallery press releases returned to galleries with corrections and commentary, and have since become BANK's best known work. They corrected the grammar, critiqued the logos and typefaces in use and deconstructed the text highlighting the many examples of pretentiousness, meaningless assertions and general misuse of the English language on display in galleries. They always gave texts marks out of ten and faxed them back to the galleries from which they came. And then they exhibited them, seemingly making an example of the absurdity of artspeak. The Fax-Bak project was included in Bluecoat's exhibition *Double Act: Art & Comedy* (2016) during the project. Once broken down, the group really liked the concept and Leah even 'Fax-Bak-ed' Bluecoat's own press release.

During May 2016 Marie-Anne McQuay, Bluecoat's Head of Programmes, wrote to the Bluecoat team in order to begin the process of putting together the Autumn 2016 brochure, which would cover September, October and November that year. Marie-Anne anticipated that Bluecoat's programming team would be particularly busy during the summer period, due to their involvement with Liverpool Biennial, and suggested that the Autumn brochure should be planned further in advance with earlier deadlines. As the group's exhibition fell at the very end of the Autumn brochure, this meant the group were now under pressure to produce a public facing text much earlier than expected. To put in context, when asked to produce a copy and an image for the

brochure, we had not yet selected any artists and had yet to hear about any funding. Still, the group had to press on with putting together text to attract visitors to the show. Here we experienced how institutional frameworks and deadlines of the gallery also shape the work of a curator. Would the group have gone with Auto Agents as their exhibition title/theme if the deadline was not looming?

I approached the group on how we should go about producing writing for the brochure. Not all members of the group can read or write independently so they nominated Leah and she agreed to take the lead in writing and overseeing the text. To do this, Leah emailed Marie-Anne to ask what to include in the copy. Marie-Anne came back to Leah with the following pointers; "100 words is basically the essential information: What is the show called? Who is in it? What is the theme of the show? Who has curated it?". From this Leah wrote the first draft which was then workshopped with Halton Speak Out's self-advocates and Blue Room members for feedback. The group felt it was really important for the text to be as accessible as possible, so they felt a good way to test it out was by asking the opinion of lots of people who have a learning disability in their peer groups. The workshops proved that some words were confusing – 'commission', 'collaboration' and 'autonomous' were flagged by both groups as difficult. Leah decided to take out these words completely and replace them with new words such as 'new art', 'working together' and 'making decisions for yourself'. As no artworks had yet been selected for the show, the group decided to include a developed version of their group collage from which their exhibition title emerged.

The development of this text also threw up an important decision for the group; did they want audiences to know that the exhibition was curated by learning disabled people? Or, would they prefer not to disclose their learning disability at all? Throughout my own practice the issue of labelling has always been carefully reflected upon with my collaborators; the curators needed to make their own decision on how to label themselves within the context of the exhibition. I approached this topic with the group and framed it as; "what will be gained or lost by people not knowing you have a learning disability?".

Eddie and Tony firmly believed that people did not need to know about their disability, and Eddie found it uncomfortable and even embarrassing to "have it out there". Tony was incredibly evasive about his feelings around this topic other than that he didn't feel it was necessary. I sensed Tony did not really identify with his learning disability label, often seeing himself as 'different' to others within his peer groups. In complete contrast, Leah was very passionate about alerting audiences to

their learning disability status which was clearly informed by her background in self-advocacy. "If we don't tell people, then we can't change people's minds about what we can achieve" she explained. Unlike Eddie and Tony, it appeared that Leah found the use of the label empowering and saw the opportunities for change in doing so. Hannah was also very clear that "it was a good thing" and explained how in Ella Together they "tell people at the shows all the time".

The purpose and use of labels is complicated both in self-advocacy and art gallery contexts. For people labelled as learning disabled, the very label is just one in a long succession of descriptors applied to those people in our society who are categorised by a "matrix of psycho-medical assessments, marginalized by compromised intellectual function, characterized by increased health needs and excluded from the mainstream on the basis of reduced social opportunity" (McClimens, 2007, p. 257). Self-advocates have long campaigned to have the terminology used to describe them changed and crucially, the right to self-define (Whittaker, 1996; Simons et al, 1993). For example, People First London have carried out service evaluations which they have published, participate in staff training and campaigned, with partial success, "to get the largest charity in Britain for people with learning disabilities (MENCAP) to change its image" and terminology (Finlay and Lyons, 2010, p. 39).

For artists and curators, it also raises the issues surrounding how and/or when is it acceptable to label artwork produced by or in conjunction with a person with a learning disability? In Act 1: Prologue I outline the key debates in regards to labelling which in summary highlights that labels can work to differentiate groups, and in doing so they can stigmatise. However, by excluding the artist's label of learning disability, as Leah points out, do we perhaps miss the political work their art may achieve?

After much deliberation, the group decided that it was important for audiences to know about their learning disabilities since their exhibition theme had emerged directly from complicated experiences of autonomy and support as learning disabled people. However, they wanted this not to be "in yer' face" and "written on walls" but weaved subtly into the context. As the project progressed this would prove difficult as Bluecoat went onto include Auto Agents in a "season of inclusive arts at Bluecoat" alongside other learning disability led projects, which directly put the exhibition in the context of learning disability. For the programming team, this gave a prominent theme to organisation's schedule which is helpful in terms of audience targeting, marketing and

ticket sales. But it also meant that the project was unable to shake off the framework of 'inclusion' often based around learning disabled people's art exhibitions. I wondered how, and if at all, Bluecoat consults members of Blue Room and their other learning disability projects on how they are labelled and presented to audiences.

Now a theme had been developed, the group needed artists.

Act 3: The Commissioners and The Commissioned

During the second phase of the project, focus shifted from devising an exhibition theme to working with artists with an aim to find work for the show. Contemporary art curators have extensive networks and relationships with artists cultivated from years of experience in the sector, and this "ability to build relationships" is cited as a core competency of the curator's role (National Career Service, 2016). Although it would be impossible to try and replicate this in a matter of months, what I did want to do is support the group to meet as many artists as possible in a bid for them to experience a variety of artistic forms, processes and approaches. To do this I contacted a well-known local artist-led studio in Liverpool called The Royal Standard and advertised for artists to deliver a two hour paid workshop with the group. I explained that the group were looking to meet local artists in order to develop experience for curating an exhibition and were open to all types of practices. The decision in supporting the group to connect with artists via a local studio instead of an open call for example, was informed by previous experience during my MA. For my MA project *You Are Artists, I am Curator* (2013) I advertised for artists via an online open call with the potential to reach a huge number of artists spread nationally. Whilst there was a great variety of applications, most of the artists lived some distance away and so communications were predominantly conducted online, presenting little opportunity for face-to-face time between the curators and artists. As this project was hoping to explore commissioning, it seemed logical to network with local artists who were able to participate in a quality collaboration with the group. From the advert with The Royal Standard, we had seven artists come in and work with the group during this 'network' phase. However, for the purpose of this thesis I have chosen to discuss three of the artist workshops; two of which were artists that were commissioned for the exhibition.

Building Networks

The first artist to deliver a workshop was Joseph Cotgrave, whom was undertaking an MA in Fine Art at Liverpool John Moore's University at the time. Joe devised an engaging workshop in which he collaborated with us to create an installation inspired by his previous piece *Workspace* (2015), comprising of a fan inflating a large plastic form with items inside. Joe's workshop began with a quick slideshow of his previous work. We then started making our own inflatable installation using a

fan, plastic sheet, paint and selecting objects to place inside.

After Joe's workshop, I discussed with the group what they thought about the experience. They particularly liked that Joe's work employs everyday materials that they see all the time. From items you could find at home - like the fan, paper, tape - or materials found on building sites seen all around Liverpool - like scaffolding, plastic and pallets. They felt it made his work accessible and could relate and understand these objects and materials, even though he transforms them. Joe also told the group that the materials he uses are inspired by his father who is a builder. Joe spent lots of time on building sites growing up and this "stuck with him". I noticed the group really connected with this part of Joe's explanation of the work - asking questions, clapping hands and telling Joe about their own families' occupations. Similar to visiting The People's Republic exhibition at the Museum of Liverpool, it is evident that the personal story underpinning the art was important to the group.

The most successful aspect of Joe's installation from the group's perspective was that it moved. Leah said "It's like it was alive!". When the fan was switched on you could "watch it grow, and when you touch it, it bounces back and moves". The group filled it with different objects like balls, feathers, paper, to see what would happen. They all seemed to really respond to the experimental aspect of Joe's practice and surprisingly to me, did not seem to care that the installation did not 'look like' anything in particular (a previous preoccupation with some group members). Here the group appeared to invest more in the process than the final product. "What would it like look like in the gallery?" I asked. "It could look quite good or it could look a right mess!" said Eddie, "they might look at the plastic and say, well I don't give tuppance for that". 'They' in this instance I assume is visitors of Bluecoat and Eddie touches on an important point; this installation was fun and engaging to make and is really all about the process. So, the question for me at this time was how do we convey the quality of this process to the audience so it moves beyond being just a giant piece of plastic that Eddie feels could be potentially overlooked or misunderstood by visitors?

A few weeks later artist James Harper came in to work with the group. James, a member and a previous director of The Royal Standard, is an artist and also a curator. James began his workshop by sharing some of his previous work. For one of his pieces titled *Pre-existing Form* (2015-present) he had recreated a football, but instead of it being hard, it was soft and tactile. James explained that he made them so people can touch these in the gallery. The group passed them around and

felt them, and discussed how touching art in galleries could be seen as breaking the rules; "that's a good thing!" said Eddie. Next James showed us a gif - a gif looks like short video clip which repeats itself over and over. Hannah, who perhaps has the most support needs in the group immediately spotted the gif's origin and blew James away with her pop culture knowledge. The gif was from the film Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, and had been taken from the scene where the lucky golden ticket winners are inside the inventing room in awe of Willy Wonka's unique (but wacky) ideas. Hidden under sheets - to keep his ideas top secret - is machinery moving suspiciously beneath them. James explained that his interest in the inventing room scene was because the machinery was hidden - it was a mystery. "Using this gif is a good idea because lots of people have seen the film and can relate to it." said Leah. The machinery in the film has inspired James to begin working with motors which formed the starting point for his workshop. James taught the group how to wire up a small circuit with a motor and a battery to which they attach painted panels to create a moving piece of artwork. *What would our painted panels look like moving? How would they change?* The group were so excited to see it all come together. James' workshop was really successful in that he showed where his idea had come from. His work supported the group to think about autonomy in a new way, from personal autonomy to an autonomous machine, and the question of the day was; *Can art take on a life of its own?* The group made it very clear they wished to shortlist James to make the commission and are keen to work with him again.

The final artist workshop I shall discuss is by Mark Simmonds who, as a graphic designer and book maker, presented slightly different skills and approaches than the other workshop artists. Mark chose to host his workshop in Bluecoat's library space, a room housing Bluecoat's publications and ephemera, and also doubles as a meeting space. Mark's workshop began with a question; *What do you use books for?* The group really surprised me and responded with some ingenious ways in which they use printed publications in their lives. Comics, programmes, pop up books, games, literature, football pamphlets, textbooks, maps, the list went on! Fascinatingly, the group also responded by sharing with Mark their experiential relationships with books too. Eddie explains although he cannot read, he likes to buy books when he visits a new place. They act as a memory. Diana likes the smell of books and Hannah likes books which feel nice with textured paper. Mark was intrigued. Mark then opened up the cabinets and gave the group an activity; *find a book with a picture of Bluecoat on, find a book that's big, find a book you like the look of* etc. The result was the workshop table full of diverse array of publications. The form of a book – its size and shape, paper stock, printing, cover and binding – opposed to just its contents an experience for the reader. The

group thoroughly enjoyed the activity which supported them to explore the Bluecoat's extensive archive. Over lunch, myself and Mark photocopied the selected items so the group could create a collage with them, as Mark was interested in turning "old things into something new". The group really enjoyed Mark's approach to thinking broadly about books and asked me if he could help them make their own gallery publication. This was a great idea I thought, but it was contingent on funding I explained.

However, during the development of the artist network, I had begun to explore funding to enable the group to commission new art work and to support their idea of a gallery publication. Working closely with artists to commission art is seen as an empowering act for a curator as it represents a genuine act of authorship, therefore it seemed a fascinating route for the research to explore. Halton Speak Out took the lead in applying for the funds and they successfully won a Grants For Arts from Arts Council England. But as we would go on to explore, notions of authorship within the commissioning process are complicated.

Selecting Artists

A theme was in place, a network of artists was thriving, and we were in receipt of funding. But before we could interview and select artists, the group needed to decide on what sort of work they wanted to commission in the first place. Via the first research phase of the project, the curators had discovered an interest in exhibitions with stories and narratives, and from this decided their exhibition's thematic starting point should be autonomy and independence. However, along with what the commission should address, they also needed to think about the potential physical form of the commission too. Their exhibition space The Vide in Bluecoat occupies a tall space reaching an impressive height of over twelve metres which is viewable from three multiple levels and perspectives. I supported the group to spend an afternoon working in the space, thinking about what type of art would best fit the environment. They identified the following key criteria:

1. Big! We think The Vide need a large piece of work.
2. Multi sensory/Interactive
3. Fits in with the autonomy theme

Using the above criteria, we invited three artists to be interviewed. We asked for no written application but wrote to the artists to advise them;

> We will ask you to recap what you did in your workshop with us. We will ask you to pitch an existing artwork you have which fits our theme. We will ask you to pitch an idea for the commission. We would love to see lots of visuals; pictures, objects, plans, sketches, sounds and videos. Be as creative as you like! We will be considering how accessible your pitches are as part of our decision.

There is a considerable amount of literature on the inclusion of learning disabled people into interviewing processes. Self-advocates have continued to emphasise their right to influence as many aspects of their lives as possible, including choosing the staff who will work with them, and this was very evident during my time spent with Halton Speak Out[16]. Much of the literature on this topic however details case studies and the challenges to their inclusion. A frequently reported barrier is the challenges learning disabled people can experience grasping abstract concepts deemed necessary for a robust recruitment process. To give an example, Walker and Duffy (2001) reported that over 12 months learning disabled people were not involved in 42% of recruitments due to concerns about the level of responsibility or understanding required. Therefore it struck me as crucial to spend time on devising an interviewing process with the group which could potentially challenge previous ideas on how we 'know' or assess what a good candidate is.

I spoke to the group about the best way to interview artists and we decided to practice by role playing scenarios and trying out methods. First we attempted to devise a scoring system, a way for the group to give and record their opinion. We tried marking the artist out of 10, but this did not work for all members of the group as the concept of number scale was too confusing. Next we tried a more simple version of thumbs up or thumbs down. This did work, but it was broad stroke and did not capture detail or nuance, nor did it mitigate against acquiescence, the "tendency to respond affirmatively regardless of a question's content" (Carlson et al, 2002, p. 12) which can invalidate the response. Leah was the only group member who had previous experience in attending and conducting interviews. In her role at Halton Speak Out Leah often sits on interview panels with local learning disability district nurses to support their decisions on hiring new staff. Leah's frustration was visible and she suggested we needed "a sheet with questions to think about, that's how I've

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[16] On the 13th February 2015 I accompanied Leah and another self-advocate to interview 3 learning disability community nurses in Widnes.

done it before". After some heated discussions, we came up with a mixed method approach which incorporated Leah's suggested of a question sheet (which admittedly I had shied away from because of concerns that it would be inaccessible), and an anonymous voting booth where each curator would vote 'yes' or 'no' after each artist pitch. I decided to include a voting booth as I was acutely aware of the group dynamics at play. I had spent months working with the group at this point and had noticed that decisions were sometimes swayed by the more assertive members who offer their opinion first. To mitigate this, I suggested that we vote in secret before sharing our opinions with each other in an attempt to capture those individual 'gut' reactions to the artists. At the time, the 2015 EU referendum was fast approaching which was useful for the group in seeing the approaches in 'everyday' scenarios.

Now that a scoring system was in place, we needed to agree on how to decide whether the artists gave a 'good' interview. This proved even more difficult. Similarly to a study conducted by Kay and Ramsay (1999), I found that the group wanted to focus on the personal characteristics of the artists instead of their knowledge or skills. Whilst I agree that it was important for the group to like and get along with the artist they selected, it worried me that they were not taking into consideration the quality of the artist's idea or their approach to pitching. Therefore, I suggested that a two-panel system could be helpful and we agreed to invite Adam Smythe, Bluecoat's in-house curator, to help them interview. Each 'panel' focused on different aspects of the artists' interview. The curators focused on assessing the artist's character, accessibility and strength of concept, and Adam focused on evaluating skills, knowledge and feasibility of delivery. This is a great example of interdependency at play in the project. The curators sourced in Adams knowledge and experience to inform their decision. But crucially, it was still their decision to make not Adam's.

In order to best prepare the question sheet I decided to get advice from staff at Halton Speak Out. While open-ended questions are often preferred on the grounds of validity, the major disadvantage is that learning disabled people may find this too expansive and therefore confusing. In response, Halton Speak Out suggested including sub-questions along with the open-ended questions as a way to support the group to tackle the question. For example;

Question 1: Did you like their interview?
- Was it easy to understand? Or Were you confused?
- Did they talk to you? Or Did they talk to Jade/Adam?

- Was it fun? Did they interact or have things to show you? Or Did they just talk and it was boring?

What you can see here is that the three sub-questions are in place to think about the broader question of 'did you like the interview'. The sub-questions questions focus on the more behavioural, overtly observable characteristics such 'did they talk to you?', 'did they have things to show you?', instead of concepts that seemed abstract.

Next we tried out our system through role-playing an interview in an aim to make the experience more concrete and to develop skills (Johnson et al, 2012). Abi, a volunteer on the project, pretended to be a candidate for the commission and the group interviewed her for practice. For this mock interview, Abi had prepared a quick pretend pitch for the group. After Abi's pitch, the group voted and we began discussing her interview using the prepared questions. It was interesting to see the faults they raised with Abi's responses. When responding to one question, Abi slightly stumbled with her words – I could tell she was thinking on her feet grappling for the best way to explain herself. Eddie harshly critiqued this and said "she doesn't know what she's on about, I wouldn't have her" and "it's not good to stumble, you should be able to talk properly". Leah and Tony got were offended by these comments. Leah felt we should not judge people on their talking abilities alone as she did not like it when people judge her on how she speaks. Diana and Hannah agreed. On the other side of the coin, when Abi purposefully used inaccessible language in her interview, none of the group raised it as an issue. They seemed to be inconsistent in their feedback regarding language. I pointed this out to the group and asked if they noticed or whether it was their confidence. "I felt bad interrupting to say I didn't get it" admitted Diana, "I sort of zoned out" remarked Eddie. Hannah also seemed really unsure and was very reliant on visual prompts to support any discussion.

The day of the interviews arrived. The first artist to be interviewed was Becky Peach, an artist with a breadth of knowledge in the field of Printmaking. For her workshop, Becky focused on her piece titled *Do Touch* (2015). Do Touch is a sculpture made from Perspex. No larger than an A3 sheet of paper, there are nine separate parts, each made using a laser cutter and screen printed onto using process colours; Cyan, Magenta and Yellow. The sculpture seems to follow a similar principle to the children's construct game K'NEX, in that each piece can slot together to create innumerable configurations. The works title Do Touch essentially acts as instructions, urging the audience to

break with the conventions and etiquette of the gallery space. For the workshop, the group began by screen printing shapes onto cardboard. This is a new skill for most of the group and they all discussed about what hard work it was! After printing the designs, the group were asked to cut out shapes and think about how they would slot together. The group were engrossed in playing with their work. Everybody made different configurations and played with each other's artworks.

Becky began her interview by recapping her workshop by showing the group their cardboard versions of Do Touch, whilst talking through how they made them. This went down well with the group. Becky then began to discuss her idea for the commission itself. Responding to the group's request for an inclusive pitch, Becky had made a mood board. This mood board was a collage of other artist's work who had inspired her, but whilst this gave myself and Adam a sense of her conceptual approach to the commission, the group were very confused by the mood board and assumed it was all of Becky's previous work. This led to some awkward conversations with Becky trying to explain the purpose a mood board, to which the group seemed to disconnect. Becky moved on and showed the group some drawings for the commission idea. Becky was keen to produce a piece of work which explored different textures in the space, such as artificial grass, perspex and mirrors. The group liked this idea but seemed confused, despite her drawings, on the physical form it would take. After the interview, we chatted about Becky's ideas with our prepared questions to guide us. It became clear that whilst the group really liked her and her overall approach to art making, they did not understand the commission and for them, they felt it was not interactive enough.

Next to be interviewed was James Harper. James began by taking the group through a presentation, which 'told the story' of his first workshop, his artistic inspiration, and his idea for the commission. His presentation began by showing the group a series of photographs he had collected of found items hidden under sheets like cars, trees and machinery. James then shared the Charlie and The Chocolate Factory gif again with the group and discussed the link to the 'inventing room' and James suggested the gallery is also like "an inventing room of sorts?". It appeared that James was using these examples to outline his conceptual framework to the group; things that are hidden. James then went to discuss his commission in more detail. Inspired by the hidden mechanism in Willy Wonka's invention room and he proposed creating a large mechanical installation covered by a sheet which would hang in The Vide. Responding to themes of autonomy and independence, this mechanical piece would be controlled through a series of switches. The audience would have

choice and control over how it moves. The interactive and bizarre nature of his idea was a big hit. Leah straight away asked if we could add sounds and Diana quickly spotted that children would find this really fun.

What I noticed James did well, was using storytelling techniques to make it accessible such as framing his conceptual framework as; "a long time ago I was inspired by…". He also included lots of images and videos, as well as making a model of the installation's internal structure and a plan to scale and bringing in materials for the group to feel and touch. James had also been in contact with one of Bluecoat's gallery technicians to go over plans for feasibility which Adam was pleased with. When James left, the group knew exactly what the work was and were able to describe it back to me. They were visibly excited – clapping, shouting and laughing.

Finally, we interviewed Joseph Cotgrave. Joe also began with a slideshow where he recapped his previous workshop with the group and his inspiration behind his work. During this part of the interview, I did notice that it was rather muddled and he slipped into using lots of jargon. I could see Hannah and Diana becoming distracted. Joe brought along some sketches and had drawn his idea to the blueprint of The Vide space which was great to see and the group were impressed. Joe's idea for the commission was a large inflatable installation which the audience could walk inside. This idea is inspired from his previous workshop where the group made a smaller inflatable installation with a fan and highlighted his interest in the construction of spaces and environments.

After Joe left, the group were a bit confused and struggled to describe the artwork back to me. *How can you walk in it? What would it looks like finished?* And then questions around its accessibility crept in. Leah asked about wheelchairs and Diana and Eddie didn't think the idea would work at all. Diana also believed some people might be scared to go in it and wondered how you'd get out the other side. These were all astute observations. I also doubted whether the gallery was actually big enough for this piece but also questioned whether it spoke to the group's theme of autonomy very well either. Adam also had many questions about the inflatable structure in terms of health and safety and suggested we got a financial breakdown, questioning whether something so ambitious could be achieved within budget.

SCENE 1: WHAT ABOUT JOE?
The group are in the Makin Room discussing the interviews and who they

feel gave the best pitch and would be the best candidate for the commission.

LEAH: I think James did the best. I didn't get Joe's at all, and I don't think it's very accessible.

DONNA: Hannah, did you understand Joe's idea?

HANNAH: …mmm, yeah

DONNA: Can you explain what it was?

HANNAH: … No… like, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory?

DONNA: That was James' idea, did you like that one?

HANNAH: Yes, yes!!!

DIANA: You OK Tony?

[Tony says nothing, but has his face covering his hands]

DIANA: What's up mate?

EDDIE: …You alright Tony lad?

[Tony still doesn't respond, but further covers his face]

ABI: [To Jade] I think he's upset about Joe and the feedback about him…

JADE: Is everything alright Tony? Would you like to step outside and have a chat?

TONY: Yeah, you're all being mean about Joe.

In this scene we see Tony's reaction to the group's critique of Joe's interview. Tony really got on with Joe and had sparked a great rapport during his workshop, but I - and the group - was still very taken aback by Tony's reaction. It was unexpected. I had a chat about this with Tony one-on-one and explained how we all really liked Joe and the group was not being mean about him as a person, but simply questioning whether his idea was the best choice for the show. This is where the 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' approach to interviewing proves inadequate. What also struck me is throughout supporting the group to develop a network of artists, what happens when those relationships do not fulfil the requirements of the exhibition? It becomes hard to sever ties and exclude an artist for being involved when they have had so much input already. These relationships need to be carefully managed and in hindsight I did not anticipate the potential impact on the group when asking them to exclude somebody. This can be understood in terms of relational accountability. Relationships essentially underpin participatory action research approaches, as for

the most part, relationships describe individuals contributing as partners who are co-investigators in addressing questions or issues. Shawn Wilson, an aboriginal and indigenous scholar established the term 'relational accountability' which he describes as research that is both "based in a community context" and "demonstrates, respect, reciprocity, and responsibility as it is put into action" (2008, p. 99). Relational accountability encourages researchers to look at the "entire systems of relationships as a whole" (Reimer, Schmitz, Janke et al, 2015, p. 47) in their inquiries, which I had not done so well during the interviewing process. Instead of taking into account all relationships, I focused on the relationship between the curators and successful candidate only.

After this conversation, it was evident that the majority of the group wished to select James. Therefore, I needed to think carefully about how to frame this to Tony who I knew would feel disappointed. The group needed time to think and cool off, so it was not until a week later we revisited the interviews and made our final decision.

The following week I advised the group it was time to make their final decision, and we began by discussing each candidate one at a time. I did this by showing the group photographs of artists, as well as their artworks, documentation of their workshop and any items from their interviews. This helped differentiate candidates during discussions, as that one problem experienced during the selection process was remembering candidates and distinguishing between them when a decision was required. I read out the results of the votes, and James had won[17]. Tony was still a little hesitant and remained quiet during the conversation. However, Diana shared that she had actually voted for Becky, but realised "I don't think it makes good sense for the show now" which Tony clearly appreciated. The voting booth seemed to help with this final conversation as it allowed the other members of the group to move away from personal critique to discussing the 'objective' votes; "It needs to be a group decision" said Leah, "Let's go with who got the most votes". With all taken into account, the group were delighted to select James and we wrote to him that day to tell him the good news, as well as informing the other two candidates along with some feedback.

Developing the Commissions

Just three weeks later, James and Mark joined us for their first workshop. Both artists had been

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[17] 3 votes for James, 1 vote for Joe and 1 vote for Becky.

funded to spend five full days each working with the group in order to input and develop the commission. I began this workshop by facilitating a PATH. After a couple of weeks off for holidays, I felt this would be useful for the group to get up to speed again, and also useful for James and Mark to experience a person-centred tool in action and the groups approach planning around the show. PATH, is a person-centred tool which breaks down the steps needed to achieve a goal. Helen Sanderson explains; "PATH is there when a situation is complex and will require concerted action, engaging other people and resources, over a longish period in order to make an important vision real" (Helen Sanderson Associates, 2017b). The developers of PATH, Jack Pearpoint, John O`Brien and Marsha Forest suggest;

> PATH is a way for diverse people, who share a common problem or situation to align… their purposes… their understanding of their situation and its possibilities for hopeful action…their action for change, mutual support, personal and team development and learning (ibid).

I have seen this tool work wonders in self-advocacy contexts. Many years ago Leah taught me how to facilitate PATH's when I volunteered at Halton Speak Out and she still uses them in her own life planning. To reflect the task we were trying to break down - the exhibition - I slightly adapted the titles from the typical PATH. The titled I used were *Now, Who can help?, Building Strengths, Half Way Goal!, Final Steps, The Exhibition*.

First I asked the group what their dream for the exhibition was, what do they imagine? "Lots and lots of people!" said Diana, "it's really good and people like it" said Eddie, and "our names are up there" he continued. All these were written down and we talked about the effects we wished the show to have. Next I said, "But how will we get to this dream? Let's think about *Now;* what do we know now and what we can do right now?". The group looked blank. I asked them to think about what we have already done, the places we have visited and Tony said, "seeing other galleries and what they do". We talked about how this was a type of research and gave us experience of seeing lots of different types of exhibitions, "some weren't very good: said Eddie. "That's ok!" I said, "but we need to think about why". The next step was *Who Can Help?* and the group found this one very easy to answer, in fact I could hardy hear through all the names they were shouting out! The group were able to identify all the different types of support - from family, friends and support workers, to organisations like Ella and Blue Room, to artists, media figures and even celebrities. The *Building*

Strengths and *Half Way Goals* were quite tricky steps for the group. The group were not able to think of skills they were lacking. I asked if they knew what marketing was and whether a strength to be built could be how to get people to come to our show. We talked about artists' interviews and making the commissions as our *Half Way Goals,* and *The Final Steps* included installing the work, inviting people to see the work, organising a party and perhaps doing tours.

The group really enjoyed and responded to doing PATHs and although they were undertaking a planning and memory exercise, I always found the group to be energised after doing one. James and Mark took a back seat during the PATH and appeared to be intrigued by the process. What I noticed from doing PATHs regularly with the group is how often they tended to forget about interpretation. They rarely factored in that they would need to create things to help the audience understand the exhibition. Therefore during this particular PATH, I decided to prompt a discussion about this. "How do you like to be interpreted?" asked Diana to James. James laughed. "Well, a curator has never asked me that before!". He explained he was very happy and relieved that Diana had asked that, as it's "not very nice when curators explain your work without you being involved". "Oh no" Eddie said, "we won't be doing that!". Eddie then began describing to James the video in the Matisse in Focus exhibition. "I'd like to do something like that". James agreed that this was a really good way to tell the audience about his work, Mark agreed too. Mark suggested it might be fun to ask if we could film at the printers to show people how the book was made. The group loved this idea. They then all discussed, without me saying a word, different things they could film, who could help, and what effect this could have on the audience. James said that maybe we could show some of these films on old TV's, perhaps to build on the 'factory' feel of his piece. "I like that" said Leah.

Observing this conversation unravelling was exhilarating for me as both a facilitator and researcher. I felt that this moment encapsulated much of what I hoped this project could achieve; collaborations between the artist and curator that begins to re-think the traditional curated exhibition. After the PATH, James took over the session to begin working with the group to get their thoughts on the commission. James asked to draw around each of the curators, to use their outline to make aspects of the artwork. The group happily obliged and after James had done the drawings, they decided to take them into the gallery to see how big they were in the space.

At the next workshop a couple of weeks later, James wanted to begin by sharing some swatches of

fabric with the group, so he could begin properly planning the material to cover his sculpture. However, the group had other ideas.

SCENE 2: BUT WE CHOSE HIM?

Artist James and the curators are gathered around a table in the Makin Room. Today is the second workshop with James, they're discussing the plans for the commission.

TONY: Lights would be good. Like, moving lights... [interrupted]

DIANA: Yeah, lights!

TONY [continued]: ...like a disco

JAMES [hesitant]: Oh right... um... well... [interrupted]

EDDIE: That does sounds good

JAMES [continued]: Well, I don't think lights were a part of my original pitch if you remember? My work looks at movement.

EDDIE: Oh right

[The room goes quiet and everyone looks at James]

JAMES: It's an interesting idea, it's just I've never really worked with lights

DIANA: Awww he doesn't know, never mind

JAMES: I mean, I could find out but... I'm just not sure it will look right, it's not really my style

EDDIE: Lights would get people's attention

JAMES: ....yeah... um

JADE: Maybe we should leave the idea of lights with James and give him time to think about it. Let's refocus and chat about the fabrics James has brought in to show you?

[Diana turns to Jade]

DIANA: But we like lights and we chose him?

The room was tense, and all eyes were on me. In this vignette, we get a sense of the complexities unfolding when commissioning artwork, which here, circle around autonomy and authorship. Whilst Diana was the only one to explicitly voice her confusion surrounding the authorial boundaries of the commission at that time, she certainly was not alone. After all, the curators had

worked hard for five months to develop an exhibition theme, secure funding and network with artists. Understandably for them, and I suppose for many curators in a similar position, it was difficult to relinquish control. And so for us, the concept of autonomy was explored not just in the exhibition's theme but also through the curatorial processes themselves.

From this scene, I feel it is very evident how torn James was. On the one hand he appears to want to please, or at least, appease the curators; "I mean, I could find out…" and "it's an interesting idea". However, I believe this is politeness. It was only the third time James had worked with the group and I suspect he wasn't yet sure how to say no to them. In this scene Diana directly points out to James that they selected him; "we chose him", and I wonder whether the subtext here is that their opinion is therefore of importance. Writer and Editor of Art Flux Journal Anton Vidokle discussed this issue in his piece *Art without Artists* (2010). Vidokle asserts the importance of artists to have what he describes as "sovereignty". "By sovereignty" Vidokle writes, "I mean simply certain conditions of production in which artists are able to determine the direction of their work, its subject matter and form, and the methodologies they use—rather than having them dictated by institutions, critics, curators, academics, collectors, dealers, the public, and so forth" (ibid). Furthermore, is this "sovereignty" described also crucial in underpinning the very freedom of art as expression? In the scene, James does eventually express his reluctance in their suggestion of including lights into his commission; "Well, I don't think lights were a part of my original pitch" and "it's just I've never really worked with lights" indicating his desire to keep true to his vision for the piece and his artistic style, or asserting his artistic 'sovereignty'.

So, whilst a brief moment in the overall project, for me this scene cuts to the heart of some really crucial issues with my work which circle around complexities of autonomy, interdependence and authorship. Here, the curators are not seeing decision-making as a shared responsibility and seem to suggest that the act of selection has given them autonomy over the commission. I also feel that this scene reveals something about risk taking. From this scene we can see all sorts of risks playing out; either the curators are taking risks in allowing the artist to do it his own way despite their suggestions and overarching vision for the show, or the artists takes on board the curators comments and risks the art by comprising his practice and approach. Art collector Dennis Scholl comments;

> We commission works because it's very adventurous. It's so much more involved

than going to a show and saying 'I'll take the third one from the left'. But it's also very hard, it's complex and it's very risky: Sometimes you can get the most inspired work ever; other times it doesn't work out so well. (Buck and McClean, 2012, p. 35).

The risk that Scholl discusses here is in relation to the 'unknown', as commissioning work means you can never really anticipate the final result. Similarly, Maria Frisa (2008, p. 172) writes;

As a curator you have to take risks, because you have to put your ideas to the test; by following an intuition and constructing a project which only becomes a reality when it is finally complete. It is at this point that it is subjected to the judgment of others—and this is the point of curation.

When thinking about risk taking in self-advocacy contexts, often the lives of learning disabled people are incredibly risk averse. There have been a number of studies, particularly around the time of the personalisation agenda, which discuss the dichotomy of enabling risk - through autonomy and choice - whilst still maintaining safeguarding duties (Fyson, 2009; Close, 2009; CSCI, 2008). As the Department of Health outlines; "The goal is to get the balance right moving away from being risk averse while still having appropriate regard for safeguarding issues" (DH, 2008, p. 23). For example in 2012, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation conducted a large study The Right to Rake Risks, in which findings suggest one of the key reasons for this risk averse approach has more to do with implications for the accountability of the care providers than individuals. Similarly, a report by Sarah Carr on behalf of the Social Care Institute for Excellence also documented risk aversion on the part of social care practitioners. It found genuine concern for the safety of groups seen as 'vulnerable', but often it "is based on assumed or perceived risk solely on the part of the practitioner" (2010, p. 5). Therefore self-advocates and their supporters argued that risk is often perceived negatively by people using services because it is "used as an excuse for stopping them doing something" (Glasby, 2011, p. 1). Doug Paulley, a disability activist who lives in a residential home, refers to this as 'Careland'. "In Careland" he explains, "there are different rules - you are not expected or allowed to do things that might hurt you or might risk your safety even if that 'safety' means risking your own independence and wellbeing" (Faulker, 2012, p. 11). But risk needs to be shared equally between the individual taking the risk and the system that is trying to support them. This should be equally as personalised.

I talked about risk with the group, both in regards to the commission and to their own lives. Leah one of the curators on this project talked a lot about her frustrations in not being allowed to try things out and make mistakes. She talked about having to go on a training course in order to support her engagement to her boyfriend; "everyone's so scared that we don't know what we're doing". Ideas of risk, choice and control carried over into the curation of other works for Leah. She was instrumental in including the piece by artist Alaena and worked closely with her to produce the interpretation for the show about this work. Leah describes "I think these paintings are celebrating mistakes and accidents, something if you've got a learning disability you're not allowed to do".

In addition to risk, Scene 3 also flags issues of authorship. We see the curators pushing their vision for the artwork, the idea of including lights, onto James. As discussed in Act 1: Prologue, the act of commissioning art is nothing new and the relationship between the artist and commissioner is well discussed in the literature and often focuses on authorship. Whilst the curator's role in shaping commissions is widely recognised, Vidokle (2010) warns that the curator's curatorial themes and "authorial claims" should not take precedence over the artists' work. He believes that such practices run a serious risk of undermining the agency of artists and diminishing the space of art all together. It seems the role of curator has become so entwined with connotations of knowledge, status and power that perhaps their 'authorial claim' can become dominant, because how would an artist challenge it? Through their role curators wield considerable power and play a crucial part in the subscription process. Authorship is therefore tied into the careful negotiation of power in the commissioner/artist relationship. This has even brought into debate whether the term curator is becoming outdated. In conversation with fellow curator Nato Thompson, Michelle White proposes that perhaps the very term curator does not account for the delicate collaborations at stake in the role or other subtle forms of power;

> The term cultural producer, aside from the particular conditions of our moment,
> is a healthier or more honest way to articulate the contemporary role of the
> curator. It acknowledges the complexity of the collaboration that has to happen
> when something like an exhibition is organized or a project is carried out, which
> involves, as you said, a much more complex institutional web of financial as well
> as physical logistics from the relationship of collectors, patrons, boards of trustees
> to the possibilities of display space. It is certainly beyond the simple curator/artist
> dichotomy. But at the same time, in working on site-specific projects or

exhibitions with living artists where collaboration is essential to produce meaning,
I have found myself questioning the boundaries of my involvement in the
aesthetic and conceptual production. So, I wonder, are there risks in assuming
this more egalitarian position as producer? (White, 2008)

Following the workshop with James, I decided to work with the group to think more closely about the relationship between an artist and curator as much was at stake. To support the group to self-define their role in producing the exhibition I suggested we make our own 'Auto Agent', who affectionately got dubbed by the group as Auto Agent Bob. To create Auto Agent Bob I asked the group to make a large outline of a person who was divided in half down the middle; one half to represent the artist and the other half the curators. I printed out labels for the group which described tasks in making an exhibition such as 'choosing artists', 'getting money' and 'making the artwork'. I then asked the group to think of where each label should go on Auto Agent Bob, the artist's or the curator's side? Everyone grabbed a label and in less than 30 seconds, and not to my surprise, the curator's half of Auto Agent Bob was full whilst the artist side of Auto Agent Bob was bare. In other words, the group clearly felt like all of the decisions in the exhibition were theirs to make. "That's interesting" I said, "Let's do it again but this time pretend we are the artists and not the curators". This time round no one wanted to place down a label first. "Who makes the artwork?" I asked. "Oh yeah", said Eddie, "the artists do!". Tony placed his label of "making the artwork" on the artist side. Slowly we went through each label and looked at the task from the perspective of artists. This time round many shared tasks emerged, one of which was interpretation.[18]

Following this activity I suggested we use this learning to draw up *Decision Making Agreement*. In this document we list the important decisions to be made in regards to the exhibition, how everyone should be included, but crucially, who gets the final say. This provides guidance we can refer back to when tensions emerge around agency and authorship. I have developed these type of agreements with self-advocates in the past and they are commonly used as a person-centred planning tool (Helen Sanderson Associates, 2017). Decision Making Agreements aim to break down information into three easy sections: 'important decisions in my life', 'how I must be involved' and 'who make the final decision', to "help people to reflect on how decisions are made and who is

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[18] *Auto Agent Bob* was used again in a workshop at the 2016 Engage Conference: Art & Activism to discuss the challenges in navigating the curator/artist relationship.

making them" (ibid).

Simultaneously as James's commission was developing, the group were working with Mark to create a gallery publication. Mark had been attending some of James' workshops with the aim to learn about the exhibition and the work in it to inform what format the publication could take. Early on it was decided that the publication would not be overly textual, but instead explore other ways to produce a gallery publication. This was because four out of the five curators could not read or write independently, they felt that a textual interpretation of the exhibition would not make sense. Instead, Mark suggested they focus on the experiential dimension of books and alternate ways of 'reading'. This view that books can be 'read' in many different ways is well explored amongst artists, who have long understood the potential of the book form to do more than just display information.

During Mark's next workshop he supported the group to think about movement. "Books don't move!" laughed Diana! "Of course they do" replied Mark, "look…", Mark began flipping through a book and the groups watched the pages turning. "You can't really read a book without turning pages". The group then went on to explore flip books, books with a series of pictures that vary gradually from one page to the next, so that when the pages are turned rapidly, the pictures appear to animate. They practiced the technique with post it notes and then went on to create more elaborate flip books once the technique was mastered. In another workshop, Mark brought along a wide range of paper swatches for the group to feedback on colour, paper weight and finish. Everyone had the opportunity to pick a colour and Mark talked through the different sizes of books the printers could offer.

The first draft Mark produced for the group received a tepid response. I suspect this was because it was not as playful as the previous flip books and that Mark has used cheap paper and binding for draft purposes. "I don't like this paper" Tony commented. "Yeah I get that, it's just cheap paper to give you an overall idea of the book" Mark explained. Normally when producing a draft Mark would use cheap materials to keep costs down, however when producing a book that is intended to be 'read' through its physical form such as the paper qualities, using different materials meant the draft became abstracted. This proved difficult for the group. Mark provided future drafts that were as close to the final piece as possible in order to support the group to give more informed feedback. Aside from the paper issues, in this first draft Mark introduced the idea of including the question "what do you use books for?", which was the question he originally posed to the group at their first

meeting. However, as the group made it clear they didn't want the book to be textual, Mark proposed making it very hard to read this question for 'able reading' audiences through splitting up the words by putting a letter on each page. This would mean the audience would focus on the patterns and shapes of letters instead of what they said. This received mixed reactions from the group. Some members did not understand the concept, whilst others did and loved the idea of 'complicating reading'.

SCENE 3: IT'S COMPLICATED

After Mark's workshop, I again discuss with the group again what they thought of his idea of 'complicating reading'.

TONY: I think it's good

DIANA: Yeah, it's funny. They can't read like us!

EDDIE: …Well I don't like it. It's complicated and people won't know where they're at

ABI: I think it's a really clever idea

DIANA: Yeah, a clever idea!

JADE: Leah, Hannah, what do you think?

HANNAH: It's nice, nice colours

DONNA: Jade is asking about the letters and the question

HANNAH: Yeah it's letters [looks confused]

DONNA: I'm not sure Hannah quite understands this one…

JADE: Ok [makes notes] How about you Leah?

LEAH: Yeah I like it. But I understand where Eddie is coming from, will people get the idea from the book? I only got it when you explained it to me.

JADE: That's a great point. Something to ask Mark I think. Since there's a bit of a split decision here, who will get the final say on including this in the book?

DIANA: Don't know.

LEAH: We need to check the contract.

EDDIE: Oh yeah! We did that. Fair enough I suppose, we can only tell him we don't quite get it and it's up to him to make it work.

In this scene we see the group discussing concerns over Mark's commission. Whilst the majority of the group liked this idea of complicating the reading experiences for audiences, Eddie and Leah show increasing awareness of how audiences may experience the book. They felt that although the concept worked, that audiences may not understand it without providing some explanation or interpretation. We also see in this scene a more nuanced curatorial relationship between the group and Mark. Whilst Eddie is not yet fully on board with the idea, he says "we can only tell him we don't quite get it and it's up to him to make it work" indicating that he now understands he cannot tell Mark what to make, but his job is instead to provide guidance and ensure Mark is thinking about the bigger picture – the audience experience. Eddie's comment here was incredibly reminiscent of curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist in conversation for The Journal of Visual Culture; "At the end of the day it comes down to what the artists want to do, and as a curator I just help configure it." (2013, p. 149).

Another challenge Mark had with his commission was how this book would be displayed in the gallery. The group were clear that the book should be displayed in an engaging way that urged audiences to interact with it. For me, this is when Mark's commission moved from the realm of creating a publication to producing an art installation. More on the books final display in the next act.

Including Existing Artwork

So far I have detailed how the group worked to interview and commission artists for the exhibition, but they also included one existing piece of artwork in their show by artist Alaena Turner. I first met Alaena at Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, as we were both exhibiting work in a show titled *Against Delivery* (2015). Alaena also happened to be a PhD student at the University of Leeds undertaking a practice-led research in painting. Months later I did a presentation for the group about exhibitions I had been a part of and showed some footage from Against Delivery. The footage scans across the exhibition and features Alaena's dynamic installation which immediately got the groups attention. "Wow! Did you just see that! That painting fell off the wall!" shouted Diana. "What's just happened!" asked Hannah, "Let's see that again!". "Don't worry! It's suppose to happen, Alaena sets up the paintings to do this on purpose". "That's sooo cool" Tony replied, "I wanna do that". From this brief piece of footage the group were very keen to try out Alaena's

painting techniques and learn more about her work, so I invited Aleana to a workshop.

Unfortunately for us, Aleana lives in London and so travel was extremely expensive. As we were not able to cover her expenses at that time, we instead corresponded with Alaena over several months via email and Skype. During one of our correspondences, the group had asked Alaena to film herself making a Secret Action Painting, as they were interested in learning about the process. This video shows Alaena in her studio. A painting is hung in the background and Alaena approaches with another smaller painting and mounts it over the top. The camera is left running and we see the painting slowly moving down leaving sticky black marks. Alaena's work immediately resonated with the group. I think it's because Alaena's work is so unpredictable. It really does fill you with feeling of anticipation as you wait for the painting to drop, BANG!

In conversation with Alaena, we decided to try and run a workshop remotely. In this workshop we attempted to recreate Alaena's Secret Action Paintings as a way to better understand them. On the surface they look deceptively simple; painted wooden boards, stuck together with a glue which doesn't stick quickly enough, so the painting slips, leaving traces of paint. Alaena's work also features pastel shades or as Alaena describes "muted colours"- not colours the group usually gravitate towards. I urged the group to try this new palette and what we learnt is that soft pastel colours are actually much trickier to mix. "Well she must have practiced a lot, because this is annoying me now. It still dead orange" complained Eddie. "It is isn't it! I'm going off pastel pink" said Diana. After a lot of paint mixing, the group finished their boards and we set them to dry over lunch.

After lunch, we began on composition and mixing the secret recipe glue. The group all found the composition straightforward, but mastering the glue was hard. Too thick, too thin, not sticky enough, too sticky, we all realised that Alaena's work was much more complex than meets the eye. Conversation turned to how this might be evidenced in the show. "I just don't think people know until you do it. Is there a way we can give people a go?" asked Leah. This was the first time the group - without me prompting - were thinking of engagement events and ways for the audience to understand the materiality of the work. After we tried (but sort of failed) with the glue, we had arranged to skype Alaena to show her our work. "Couldn't do it, couldn't make it stick" Tony explained to Alaena. "Yes, well it is my secret recipe" said Alaena with a grin. Alaena talked through how she would like to see her work installed at the show. Originally, the group were keen to have

Alaena create the Secret Action Paintings live, but this threw up a myriad of health and safety problems, as well as unanticipated costs. In response, the group suggested including a video of Alaena making the work alongside her static paintings, but initially Alaena was a little unsure as for her, video was uncharted territory, but was open for them to try out video ideas. The solution came with the development of the exhibition interpretation which I discuss in the next act.

Act 4: Auto Agents

As the artworks were now firmly in development and nearing completion, the group began working more closely on developing interpretation, as well as organising a programme of engagement events and marketing materials. This final phase in the project made visible the curator's role as a mediator situated within a large network and for me, the links between a self-advocate and curator were becoming more apparent. Just as self-advocates are required to operate within complex networks of support, I began to see how curators were also required to move and communicate between large networks, which now included not just the artists, but also Bluecoat's programming team, front of house, marketing, press and the technical install teams, as well as those 'outside' the Bluecoat such as external press, fabricators, and visitors.

That Goes There

SCENE 1: CURATOR TO CURATOR

In the Makin Room, Bluecoat. The group are interviewing Bluecoat's in-house curator Adam Smythe about his exhibition *Left Hand to Back of Head, Object Held Against Right Thigh.* Tony asks a question about the artworks placement in the gallery.

JADE: So Tony's question; do you want to read it Tony or shall I?

TONY: You. [I gave Tony the option because I know he cannot read well and he particularly doesn't appreciate being put on the spot to do so in front of people]

JADE: So this is in the gallery that backs onto Radio Merseyside. Did you mean to use the curtains as windows and put them opposite windows? Is there a connection? So you have three curtains that look like three windows opposite three windows? He was wondering if that was on purpose? Is that something you think much about when you put work in spaces?

ADAM: That's a really really good observation. And yeah you always have to kind of think about this when you start to put an exhibition together in an empty gallery space, but of course it's not completely empty, it's not neutral

there's things that already exist in the gallery like those windows, they're there and you have to deal with them in some way. And yeah, finding a place where the art feels right in that spot. The fact that the curtains kind of mirror what's happening with the windows, you do think about.

This scene was part of a much longer conversation with Adam in which the group interviewed him about an exhibition he had curated at Bluecoat. This conversation took place during the first 'research' phase of the project on the 21st of February 2016[19], to support the group to learn about different approaches to curating from a curator's personal perspective. This scene focuses on questions Tony had in regards to *where* artworks were displayed in the gallery, and reasoning behind Adams choices to put them there. Tony always demonstrated a keen eye in noticing where items were located, but also looked for reasons *why*. He was keenly aware that artwork placement was deliberate. This conversation prompted us to assess the space we were using and look for, as Adam describes, "the things that already exist in the gallery".

Imagining where work would go in the gallery was often difficult for the group. Even Eddie, who has been visiting the Bluecoat on average three times per week for twenty years struggles to remember and describe the physical attributes of the gallery spaces. To support the group in deciding where works might go, I suggested making a model of the gallery space that we could refer to in the studio or as Diana put it, "something to jog my memory". We began making our model by visiting the gallery and making sketches, notes and taking photographs of the space around us. I split the group in half – one group concentrated on documenting the ground floor level and the other on the first and second floors. With the information collected, back in the studio we constructed a model of The Vide using cardboard we have collected. We painted it to match the colours of the gallery and included where windows, lifts, doors and radiators were positioned. Whilst this model was not precisely to scale, it did provide a practical, hands-on way for us to assess the space and think about the possibilities of where artworks could go. In later workshops as the commissions began to be realised, the group also made models of the artworks to be placed inside the model. It is common practice for curators to use models and other planning tools when curating an exhibition. However, in my experience most curators tend to use 2D scaled floor plans, as appose to 3D models like the group.

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[19] Full transcript available in the online portfolio; www.artasadvocacy.co.uk

In our final workshop before the exhibition opened, I was able to work with the group in the empty gallery space where their show would be installed. In this final workshop, we discussed where each item to be included in the show would be best placed to feedback to the artists, there were certainly differences in opinion. The group had different views on where some of the artworks would be best placed. For example, Diana and Hannah felt that James' large-scale seed should be placed in front of the main ground floor window to benefit from the light. They also felt it would make an impact on visitors as this would be the first piece they would see upon entering the space. Other members of the group felt like it would be "stuck out on its own" and would "not look right". Much of Tony and Leah's views were instinctual and they gave little reason other than it did not "feel right".

However, the artworks placement had been discussed between the artists and curators throughout the project, so there were no surprises when the group shared their final plans. Placement emerged from a very natural process of collaboration, and most decisions were also in light of practical considerations. For example, James' sculpture was commissioned specifically to fit in The Vide's 'drop', Mark required a large wall for his projection as well as access to electricity points and the film needed to be positioned in easy view for visitors. Here we see the relationality of curating, not just between people, but also between structures and objects. Whilst much of the decisions were joint, on occasion the artists were very clear on their wishes regarding particular aspects of their install. For instance, the curators had chosen where Alaena's paintings would be situated within the gallery, however, Alaena was very clear on *how* she wished her paintings to be hung (such as the order) and provided plans for the curators and technicians. The curators were happy with this arrangement and in a Skype conversation with Alaena Eddie commented; "well you know them best don't you" when she discussed sending over plans.

Whilst all curators invest time thinking carefully about the placement of artworks in the gallery, and specifically how these placements generate connections between artworks, the outcome of the exhibition installation can lead to "surprise moments" (Acord, 2010, p. 455) wherein curators observe new emergent themes or relations between artworks not planned for or anticipated. This occurred during the third day of Auto Agents install. Alaena's work has been installed on the opposite wall to Mark's *Book* projection. As a technician thumbed through the pages, animating The Vide wall, he left *Book* open on its colour block middle section. These middle pages illuminated the gallery in pastel pink and blue, and directly opposite hung Alaena's pastel colour block paintings.

"That's clever" pointed out another technician working on the ground floor, as he gestured between the two artworks opposite each other, and when the exhibition opened to the public, many thought that the middle section of *Book* was a deliberate nod to Alaena's work. In fact, it was a surprise moment.

Reimagining Interpretation

Throughout our research phase, we spent a lot of our time recording various forms of interpretation in a number of galleries. The primary issue the group came across time and time again was that of text and difficulties in reading. Most members of the group would bypass and ignore any gallery texts displayed. They never picked up hand outs, press releases or brochures and would occasionally ask me to read out labels to copy the artists name down in their sketchbook. We found that often approaches to interpretation were "chiefly literary" (Kuh, 2001, p. 52), therefore the group learnt from the research phase was that traditional textual interpretation may not be appropriate for their exhibition.

The practice of interpretation addresses how we "facilitate encounters between object and observer" (Belcher, 2012, p. 649). In particular, the crux of curatorial practice in contemporary art is the construction of artistic meaning through the exhibition, which is largely down to the curator. As Greenberg et al. describes, "Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions—especially exhibitions of contemporary art—establish and administer the cultural meanings of art" (1996, p. 2), and interpretation plays a key role in this. But from reviewing the literature, the very nature and role of interpretation in museums and galleries is complex and widely debated; from its role and scope, its relationship with learning, ethical entanglements, to its professionalisation and incorporation into job roles and departments.

In 1957, Freeman Tilden produced a seminal text on interpretation titled Interpreting Our Heritage, and within this text he famously sets out six principles of interpretation. Crucially, Tidlen points out that "the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation" (Tilden, 2007, p. 18). Here, emphasis is placed on supporting people to make their own connections. Similarly, Cheryl Meszaros, a lecturer and museum consultant, claims constructivist learning theory[20] has

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[20] A theory in which people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiences and reflecting on those

undermined the traditional authority of art historical knowledge formerly used to empower art curators to dispense interpretation to the masses. Meszaros suggests power has now shifted to viewers, obliging curators to ask what (and how) museum visitors may be learning (2007). As a result, Meszaros argues, "people make their own meaning in and through their interactions with the world" (p. 18). Arisen is the notion that the museum is all about you-the-visitor and *your* interpretations rather than learning being about the "consumption" of ideas (ibid).

From the beginning, the group were always interested in using film within their show as a way of 'telling audiences about it'. I talked to Eddie in particular about why the Matisse film featured in Act 2: Scene 2: Fella With The Scissors, resonated with him so much. "The film makes you want to look at it and look at it some more. See how the paper is crinkly there" Eddie explained. "I really want to have a go at making that, can we?". With Tilden's principles in mind, was seeing the process of making a provocation for Eddie? Does this explain why he, and others in the group, were so keen for their own interpretative materials to show audiences the 'making' process?

In 1996 ex-director of Tate Museums and newly appointed chair of Arts Council England Nicholas Serota wrote; "The best museums of the future will... seek to promote different modes and levels of 'interpretation'" (Serota, 1996, p. 55). Serota suggested; "the story line becomes less significant and the personal experience becomes paramount... An increasing number of museums are following this model, prompting us to ask whether the museum is losing its fundamental didactic purpose" (p. 10). This comment suggests that each of us, curators and visitors alike, will have to become more willing to chart our own path in the gallery experience, rather than following a single trajectory laid down by a curator or institution. Serota's comments from twenty years ago hint at the relational turn of the museum and the emergence of audience-orientated art and relational aesthetics which would dominate in the early 2000s.

There is some literature that explores how learning disabled artists have approached the labelling and interpretation of their work. The chapter A Sense of Self by Dorothy Atkinson and Fiona Williams (1990) explores how many artists with disabilities featured in their publication identify themselves and their work through their "immediate environment" (p. 11). Therefore many of the case studies demonstrate learning disabled artists using texts resembling 'life stories' in conjunction with their visual art, typically produced via interviews with support workers. However upon

experiences.

reflection, this approach was identified as problematic by both the authors and support workers; "When we listened afterwards to the tapes, we were struck by how easy it is to talk the person down tracks they might not necessarily have gone down… to ask about particular things that interested us" (p. 228). Whilst there is literature exploring how learning disabled people have challenged labelling of their disabilities (label jars not people, learning *difficulty* not *disability*), there has been little work addressing how learning disabled artists have challenged traditional approaches to labelling and interpretation of themselves and their work in in museums and galleries contexts. This is an area I have identified where this study could contribute new thinking.

Developing the exhibition's interpretation also raised issues surrounding the use of labels more broadly, for example; how and/or when is it acceptable to label artwork produced by or in conjunction with a person with a learning disability? Some believe that the artwork should always speak for itself and that a person's "diagnostic label" (Fox and Macpherson, 2015, p. 12) should not be drawn attention to. Labels can work to differentiate groups, and in doing so they can stigmatize. But by excluding the biography of the artist and their learning disability, we perhaps miss the political work their art may achieve which was a very real debate that took place during the curation of Auto Agents previously outlined on page 71. However, Outsider Artists for example have achieved considerable commercial success from practicing under labels connected to marginalisation, sharing with audiences their 'outsider' label. In the chapter To Label the Label? 'Learning disability' and exhibiting 'critical proximity' Helen Graham describes the complexities of labelling specifically in regards to learning disabled people within museum contexts. Through drawing upon the example of *Mabel's Certificate (2004),* an object belonging to a person with the label of learning disability that was displayed at The Museum of Croydon, Graham describes how labels are not simply "*descriptive* but *productive*" (2011, p. 115), highlighting the thorny relationship between labelling objects and labelling people; recognising both the political utility in that labels make visible and articulate difference and inequality, and also their limitations such as over determining, and potentially, fixing difference.

Uniquely, Auto Agents is predominantly a text free exhibition, reflecting the ways in which the curators differently read, write and communicate. Therefore, the curators of Auto Agents thought long and hard about the inclusion of text into their own exhibition, and decided it was an opportunity to 'do it their own way' and relate the approaches to curating to their 'big idea' of autonomy. Rather than traditional labels, text panels and wordy artist statements and hand-outs,

Auto Agents instead featured a single short video filmed collaboratively between themselves and the artists. The video which is just under three minutes long and begins with the curators introducing themselves the starting point for the exhibition; their own lives and experiences. "We the curators all have something in common" Leah's voice-over explains on the video, "We have different kinds of independence and different levels of support. We wanted the artists to think about these things, and what's interesting is, everyone made something which involves action" (French, 2016). Although the concept of autonomy is highly politicised for learning disabled people as previously discussed, through their work with the curators the artists in Auto Agents interpreted that concept and made it their own. In addition, the video includes short segments made by each artist filmed throughout the curatorial process, providing a window into the relational and participatory approaches to creating the exhibition. Unlike some types of interpretation, the curators in the video do not explain or give reason to what the work is about, that is left to the artists.

Just as text was not employed as a mode of communication inside the exhibition, the curators also chose not to use text as the primary way to market their exhibition either. Instead, the group collaborated with Mark to produce a series of gifs[21]. An animated GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) file is a graphic image on a web page that moves, presenting short sequences which loop endlessly. Gifs had been of interest to the group since James' initial workshop in which he shared his Charlie and the Chocolate Factory gif. Mark also became interested in gifs as he felt mutual themes of action and movement were present in his work with the group. After a workshop in which we all made our own practice gifs for a Bluecoat exhibition, Mark designed three gifs for Auto Agents with direction from the curators.

This methodology in developing interpretation for Auto Agents illuminates the participatory and relational potential of curating. For me, it also exemplifies the potential for the process of curating to be politicised. The non-existence of text in Auto Agents challenges the norms of the gallery domain, which often rely on text, and contributes towards activating change within the institution itself through providing new solutions to areas of previous tension. The group chose to use their capacity as curators to orientate audiences to their ways of understanding art, which emphatically for them, is not through text. This disruption of the status quo could also be viewed in light of

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[21] These gifs can be found in the portfolio under the 'Auto Agents – Marketing' tab.

philosopher Jacque Rancière's writings on politics which he describes is not what is often thought of as politics, such as the exercise of power from bureaucracies which he renames 'la police'. Politics is really what occurs when the dominant social order is disrupted (Rancière, 2001). In this context, the exclusion of text disrupts the 'dominant order' within the institution opening up new possibilities of ways to 'know' about art. But this was not easy. As curator Diana succinctly explained; "People might think we aren't using text because we can't do it, instead of saying, here's a new way and it's good". By excluding text the curators drew attention to their status as learning disabled people, but at the same time, they foregrounded an important quality for activism; the ability to view and imagine the world differently through forging new relations. This approach to interpretation also enabled visitors to experience a more relational engagement with the art work as meaning was not mediated via text which is inaccessible to many people. However, despite great efforts on the part of design teams and curators, "it is well documented that many visitors do not view exhibits in the intended order" (Falk and Dierking, 2011, p. 71). We gained some feedback that people did not understand what the exhibition was about. When asked if they had watched the video, they said no, presenting a limitation with using video as interpretation.

The Show Must Go On

The installation of Auto Agents was a bumpy ride. Although the curators had engaged in lengthy, detailed discussions and workshops with the artists over a long period of time, the reality is that they, (and curators everywhere engaging in commissioning) could not know the final outcome of the commissioned work in advance nor prepare for what they would experience in their first encounter with the finished work.

As we experienced, the installation process can have considerable impact on the final exhibition. As Sophia Krzys Acord succinctly describes in her paper The Practical Work of Curating Contemporary Art (2010), installing art exhibitions throws up a myriad of unexpected practical and authorial decisions. Artists may change their minds and "edit works in progress" or make "visual decisions" about placement once inside the actual space (p. 453). This means installing art exhibitions can take a considerable amount of time, with Auto Agents taking a week to install. The bulk of this time Acord suggests is spent moving things around, stepping back, looking at them, adjusting them, and perhaps moving them again based on a curator's sense of what 'feels right'. Therefore, exhibition

installations can be seen as a combination of plans and "situated actions" (ibid). As Lucy Suchman (1987) notes in her study of human-machine interaction, while action is generally described as adhering to coherent plans, in practice these plans are necessarily vague and action is actually accomplished via ad hoc situated actions. Curators make no pretence to fool-proof plans for exhibitions but often respond to the spontaneous nature of situated actions that occur through installation.

As outlined in the section That Goes There, the curators spent the first day of the install finalising where things would go. However, they did not have the benefit of the artwork in situ and so their decisions were instead supported by plans and models. The main difficulty of Auto Agents' installation began when James' fabricator let him down and could no longer produce an integral metal part of his moving sculpture. This happened on the second day of the install when James had already delivered the majority of his work to Bluecoat. Without this piece, James was required to reconfigure his sculpture on site. Instead of moving parts inside the main sculpture as originally planned, the moving parts now operated outside the main sculpture as a separate piece of work. For the technicians, this change ensured that the piece was safe for audiences to operate, and for myself and James, it still in some way spoke to the curators' vision of movement controlled by audiences as per the original design. This recalibration of the artwork required rapid-fire problem solving. As well as addressing practicalities of changing the sculpture such as re-wiring, PAT testing and the ingenious fabrication of a wooden gear complete with marble ball bearings. But there was also the less obvious and implicit process of changing the work in terms of 'signing off' on the authorial content. In other words, did these changes in the artwork still fulfil the curators original brief for the commission? After all, we were not only accountable to the curators' vision for the commission, but also to the Arts Council England from whom the funds for the commission was awarded. For me, in this aspect of the project, the networks of people underpinning the gallery emerged. Not only though Bluecoat's own staff – Adam, Marie-Anne, Bec and the numerous technicians - but also institutionally affiliated individuals and groups like engineers and electricians. Explaining these networks to the group was supported using Hannah's 'independence' artwork outlined in Act 2: So, What is a Curator Anyway? Just as Hannah requires networks of people and support to enable her to attend performance group, wonderfully detailed in her art, commissions and artworks also require networks of people and support to be made and exhibited.

The curators however, were left out of these situated actions. Whilst this was not the only change

to occur with commissions[22], it was the first change to occur without the curator's consent. Due to their tightly managed schedules, they could only be around for the pre-agreed one-day per week and I was entrusted to manage the process on their behalf. Here we see how learning disabled people's live are incredibly risk averse; it was impossible to change people's schedules and 'risk' them 'losing out' on their usual routines and projects. If I could undertake this study again, I would insist the curators would be present during the entirety of the installation to ensure their inclusion if any decisions on situated actions that may arise.

The curator's first encounter with Auto Agents brimmed with excitement, but then confusion sank in. Bluecoat's lobby was already filling up to what would be an incredibly busy private view. Away from the crowds, the group, one by one as they arrived came to look around the show. They only had a couple of minutes before the speeches started and audience would be let in. This did not give me near enough the amount of time required to explain the series of changes that had occurred over just a few days. Upon reflection, it is interesting to think that an object such as James' metal mechanism not being fabricated threw off months of preparation and planning. This demonstrated how in the final stages of an exhibition the work becomes materially bound. Objects, such as James' mechanism, have non-objective consequences for mediation; they do not simply perform the 'scripts' they are given and objects, just as much as people, can produce significant effects[23].

In the group workshop following the private view, we scheduled a full evaluation of the exhibition away from the crowds. I ran this evaluation workshop by using Edward De Bono's (2017) six thinking hats, a tool for group discussion and thinking involving six coloured hats which each represent a different mode of thinking; (**Blue Hat** – The control or management, **White Hat** – Information, **Red Hat** – Emotions, **Black Hat** – Discernment, **Yellow Hat** – Optimistic response, **Green Hat** – Creativity).

SCENE 2: BLACK HAT

The group are using DeBono's six thinking hats to evaluate the exhibition.

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[22] In James' original proposal he had hoped to suspend the main sculpture from the ceiling. However after seeking advice from a structural engineer, he decided against it and this was agreed with the curators.

[23] Actor Network Theory (ANT) was developed in the 1980s by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law. In short, ANT can be defined as a research method with a focus on the connections and relations between both human and non-human entities (Callon 1986; Latour 2005).

Jade: Now we're going to move onto Hannah's hat

Diana: Hannah's is the black hat!

Jade: So Hannah's black hat is the problems, what didn't go right?

[The group go quiet]

Jade: No? No problems?! So, everything has been completely perfect?

Donna: Was the art what you expected?

Eddie: I say it wasn't, we wanted to see things move around the pole.

Jade: Great, thank you Eddie. So, a black hat problem was the artwork didn't move as planned?

Eddie: It's bad on his part I think. He should've had it all ready.

Eddie was cross. He was angry at the private view, and he was still annoyed in the following workshop. During this time, I concentrated on listening to the group's feelings on the exhibition and on explaining the culmination of circumstances that brought about the changes to the work in the first place. I also felt that the group would likely have felt differently if they had experienced the extreme pressure of the situation. In some ways, they were protected from this. Whilst having the curators on site during the install is clearly the best way to mitigate this sort of situation in the future, if curators could not be on site then a solution could be to record the chain of events. Perhaps recording the circumstances via video for example, interviews with technicians, then the issues at stake could have been more tangible for the group.

Interestingly, I sensed Eddie, Tony and Diana – the three Blue Room members – found it hardest to accept the difficulties in the install. However, Hannah in particular demonstrated great understanding about the risk involved. In the workshop, Eddie postulated that maybe, the exhibition should not have opened that day if it was not ready. But Hannah responded by saying "but the show must go on". Donna explained this is something they discuss in her performing arts group Ella Together and that 'things seen as going wrong' are often a very real part of shaping art.

James Harper: Meet at the Tree

James' completed commission was an installation titled *Meet at the Tree*. It comprised of a large central sculpture which was based on the concept of a tree, covered in a large draped blanket of

hessian. Behind this sculpture was a mechanical seed shape, which audiences could control via a switch on the wall. When on, the seed would continually rotate which for James was an important link to the curator's concept of autonomy. Either side of the large sculpture, James included two real live birch trees as well as large hand sculpted wooden seed varnished in linseed oil positioned on the floor. Along two walls of The Vide, and on the wall of the upstairs level of the gallery, James also installed small sculptures which resembled stones. These clay sculptures were directly informed by workshops with the group. The concept broadly underpinning James' installation is community. In the interpretation video James explains;

> The tree is a symbol of so many different things from landmarks, to sources of food and shelter. When I was growing up, friendship groups always had a landmark which was a meeting point, for me this was the tree. There's a Costa Rican saying that if you have a church, a bar and a football, you have a town but I feel a tree is far more important in terms of community.

Mark Simmonds: Book

Mark's completed commission is titled *Book*. It aims to reimagine the purpose of gallery publications through the eyes of the curators who employ alternate ways of 'reading'. It is an 27.9 x 21.5 cm, spiral bound publication broadly comprising of three sections. The first section of Book sets out the question *What do you use books for?* through placing each letter of this question on a separate page. Each of these individual letters were scanned from ephemera found inside Bluecoat's own library, used as a source for the group in their workshops. By drawing out the question across many pages, Mark complicates and disrupts the reading experience for audiences, inspired by working with the group. He was also drawing attention to the uniqueness and design of typefaces by enlarging each letter on a single page.

Section two contains no text, but colourful textured pages. This has been described as an 'explosion' within the book, a surprise for the reader following the previous black and white section, like Dorothy entering the Technicolor land of Oz. The third and final section is a mixture of Bluecoat ephemera such as old logos and slogans the group found in their library workshops, as well as prints made by the group. Here the publication draws into dialogue old events and exhibitions throughout

Bluecoat with the groups own contemporary artworks.

Book highlights the experiential and sculptural elements of books; the action of page turning, colour, form, paper weight and texture. The experiential dimension of 'reading' is also explored via Books display in the gallery. Instead of displaying it on a plinth or table, which for the group produced a "boring" and static experience, they challenged Mark to devise a participatory way to include it in the gallery. Inspired by a book lecture he saw online, Mark proposed using a live camera positioned over Book to project its image into the space. Mark demonstrated this idea to the group during a workshop using an iPad connected to a projector. Hannah in particular engaged with this idea and pushed for its inclusion in the final exhibition.

For the exhibition, Book was situated on the second level of the gallery space. When entering the gallery on the ground floor, visitors were unaware that the projected image of the book pages positioned high on The Vide wall was actually a live camera. Then when a visitor travelled to the second floor and looked through the publication, their experience would appear via a large projection onto The Vide wall. For me, it was interesting to see the many ways the live camera was used or (perhaps misused!) by visitors. On one occasion, I saw a large group of teenage boys playing an elaborate game of Pokémon Go using the camera. I also saw several notes left under the camera, as well as flyers for gigs and stores, transforming the gallery into a giant advert.

In addition to producing Book, Mark also worked with the group to create vinyl designs throughout the gallery. This included the exhibition title on the ground floor window, footprints in front of the film screen and his installation (signally to visitors to stop), as well as arrows on the floor and walls which acted both as practical signage indicating that the show was across two floors, but also fed into Leah's description of the exhibition featured in the film that the exhibition was about movement and action.

Alaena Turner: Secret Action Paintings

Alaena exhibited three paintings in Auto Agents from her series titled Secret Action Paintings. Alaena has been making this series since 2008 and during this time has developed a technique for making a painting directly on the wall of an exhibition space, using oil-paint as glue to attach pieces

of coloured wood to the wall. Alaena calls these works Secret Action Paintings because they are always shown in a state of stillness, as a static installation or image, so the 'action' of the works falling off the wall is not seen by the gallery audience as a 'live event', instead it is implied by the marks on the wall and panels on the floor. Alaena describes; "I intend for these to be read as propositions for how you might make a painting, accepting and exhibiting moments of accident and mess." The title of the series is also a reference to the early abstract paintings of 'action painters', such as Jackson Pollock, and the theatrical nature of the 'drip' in painting. Alaena plans to continue making paintings directly in exhibition spaces using this technique, which is intended to show an unexpected quality of painting materials (its potential as an adhesive), and to allow the materials of painting to perform for an audience. She also intends to continue recycling the pieces of wood to make collage paintings, incorporating the dents the wood gathers from falling to the floor, and the stains from the oil-paint as part of the image of the painting.

Engagement Events

In addition to the Auto Agents exhibition, several events ran alongside it. These events were broad in scope ranging from curator-led tours of the show, artist events, to events designed for specific audiences such as students.

With the curator's approval, Mark organised an event at Bluecoat titled What Do You Use Books For? This event was held in Bluecoat's Library Room - the space he worked with the group in - on Thursday 12th January 2017. Mark presented a lecture based on the thinking behind Book as it in part explores different ways of reading, and the possibilities and constraints of the printed page. As part of the event's invitation Mark used a photograph he had taken of the decorative inside cover pages of a Bible accompanied with this found text;

> There was an old, delicate, lingering odour about it, such an odour as sometimes
> haunts an ancient piece of furniture for a century or more. The end-papers, inside
> the binding, were oddly decorated with coloured patterns and faded gold. It
> looked small, but the paper was fine, and there were many leaves, closely
> covered with minute, painfully formed characters (Machen, 1904, no pagnation)

During the event Mark presented a slideshow of images. Each of the images illuminated publications, books and ephemera that Mark has experienced interesting encounters with in his life, and Mark talked audiences through these exchanges. One slide showed a book Mark picked up on holiday, another showed audiences his search for his 'most yellow book' and another depicted interesting coincidences between authors. The event aimed to reveal the personal and relational components that books and publication support, inspired in part by many of the curators collecting books, despite them not reading in the traditional sense. The event was sold out and culminated with a walk through of Auto Agents.

To further engage audiences with the exhibition, the curators wanted to do visitor tours of the exhibition. During workshops, we practiced giving tours of the show but most of the group found it too difficult to remember and recall information about each artist and each piece. Tony and Hannah also did not enjoy public speaking in this way which meant much of the talking was left to the others. We also tried using prompts, such as photographs, but these worked to varying degrees of success for different members. Finally, we thought about how we as a group explored exhibitions and decided to try a completely different approach inspired by one of Blue Room's methods of engaging with art. When Blue Room members explore a new exhibition, they sketch it. This is the approach we adopted in the first phase of our own research. This method not only produces a visual record of a visit, but the act of drawing supports people to really *observe*.

Therefore, instead of leading visitors on a traditional exhibition tour, with the expectation of the curators verbally explaining their exhibition and works in it, we used this drawing approach and on tours of the exhibition we invited visitors to sketch the artwork with us as a way of looking and engaging. As we sketched together conversations and questions naturally came about. The curators would approach visitors as they drew which meant often they had multiple one-on-one discussions rather than a single conversation addressing the entire group. This meant that the shyer members could all participate. When the curators were 'stuck' and were unsure of what to say, they asked about what visitors were drawing and what they saw in the work instigating an active dialogue. Interpretation researchers Doug Knapp and Brian Forist advocate an active dialogue between the interpreter and visitors.

> In a dialogic approach, the interpreter is aware of the visitors and the place in which they have gathered. The visitors are no longer seen as vessels to be filled

with information or individuals not yet connected to resources. The respectful relationship between interpreter and visitors is at the center of the ensuing dialogue. (2014, p. 35)

Dialogue-based interpretation is much less presentational than the traditional offerings. It is more about the visitors and their interaction with the objects than it is about the planned presentation of the interpreter. It attempts to veer programs from didactic one-way presentations to active two-way communication between the visitors and the interpretive message. This approach is more complex and challenging, but increases the potential for the visitors to make personal connections and therefore have lasting memories of their interpretive experience (ibid). However, not knowing a "specific trajectory" for a tour can be seen by some "as a process that lacks guidance and control" (p. 37). But the concept of any process being structureless is contested, namely by Jo Freeman in her influential essay The Tyranny of Structurelessness (2017). In this essay Freeman reflects on the experiments of the feminist movement in resisting the idea of leaders and even discarding any structure or division of labour. She suggests that for everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in any given group and to participate in its activities the structure "must be explicit, not implicit" (ibid). The rules of decision-making must be "open and available to everyone, and this can happen only if they are formalized" (ibid). In terms of the drawing tours, the 'rules' were clear; the audience would initiate and lead the conversation supported by observational drawing – the curator's role was simply to respond. I found that this open-ended, emergent approach supported the curators to engage with visitors in-the-moment on their own terms, and importantly, with little intervention from me. One of the final engagement events took place on Friday 13th of July, 15 members of PaRNet – the Practice as Research Network – hosted one of their colloquiums at Bluecoat based on Auto Agents. PaRNet is made up of postgraduate research students undertaking creative practice-led research. They are based across the Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York but their meetings often include students from outside of these institutions.

SCENE 3: THE ELEPHANT MAN

Jade and Eddie are leading a drawing tour, an approach devised by the curators, for students.

Eddie: My name is Eddie and I helped put this show together... We're going to

look around it and draw it and talk about it.

Jade: Rather than give a traditional tour where we explain the work to you, we would love to hear what you think the work means.

Eddie: Yes, exactly that.

[The group is handed drawing materials and begin to explore the space]

Eddie: That's a good picture.

Student: Oh thank you, it's quite hard to draw. But It reminds me of the elephant man, y'know with his hessian mask?

Eddie: Does it now? Who's that?

Jade: Well, he was this man in Victorian times who had a condition which made him look very unusual. He had like, growths all over his body which people said made him look like an elephant. He used to wear a mask to cover himself and it was made out of a similar material to that

Eddie: Well that is very interesting, do you think James knows that?

Jade: I'm not sure, we'll have to ask him.

Eddie: …I think it's a lot about hiding things away this one… but I never heard of that fella before.

In this scene we see Eddie and a student discussing what the hessian material in James' sculpture could mean. James' large draped hessian sculpture was intended to reference the artist's personal experiences of community, but on this drawing tour students convened around the piece and discussed concepts of restriction, of concealment and even drew parallels with Joseph Merrick's (the 'Elephant Man') burlap sack used to conceal his condition. Eddie, and the other curators had never come across Joseph Merrick before and were very curious with this reference. For them it brought a completely new and historic resonance to James' piece and they began sharing this in subsequent conversations around the work - despite it not being a deliberate reference intended by the artist. But on a different drawing tour, local councillors and disability health professionals also saw the draped hessian as a type of concealment, not of the individual as the students did, but of the dampening of ideas and practices. Feelings of restriction resonated in a different sense and from a different perspective, drawing the art work into new meaning.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett wrote in 1998 that "Museums were once defined by their

relationship to objects: curators were 'keepers' and their greatest asset was their collections. Today, they are defined more than ever by their relationship to visitors" (p. 138). Curatorship has gradually evolved from an object-based practice towards a practice of exhibition-making based on community-driven projects and approaches. In her book, The Participatory Museum (2010), Nina Simon advocated that museums ought to become places geared towards social change - that is, places intended to change the world rather than only interpreting it. She and others (Sandell, 2010; 2012) suggest museums can be places that facilitate people's understanding of their role and place in society, and hopefully find tools to better interact, communicate and share knowledge in order to bring about change. I believe drawing tours were a place that supported the curators and visitors to interact and share views and experiences with each other. More so than the more formal events, or even the launch, this is where conversations took place.

Finally, it was great to see that Blue Room ran a workshop in response to Auto Agents. In this workshop, the curators gave a tour of the exhibition and the group proceeded to make artwork in response. The participatory nature of work appealed to the Blue Room cohort, but some struggled to draw out the theme of independence from the art work for themselves. Becky designed the workshop activities in response to the art works. Inspired by James' spinning seed sculpture, Blue Room members made their own spinning sculptures reminiscent of those made in James' very first workshop with the curators.[24]

Auto Agents at The Brindley

After Auto Agents closed at Bluecoat on the 16th January 2017, it went on to open again at the Brindley in Runcorn, Halton, from the 4th March to 15th April 2017. This move was never intended when the project was first designed, but came about through forging new links between Bluecoat and the Brindley brought about as the project developed. The exhibition at the Brindley, although it was the same work, was different. This came about in response to firstly, the different physical space of the gallery. The majority of the work in Auto Agents was commissioned specifically in mind for display in The Vide at Bluecoat. This is an unusual space with a cavernous drop. The Brindley's space however is almost the opposite. The gallery is located in a round building, has curved walls

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[24] Video of work produced available in the portfolio.

creating a long thin space. Therefore the curators and artists had to think carefully about how to reconfigure the work into the space. This was made somewhat easier by the physical limitations of the space. The projector was already rigged up on one end of the gallery and the opposite end had temporary partitions which the curators felt could be used to create more of a 'cinema' feel. They felt that the video when displayed in Bluecoat was often hard to watch as there were no seats, so at the Brindley they utilised the partition wall and included seats in this portion of the gallery. Secondly, the different institutional set up affected the show. The Brindley is a council run arts building as appose to Bluecoat which is a charity. We found that there was less institutional support with the exhibition due to the arts manager of the council having recently left post and not replaced. This meant we only ran one event during Auto Agents at the Brindley, which was designed by curator Leah.

Celebrate Me was the event organised by Leah as part of her business Positive You and supported on the day by myself. Throughout the project Leah had been looking for opportunities to bring her own work into the gallery and the Brindley presented a great opportunity for her as the dates coincided with World Down Syndrome Day on the 21st of March. Celebrate Me was a free drop in activity where visitors were invited to create their own celebratory bunting as part of a unique arts display. This event is all about celebrating the lives and dreams of people who have Down Syndrome, through creating a piece of bunting. Bunting is a decoration often used at parties which symbolises celebrations. Leah wanted to use this idea to help people celebrate their own lives and achievements and raise awareness of the potential people with Down Syndrome have when given opportunities and independence to make their own decisions. The event was well attended and many families with children with Down Syndrome attended. The event made it into local newspapers, and subsequently myself and Leah were invited to be filmed inside Auto Agents for local TV news to discuss events and the exhibition. This was perhaps one of the most successful events run as part of Auto Agents and if I was to run this study again, I would be more explicit in supporting each individual curator to generate their own engagement events.

Act 5: Epilogue

When embarking on this project I was interested to know what the action of curating could tell me about the action of self-advocacy, and if by bringing the two into dialogue there were practices and discourses which could cross over and move in between. What emerged through the curation of Auto Agents were questions of autonomy and authorship, and furthermore, the individual versus collective, author versus observer, 'real life' versus art. But rather than advocating for one over another, we wanted to explore how these polarities can sit in relationship to each other.

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the ways in which autonomy is a contested idea and then demonstrated how this complexity became lived and visible during the curation of Auto Agents. Autonomy is "touted as the hallmark of personhood" (Kittay, 2002, p. 248), yet is a state both sought after and treated with suspicion. As we have seen in the literature, autonomy has been desired in the context of self-advocacy, now with more relational models of interdependence emerging. Equally, the relationship between artists and curators indicates how ideas of autonomy relates not simply to the right of curators to act themselves but how they are tied into the careful negotiation with artists. But as indicated in Act 3, Scene 1: But We Chose Him? this negotiation is complex and I experienced first hand the blurred lines of autonomy and authorship between artists and curators. For me, this presented an opportunity for an intervention; to investigate how approaches used in self-advocacy could be carried over into curatorship in an effort to make the authorial boundaries more explicit and tangible for everyone. In self-advocacy, these approaches are devoted to support learning disabled people to identify and utilise their networks (e.g., PATH's), recognising autonomy in life is enabled through collective support and action. However from undertaking this research, I believe they could be as useful for curators in making explicit the intricate linkages that enable complex collaborations that underpin the making of exhibitions. Equally, self-advocates and their supporters could learn from curators. Through the commissioning process and final installation of the work, this research enabled us to experience and reflect on the importance of risk and experimentation, which we found to be more common place in the work of curators and artists than self-advocates. On this, British artist Cornelia Parker commented;

> If you like an artist, have faith in them! Even if the end product is not necessarily
> something you like as much as something they've done before, it might be a very

interesting point in their development that you helped to facilitate and 10 years

down the line you'll think, 'Wow, that was an amazing leap!' All the great patrons

of the arts, the ones people write books about, were those who had the nerve to

allow the artists to be themselves.

This comment stayed with me throughout my time on this project. Whenever I read it, instead of artists, I imagine Parker is really talking about self-advocates, and I hope this research demonstrates that curatorship and self-advocacy do have practices and ideas to learn from each other.

The curators have all viewed the completed written thesis and in particular enjoyed the inclusion of their voices via the scenes. Upon reflection, it struck them all how much they learnt about support relationships and wish to share this valuable learning with other self-advocates. Therefore, it has been decided by the group to create a summary film of the research which 'tells the story of the project and what we learnt'. This summary film will be available via the project website post-submission.

Through curating Auto Agents, I also learnt that an inclusive and relational approach to curating facilitates an active experience, providing audiences a space within the process to be integrated, often helping to materialise or to activate the works. In Auto Agents this is literally the case through James' mechanical sculpture or Mark's interactive 'reading' experience. Auto Agents became a site for social interactions and exchanges catalysed by the artworks and engagement events such as the group's drawing tours. This engagement highlights possibilities of curatorial practice as an alternative realm of knowledge production, through its ability to establish wide reaching connections between people, disciplines and counterpoints. This becomes politically potent for learning disabled curators as the ability to affect change in their own lives requires the engagement of diverse fields. Claire Bishop asserts that "at a certain point, art has to hand [responsibility] over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved: it is not enough to keep producing activist art" (2011, 55 mins). Auto Agents brought together learning disabled people and their support networks, learning disability professionals, self-advocacy groups, local authority workers and local councillors, artists and artist studios, artwork fabricators, Bluecoat's programming, curation, front of house, press, marketing and engagement staff, external press, social media, the University of Leeds, academics, students and of course, the exhibition visitors.

The success of this project was largely down to a successful partnership between myself, the University of Leeds, Halton Speak Out and Bluecoat. The nature of the AHRC's Collaborative Doctoral Award scheme, which has been specifically designed to support collaborations between universities and non-academic organisations, meaningfully supported this project's cross sector partnership, and in turn, through this collision of people, disciplines, institutions and viewpoints, new networks were forged, new conversations took place, and ultimately new meanings were made. Whilst these partnerships required much time, diligence and care to grow, it resulted in rich learning.

And finally, a frequent question I encountered during this study was 'do you think anyone can be a curator?'. From undertaking this research I would say yes, most people can. But to engage 'anyone' with this practice, it must be underpinned by a rigorous process which I have worked to develop during this study and plan to continue to refine in the future. During this project's very first workshop, outlined in Act 2 Scene 1: So, What Is A Curator Anyway?, Eddie draws attention to the opacity and mysteriousness of the curator's role. However this research demonstrates that curating is not mysterious and can be broken down into actionable parts. By interrogating curatorship and breaking it down in ways as demonstrated in this research, it allows curating to be more usable for more people, challenging the perception that it is an exclusive job for the privileged few. At the same time, this new attention to process explicitly evidences curatorial decisions and ways of working, making curating more rigorous and transparent. By enabling this greater rigour and transparency regarding how exhibitions are curated, it is therefore hoped that this research contributes to understanding the process and practices by which our cultural spaces can become democratised.

In summary, it is this rigour in the curatorial process, which I developed using self-advocacy tools, that enables more people to curate. This rigour is vital as it firstly makes curating more transparent, useable, and therefore democratic, and secondly, it enables risk taking and experimentation. Furthermore, this keen attention to the curatorial process enabled myself and the curators to experience and reflect upon ideas of autonomy. We discovered that autonomy is not always about being independent, but is in fact enabled through our interdependence, whether you are a self-advocate or a curator.

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Appendix

James Harper: Meet At The Tree

James' installation is now located at his studio in Liverpool and can be viewed by appointment only via info@james-harper.com.

Mark Simmonds: Book

Mark's book can be viewed at Bluecoat's library by appointment or purchased at these stores in Manchester and London in the UK.

Bluecoat	Ti Pi Tin	Cornerhouse Publications
The Library	47 Stoke Newington	HOME
School Lane	High St	2 Tony Wilson Place
Liverpool, L1 3BX	London, N16 8EL	Manchester, M15 4FN
By appointment only.	http://www.tipitin.com/shop/book-by-aaa-collective-mark-simmonds	https://www.cornerhousepublications.org/publications/book/

Alaena Turner: Secret Action Paintings

Alaena's paintings can be viewed by appointment only via alaenaturner@gmail.com.