Learning with learning disabled artists: a practice research enquiry into artist identity

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Abstract

This practice research is about learning disabled artists within the context of contemporary art. It is conducted in partnership with Venture Arts (Manchester), an established arts organisation and supported studio that aims to remove barriers for learning disabled artists. Through case studies with five artist-participants – Roxy Maguire, Amy Ellison, Sally Hirst, Louise Hewitt, and Emlyn Scott – this research highlights learning disabled artists' self-understandings and ideas about artist identity. Contemporary art contexts, including diversity and inclusion, art therapy and arts and health, Disability Art, Outsider Art, and socially engaged art, as well as the British social model of disability, are shown to not fully capture the situation and experiences of learning disabled artists practicing today.

Initially conceived as in-person, collaborative group sessions, the research moved to individual online engagement due to COVID-19. This led to an unexpected shift in focus from the supported studio model to individual artist experiences and enabled the development of peer-to-peer relationships between the artist-participants and myself. The findings show that learning disabled artists possess a clear understanding of their artistic practices, desire validation through traditional art world structures such as exhibiting, and the importance of affirmative relationships in supporting artist identity. Utilising the affirmation model of disability (Swain and French, 2000, 2008), the thesis provides evidence for learning disabled artists to be recognised and validated as artists on their own terms, based on their self-motivation, artistic decision-making, and critical development of practice, even in the absence of formal support systems such as supported studios. It identifies current gaps in how learning disabled artists are recognised and supported in their long-term development.

Drawing on Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity and nomadic ethics (1993; 1994; 2005/2006; 2006; 2013a; 2013b; 2014), the research positions artist identity as relational and shifting. Through a period of solo, studio-based practice research, the significant impact of the participatory research engagement on my practice development and self-concept as an artist is presented, resulting in a shift from the position of 'facilitator' to one of affirmed artist identity. By showing how encounters between learning disabled and non-learning

disabled artists can reshape the practices and self-understandings of both, the research challenges hierarchical models of facilitation and reframes inclusion as a dynamic, mutual process. The thesis proposes a model for peer-based, relational practice that affirms artist identity across difference, and provides resources for artists, facilitators, and organisations to practice similar reflective and relational shifts. These contributions suggest pathways for transforming institutional and cultural norms, and offer a framework for more equitable and expansive understandings of artist identity.

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Introduction

This practice research[1] set out to explore the intersection of learning disabled artists and contemporary art. The research is in partnership with Venture Arts (Manchester), an established arts organisation that aims to remove barriers for learning disabled artists. Venture Arts provides accessible studio space and facilitator support, presents exhibitions in respected cultural institutions, and creates development opportunities for learning disabled artists. Through these activities, and in concert with a number of other supported studios in the UK – including Pyramid (Leeds), ActionSpace (London), Intoart (London), Rockets Studios (Brighton), and Project Artworks (Hastings) – Venture Arts present a case for the recognition and relocation of art practice by learning disabled people within the contemporary art field.

While this research is interested in the supported studio model, the impact of learning disabled artists' inclusion on established contemporary art discourses, and the barriers that learning disabled people face within the UK cultural industries, it is more closely focused on learning disabled people's relationship to their art practice and feelings about artist identity. It gives space to learning disabled artists to share their practice and what is important about it to them. The research is presented through case studies with five artist-participants[2] – Roxy Maguire, Amy Ellison, Sally Hirst, Louise Hewitt, and Emlyn Scott – drawing on individual weekly research sessions over an eleven-month period. Through the artist-participants' testimonies and practice demonstrations, the research shows that learning disabled artists have a clear understanding and intimate connection to their creative practices. Beyond this, the research asks how engagement with learning disabled artists has,

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[1] For clarity, I use 'practice research' in this thesis as an umbrella term to capture the interrelationship of practice and research, following James and Özden's (2021:3) definition that "[practice] research is when practice is the significant method conveyed in a research output" and their findings from interviews with academics that the splitting of terms was ultimately not productive. A fuller discussion is provided in Section 1.4.1.

[2] Artist-participants Josh Brown and Rory White also participated in the research engagement but are not presented in the thesis. Rory White's contribution is not included due to him being based at Creativity Explored, San Francisco, California, USA. Josh Brown's contribution is not included because he undertook the fewest number of research sessions. As the research focus changed and I wished to give sufficient space in the thesis to each artist-participant, the word limit required these omissions. Brown and White were included in an Online Open Studio event as part of the research, discussed in the Conclusion. I remain incredibly grateful to Brown and White and, with their permission, will write up their contributions in future journal articles.

in turn, informed my practice development and identity as an artist. Understanding subjectivity as relational and shifting (Braidotti, 1994; 2013a), the experience of the research engagement is drawn out through a period of solo, studio-based practice research. The research suggests a model for reciprocal, artist identity-affirming relationality in which learning disabled and non-learning disabled artists engage as peers, reshaping each other's practices and self-understandings through nomadic subjective creative exchange.

This shift in focus came about in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The fieldwork was originally conceived as in-person, collaborative group sessions, taking place at Venture Arts. Additionally, studio visits and short collaborations were planned at five supported studios in the USA.[3] Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the research trip to the USA was cancelled, and the engagement with the learning disabled artist-participants moved online using the Zoom platform. The artist-participants and I met from our homes, individually, instead of as a group. This led to an unexpected blurring of private and public spaces, an increase in engagement hours, an altered possibility of material engagement, and a reliance on video conferencing software to collect the research data. This changed the research focus from the supported studio models to the individual artist-participants, the manifestation of their practices beyond the supported studio environment, and their self-understandings as artists.

I was motivated to undertake this research following five years of experience as socially engaged artist with a focus on working with learning disabled people. I had worked on projects that ranged in duration from three months to three years that positioned me in different roles – tutor, facilitator, collaborator – representing a spectrum of approaches. My first experience working with learning disabled people was in 2013 as a Community Learning Tutor teaching photography. I initially expected this to be a 'day job' that would enable me to continue my independent artistic practice, which I conceptualised as separate from what happened in the participatory sessions. However, the course participants challenged my

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[3] Creative Growth, San Francisco, CA; Creativity Explored, San Francisco, CA; Art Explorers, Fort Bragg, CA; Portland Arts and Learning Studio (PALS), OR; and Vibrant Pallet Arts Centre, Seattle, WA. An artist talk was also planned at Portland Art Museum, OR. This research trip could become a post-doctoral study.

assumptions and revealed how I had been habituated to a narrow and particular way of looking at and making images through my art school training.[4] This dislocation urged me to question the structural, institutional, and psycho-emotional conditions that had led to my positioning as the expert-tutor-artist while the learners were conceptualised through a deficit model. From that moment onwards, my practice trajectory focused on developing accessible and collaborative methods for high-quality engagement with learning disabled people, challenging their exclusion from the field of visual art by platforming their creative practices. These experiences, the motivation to recognise and affirm learning disabled artists, and the changes to research design as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, lead to the first research question:

Q1 – How do learning disabled artists define, develop, and sustain their artistic practices and identities within and beyond supported studios? What conditions support their recognition as artists on their own terms?

While my early practice was focused on creating accessible, collaborative spaces for others, particularly for learning disabled people, I gradually became aware of a tension in my own position as an artist. The role of 'facilitator' increasingly complicated and eclipsed my own artist identity, and my individual artistic practice became difficult to locate within the frameworks of socially engaged art. This research addresses this challenge by drawing out the artist-participants' key markers of artist identity and showing how working through these in a period of solo, studio-based practice research impacted my own artist identity. This approach to the research design affirms the artist-participants as peer-artists who non-learning disabled artists can learn from, while also creating the conditions to shift and affirm my own position as an artist. Undertaking the practice research through the artist-participants' key markers shaped my practice development in a way that could not have been foreseen, and the Conclusion shows how, through the process of practice and reflection on outcomes, rather than remaining fixed in the role of facilitator, I was deeply affected and reshaped by the engagement with the artist-participants. The term 'facilitator',

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[4] I graduated with a BA (hons) in Photography from Leeds Arts University in 2011. This research is framed within the UK art system.

therefore, no longer adequately captures this shifting dynamic, as I was not simply enabling access and participation, but also undergoing a process of transformation as an artist myself. The approach to identity is underpinned by Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity and nomadic ethics (1993; 1994; 2005/2006; 2006; 2013a; 2013b; 2014), which highlights the relational nature of identity formation while also claiming multifaceted subjectivity as a site from which we extend and meet the other: "I am rooted but I flow" (Woolf quoted in Braidotti, 2014:163). This leads to the second research question:

Q2 – How can encounters between learning disabled and non-learning disabled artists reshape the practices and self-understandings of non-learning disabled artists, particularly those in facilitative roles? What forms of ethical and relational practice support the affirmation of artist identity across difference, and how can these help reshape current institutional or cultural norms around participation?

The research questions are addressed by pursuing the following research aims:

- Examine the contemporary art discourses that inform an analysis of learning disabled artists and supported studios operating within contemporary art contexts.
- Investigate and evidence the artistic motivations, practice processes, and reflections of learning disabled artists and how these enable them to define, develop, and sustain their practices and artist identities within and beyond supported studio environments, and synthesise key-markers for artist identity from the artist-participants' accounts.
- Interrogate the non-learning disabled artist-researcher by examining how my own practice development and artist identity are reshaped through peer-to-peer encounters with learning disabled artists.
- Challenge deficit-based or facilitation-framed models of inclusion and explore the relational and ethical dynamics that support the mutual affirmation of artist identity across difference through the theoretical and methodological lens of nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 1994, 2013a).

- Contribute to a reimagining of institutional and cultural narratives around who is recognised as an artist through proposing practice-informed approaches to inclusion that centre artist identity.

These aims are achieved through the following research objectives:

- Maintain a partnership with Venture Arts, following their protocols as required.
- Undertake weekly one-to-one sessions with five learning disabled artist-participants that incorporate side-by-side making and reflective discussion, conducted from our homes through video conferencing via Zoom to develop in-depth case studies.
- Undertake and document a period of reflexive, solo, studio-based practice development.
- Synthesise insights from the artist-participants, the solo studio-based practice, and theoretical grounding into a model that can be operationalised in future practice, and by other artists, practitioners, and researchers.

Chapter 1 of this thesis addresses contexts in contemporary art and disability studies that frame how learning disabled artists are positioned within the art world. These contexts also informed my research engagement with the artist-participants as part of a social inheritance that creates ideas of division and difference that I sought to divest from. Discourses around cultural diversity and inclusion, Disability Art, Outsider Art, and socially engaged art are interrogated to show how they are related to, but do not fully capture, learning disabled artists' self-understandings as artists or the ways they practice art today. The British social model is outlined as the dominant framework of disability studies that has been taken up by significant arts institutions in the UK, and its usefulness in relation to positioning and working with learning disabled people is explored. These contexts led to the adoption of a practice research method drawing on Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity and nomadic ethics that challenge the notion of fixed and stable identities and create space for relational artistic subjective becomings that are affirmative and orientated towards co-producing better futures (1993; 1994; 2005/2006; 2006; 2013a; 2013b; 2014).

Chapter 2 foregrounds the artist-participants. They are each given individual space to share their art making processes and how they conceptualise their relationship to contemporary art. The discussion draws out the artist-participants' thoughts around artist identity, and how this is relationally and environmentally affected. The artist-participants demonstrate unique and critical understandings of themselves as artists. For some this is strongly related to their experiences as disabled people, whilst for others this context is less salient. All artist-participants shared an interest in personal and creative development, and most reported that their development as an artist could be affirmed or denied by art-world structures. The key markers for artist identity are synthesised in this chapter.

Chapter 3 presents my own studio-based, experimental and reflective practice in response to the learnings from the artist-participants discussed in Chapter 2. It demonstrates how a sustained engagement with Maguire, Ellison, Hirst, Hewitt, and Scott affected my own self-concept as an artist and led to developments in my practice. Having begun the research in a socially engaged mode, difficulties in sustaining my artist identity were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on individual artist-participants first, followed by my practice research utilising material experimentation, I demonstrate the common ground of practice that opens up understandings of learning disabled artists, broadening the contexts presented in Chapter 1. The relational impact of engagement is understood in the round, impacting all, thus challenging normative constructions of artists' subjectivities.

Chapter 4 develops ideas in earlier chapters to present an analysis of one artwork, *632700* (2022), which synthesises my social and studio-based practices. This piece represents a significant development for me as it brings the material and aesthetic strategies I had developed in the studio together with a co-production process, thereby affirming my artist identity rather than troubling it through a slip into a facilitator position.

This thesis positions learning disabled artists as artists in their own right, demonstrating that their practices are self-motivated, critically engaged, and continually developing, even in the absence of conventional support structures. It also explores how my own artist identity was reshaped through encounters with the artist-participants, revealing a shift from a facilitative

role to one of peer engagement and mutual affirmation. Everyone in this thesis is considered an artist making art. Through the research engagement, I was able to reflect differently on my practice, and in turn think more deeply about the artist-participants' approaches. The research did not begin with a shared ground between us, but it shows how that ground was created through practice-informed dialogue and relationality, and a nomadic subjective ethics of affirmation. The Conclusion identifies current gaps in how learning disabled artists are recognised and supported in their long-term development, and proposes a model for inclusive practice that centres artist identity. Recommendations are offered for supported studios, cultural institutions, and future research.

Chapter 1: Situating contexts, concepts, and methods

1.1 Introduction

This research is situated at the intersection of discourses in contemporary art, disability studies and art practice. This chapter introduces relevant contexts and the research methods. It maps interconnected contemporary art contexts for learning disabled artists practicing today alongside my own experiences as a non-learning disabled artist. While these contexts are relevant in that they provide a backdrop against which our artist identities are formed through assimilation or rejection, it is important to note that artists "are not reducible to them" (Fisher, 2010:67). A review of models of disability informs a broader analysis of the social factors that position the learning disabled artist-participants and myself. The construction and limits of the disabled/abled binary are presented. The applicability of contemporary art and disability studies contexts is interrogated to establish the relationship between the learning disabled artist-participants and myself, with the contemporary artist understood as "a socio-psychic *performance* that occurs within specific discourses, practices, and their immanent power relations" (Atkinson, 2006:18 [original emphasis]). Insights from critical disability studies, alongside Braidotti's (2013a) notion of a fluid, relational, and shifting subjectivity are employed to resist the problem of engaging with people based on a single characteristic. I endeavour to be "not backwards looking … [but] forecasting to the future" (Appignanesi, 2010:15). Practice research is presented as a method that allows for alternative ways of conceptualising subjectivity and relationality because it "*performs* social reconstruction … [through a] processes of discovery and invention" (Finley, 2008:72 [original emphasis]) and engenders an open-ended, multiple, and non-linear research journey.

1.2 Contemporary art contexts

In this section, contemporary art contexts, including diversity and inclusion in the arts, art therapy and arts and health, Disability Art and Outsider Art, and social art practices, are discussed to locate the cultural positioning of learning disabled artists. These contexts are

shown to have tangential relationships that do not fully recognise the broad creative capacities of learning disabled artists practising today. Diversity and inclusion in the arts, art therapy and arts and health are framed by policies, protocols, and ethical and medical concerns, with less focus on artistic outcomes. Disability Art and Outsider Art focus closely on disabled peoples' creative capacities but are constructed as signifying difference though divergence from a central, hegemonic 'contemporary art'.

Contemporary art is a dizzyingly broad subject that can be examined through multiple lenses and scales that cannot be separated and exist in tension. Contemporary art is understood as a broad diversity of practices connected with ideas of freedom and internal critique (Danto, 1997), a site of political imagination (Hlavajova, Sheikh, and Winder, 2011), and propaganda for global consumer capitalism (Stallabrass, 2004). If contemporary art was to be only understood as a state of "perfect freedom … Everything is permitted" (Danto, 2015:12), there would be no basis on which learning disabled artists are excluded. This research is interested in the construction of specific branches of contemporary art practice, how association with those categories signifies differences in validation, and how they inform artist identities.

1.2.1 Diversity and inclusion in contemporary arts

When I entered the contemporary art workforce in 2011, conversations around accessibility and diversity were beginning to proliferate. The *Creative Case for Diversity* (2011) from Arts Council England (ACE) represented a "fundamental shift" (Bazalgette, 2014:unpag.) by requiring ACE-funded arts organisations to ensure their work is reflective of the communities in which they are based. Although the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) compels all UK organisations to attend to the access needs of disabled people, promote positive attitudes towards disabled people, and encourage the participation of disabled people in public life, the *Creative Case* was the first time that ACE-funded organisations were required to take "measured action on diversity" in regard to commissioning/exhibiting artists, workforce, and audiences (Bazalgette, 2014:unpag.). The fundamental concept of the *Creative Case* is that bringing more voices, perspectives, and experiences into the arts will produce unique, innovative artworks that could not be produced otherwise. However,

the *Creative Case* has been criticised for lacking specific policy applications, failing to address systematic inequalities, and not establishing a link between diversity and innovation in arts practice (Newsinger and Green, 2016).

In addition to the *Creative Case*, increased focus on cultural diversity was seen to have both ethical and economic benefits. Frances Morris, then director of Tate Modern, identified a redress of historic exclusion in the canon of art in a 2017 speech by reflecting on the "deep-rooted … particular kind of history" of art contained in the institution, which ascribes value to works of art by white men with economic privilege while excluding works by women, people of colour, working class people, and disabled people. The historic exclusion of disabled people in museums is also noted in other research (cf. Allday, 2009). As The Museums Association (2016:17) reckoned with the sectors' omissions, it moved towards an ethical case for diversity by positioning cultural institutions as "active spaces for debate and discussion" that could "highlight areas of discrimination". Relating to the cultural economy, there is a popular idea that museums that encourage active participation are more robust and sustainable, with Nina Simon (2010) providing a catalogue of case studies of failing institutions that became financially sustainable after introducing participatory audience-focused projects.

Shifting narratives around diversity and inclusion in contemporary art dovetails with the changing orientation of supported studios that work with learning disabled artists. Venture Arts' mission is to "place learning disabled artists right at the forefront of the art world, no longer 'on the margins' but a central and vital part of our rich contemporary art scene" (Venture Arts, 2020). Venture Arts has facilitated partnerships and exhibitions with Castlefield Gallery, The Whitworth, and other notable arts organisations in Manchester and beyond, signifying a strong relationship to the contemporary art field and a desire to expose the artists they support to mainstream audiences (Venture Arts, no date-a). Similar missions, vision, and approaches are shared by other supported studios.[5] The reappraisal of

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[5] For examples, see: Pyramid (Leeds), which includes the vision for there to be "more famous artists with a learning disability" (2024:9); ActionSpace (London), which positions their work "at the centre of the cultural sector" (no date:unpag.); and Intoart (London), which states the vision "for learning disabled and autistic people [to be] visible, equal and established artists" (no date:unpag.).

art produced by learning disabled people was highlighted in 2021, when the Hastings-based organisation Project Artworks was collectively included in the Turner Prize nominations (Tate, 2021).

The concept of 'inclusion' can be critiqued for relying on a binary power relation model, becoming a system of labelling and othering that requires new approaches to identity and difference to resolve (Hickey-Moody, 2009). Relating to disability, the focus on "service level agreements and performance monitoring" rather than "developing innovative practice or incorporating more sophisticated understandings of disability" has been criticised for perpetuating 'disabled' categorisation (Newsinger and Green, 2016:9). Additionally, when 'diversity' focuses on differences *between* cultures, it fails to "acknowledge that culture within itself is already an assemblage of differences, diverse tendencies and unresolved tensions" (Appignanesi, 2010:5). As a result, inclusion and diversity agendas risk flattening difference into homogenous categories (Fisher, 2010). Institutional inclusion and diversity projects have been criticised as piecemeal and bolt-on rather than having a holistic impact on the processes of inequality and exclusion (Museums Association, 2016). Richard Appignanesi (2010:10) suggests that, rather than the "remedial treatment" of diversity policies, the history of black and brown artists in British modernism needs to be integrated into mainstream art history to recognise their decisive role. The same can be argued for learning disabled artists working today. Their relationship to contemporary art needs to be examined not only in relation to institutionally-led inclusion and diversity, but also through a bottom-up, artist-led focus on their specific practices and self-understandings as artists. This approach creates space for heterogeneous practices, subjectivities, and relationalities to emerge, suggesting that integration is less about including more people within an assumed centre, and more about challenging the binaries and hard categorisations coded into cultural narratives.

1.2.2 Art therapy and arts and health

The association between art therapy, arts and health, and learning disabled artists is illustrated in the history of Pyramid (Leeds), a supported studio I have worked with since 2015. While Pyramid is now a registered company and charity, it began as a volunteer-run

art club in the Meanwood Park Hospital, Leeds, characterised as a 'mental handicap colony' (Spencer, 1989) that operated from 1919 to 1996. The art club provided provision for the people still residing in the hospital during its final years, as deinstitutionalisation policies came into effect. *Hidden Art / Hidden Artists*, an exhibition at The Tetley (Leeds) from November 2019 to March 2020, featured new works by Pyramid-supported artists Stephen Harvey, Ria, and Liam Hirst that responded to the site of Meanwood Park Hospital and archival imagery of the original art club (Pyramid, 2019). Less is known about the origins of Venture Arts, and the organisation's historical context has not served as source material for their current artists, but it was suggested in a conversation with current director Amanda Sutton that the organisation began as a community group connected to a religious centre. These examples reflect the historical association between learning disabled people's creative practice, community building, and health agendas, suggesting that linkage to contemporary art has not been a primary motivator for organisations or community initiatives working with learning disabled people and art in the past.

Early literature on learning disabled people's creativity focuses on the therapeutic benefit of art participation, rather than the creative intentions or potential of learning disabled people (cf. Chesner, 1995). Art therapy in the UK is a statutorily regulated profession that describes the use of art in psychological intervention. UK-based practitioners of art therapy must have completed recognised training and be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council. The significance of this is outlined by Springham (2008), who describes a case in which the 'art therapy' title was misappropriated and led to serious harm. While the application of art therapy can be seen as positive in the context of a global mental health crisis,[6] the regulation and goal orientation of the practice – to address psychological distress – distinguishes it from contemporary art practice. While some scholars link the emergence of art therapy to twentieth-century avant-garde movements (cf. McNiff, 1992; Taylor, 1998; and Jones, 2005), the creative output of art therapy is not intended as an endpoint in itself and will not, in most instances, be presented for public consumption in exhibitions. Artist Helen Johnson (2022:97) considers the removal of the expectation of exhibiting to be a

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[6] The World Health Organisation reports that "In 2019, 970 million people around the world were living with a mental disorder" (WHO, 2021).

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strength of art therapy because it makes it "resistant to being positioned outside art as such, because it does not define itself against art, nor desire to be embraced by it". In the broad but related field of arts and health, a scoping review of over 3000 studies by Fancourt and Finn (2019) found that engagement with art can positively impact both mental and physical health, and, moving beyond the individualised notion of therapy, can impact the social determinants of health. The measure of success in arts and health includes outcomes such as reduced GP and hospital visits, greater instances of engaging in healthy activities such as exercise, reduced loneliness, and reduced economic cost of health interventions (APPGAHW, 2017).

These historical associations between learning disabled peoples' art practices and health agendas linger and obscure the present relationship between learning disabled artists and contemporary art. Art therapy and arts and health neither approach artworks as cultural artefacts, nor begin with the premise of participants as artists, distinguishing these fields from contemporary art practices. Disabled comedian, poet, and writer Allan Sutherland (1989:2) cautions disabled artists against associating with art therapy precisely because of the "[use of] the forms of art for entirely unartistic ends" and for "[leaving] out communication … [assuming disabled people] have nothing to communicate". These contexts are, therefore, not reflective of the contemporary practices of supported studios and learning disabled artists who, as this research will show, are keenly interested in developing as artists and exhibiting their work publicly.

1.2.3 Disability Art and Outsider Art

Other cultural contexts that are frequently evoked when discussing learning disabled people's creative practice are Disability Art and Outsider Art. Disability Art grew out of the disability politics movement from the late 1970s in the UK, and Sutherland considers the relationship "two-way" (1989:4). He also notes, however, that Disability Art was not always a respected component of disability politics because it was "messy and unstructured and [did not] always define its terms", though this was ultimately positive, as it allowed "new groups of people to push their way in … [more successfully] than in some other parts of our movement" (Sutherland, 2006:8). Where the disability politics movement supported

positive identities of disabled people *as* disabled people by defining them not as inferior but as people experiencing forms of oppression, Disability Art was a platform to express this newfound pride and politicisation, as well as communicate lived experience and build connections and solidarity across the movement. Disability Art is historically defined as "art that is informed by personal *experience* of disability" (Sutherland, 2006:8 [original emphasis]) and art that has "played a key role in articulating what disability means— politically, personally, and aesthetically" (Sandahl, in Finger, 2010:29). When it emerged, Disability Art challenged the prevalent negative narratives and images of disability and contained an activist impetus for self-identification and representation. Susan Peters contends that, for those who view culture as personal/aesthetic, "the ability to assert an aesthetic pride in the disabled body is a necessary prerequisite to political identity and is the source of empowerment" (2000:592).

Disability Art can be considered to have a different historical lineage to contemporary art due to its direct link to disability politics and the particular focus on the disabled experience. Per Koren Solvang identifies a second phase of Disability Art through interviews with artists associated with the field. This phase is moving away from "hard-core identity politics" to embrace "greater complexity in how artists relate to disability identity" (2012:184) and is developing a "closer relation with mainstream art" (2012:187). Although artists within this second phase employ more subtle aesthetic approaches (as opposed to the shock tactics associated with the formative period of Disability Art), there remains a relationship between disability and art production. Therefore, "[Disability Art] does not encompass all artists with disabilities" (2012:186). The art made by learning disabled people at Venture Arts would, in many instances, not qualify as Disability Art, as it covers a broad range of interests and subjects and does not directly reflect on the disabled experience.

Artists associated with Outsider Art, just as with Disability Art, can be considered to have a different historical lineage to mainstream contemporary art. This is highlighted by Roger Cardinal – who coined the term through his 1972 publication – who asserted that "a paramount factor in the critical definition" of *Outsider Art* is that it "defies conventional art-historical contextualisation" (1972:68). The fundamental concept of Outsider Art is that

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practitioners have developed their own aesthetic approaches independent of dominant cultural norms. The term often does not describe "an art identifiable for its formal characters, but … the status of the persons who created it" (Tansella, 2007:133). Historically, Outsider Art refers to the creative work of people who are significantly marginalised or excluded, for example, people incarcerated in psychiatric hospitals or prisons and people who live in remote rural locations. Therefore, the "difference [of Outsider artists] is not merely marked by exclusion from the mainstream of the professional (Western) art world, but also by exclusion from, or marginalisation in relation to, the very culture that supports the market for mainstream art" (Rhodes, 2000:15).

Modernist artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Paul Klee (1879–1940), and Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) – whose concept of Art Brut[7] provided the foundation of Outsider Art – were interested in works created under these conditions because of an assumed spontaneity, immediacy, and purity that was valued in the movements they were associated with, such as Surrealism. Debuffet made a passionate case for this in a catalogue essay for the 1945 exhibition *Art Brut Prefere aux Art Culturelles* that took place in Paris at the Galerie Drouin, by saying that the artists represented there "take everything (subjects, choice of materials, modes of transposition, rhythms, writing styles) from their own inner being, not from the canons of classical or fashionable art" (1945:unpag.). This is contrasted this with what Debuffet sees as the deadened emptiness of the "cultural art" made by "intellectuals", going so far as to accuse that latter of being a "false art" (1945:unpag.). This contrast is restated in curator Lynne Cooke's assertion that "outsider art [sic] has come to be viewed as a parallel field, separate but equal to contemporary art" (quoted in Thorne, 2013:unpag), which rests on the fact that parallel lines can never converge. These interpretations consistently position Outsider Art as separate and distinct from contemporary art and its lineage.

Despite these attempts at boundary work, Outsider Art has become increasingly difficult to separate from contemporary art. The 1979 exhibition *Outsiders: An Art Without Precedent*

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[7] 'Art Brut' translates to 'raw art'.

or Tradition at the Hayward Gallery, London, curated by Cardinal and Victor Musgrave who became a prominent collector of Outsider Art, offered a broader conception of Outsider Art by including artists from a wider spectrum of social and cultural situations who had previously been excluded from the art brut category. Various definitions of Outsider Art since have focused on: the status of practitioners as socially and culturally marginalised (Thevoz, 1975); as working without awareness of the mainstream art world (Danto in Rexer, 2005); the relationship between practitioners and diagnostic categories such as psychosis and autism (Rexer, 2005); the self-taught nature of practitioners (Cardinal, 2009) and the lack of desire to be an artist in the conventional sense (Glâveanu, 2000); or nebulous aesthetic qualities of the artworks, such as "intensity" and "primal creative force" (Maizels, in Kahn, 1991:26), or "convey[ing] a strong sense of individuality" (Cardinal, 2009:1459). These more open definitions, not hinged on relatively complete social isolation such as within psychiatric wards as prized by Debuffet, have led to the term Outsider Art being "used extensively to describe a bewildering range of artistic activity situated outside, or in opposition to, mainstream concerns" (Rhodes, 2000:14).

While works that exist within the historical canon of art brut and Outsider Art, and works that are only 'discovered' once the artist has passed away, are easier to categorically manage, for living artists, the relationship to the conditions of the 'outsider' artist are more problematic. Policies of deinstitutionalisation and proliferation of communication technologies have reduced instances of people who might be considered 'outsiders' in the original sense. Rhodes suggests that once an otherwise 'outsider' artist achieves career success, they must develop "a sense of being appreciated and of an external audience for the work … they might come to recognise the desires of the 'insider' audience" (2000:20). Historically, the construction of Outsider Art was "partly a function of qualitative selection by informed psychiatrists" (Rhodes, 2000:103), however contemporary interest from collectors, curators, galleries and other art-world insiders troubles the binary separation of Outsider Art and contemporary art. David McLaglan considers Outsider Art as "something like a shadow version or inverted image of the manic promotions of the contemporary art world" (2009:158), retaining a tacit connection between the two fields. Chris McAuliffe draws on this to contend that the sustention of the outsider category speaks to the anxieties

of contemporary art. He argues that instrumentalisation by market forces, globalisation, and atemporality has left contemporary art at a "historical impasse" (2014:unpag.) and seeking new routes by which to offer the critical resistance once associated with the avant-garde. He draws on Danto (1997) to suggest that while theoretically the inside/outside binary no longer exists, this is an undesirable condition for a field that is driven by the pursuit of the new. The sustention of a boundary, therefore, "offers the promise of productive difference" (McAuliffe, 2014:unpag.). Curator Andrew Hunt furthers this position by surveying recent curatorial projects that present the work of 'outliers'[8] in a bid to re-examine existing art histories, influence the collection policies of museums and galleries, and "provide a means of escape from prevailing interpretative authoritarianism" (2022:6). Hunt suggests that these projects have "implications for contemporary practices" (2022:10), in part by offering a counterpoint to "academic formal painting" (2022:17), and cites a number of professional artists who have adopted a style that references Outsider Art, suggesting this represents a "progression against a conservative impulse" (2022:18). These positions subsume Outsider Art within a revised understanding (and associated history) of contemporary art, pointing towards a wholesale adoption of Outsider Art that is potentially necessary in order to revitalise and challenge the hegemonic narratives and histories of contemporary art. However, Cooke concedes that while current curatorial projects that eschew the inside/outside binary have a positive effect on reducing stigmatisation, they might negatively affect what she describes as the "unique and crucial agency" that Outsider Art has to challenge the "monocultural frame" (2013:213). This reflects the dual desire of Outsider Art advocates. On one hand, there is a push for Outsider Art to be afforded greater legitimacy, with proponents seeking its inclusion in mainstream gallery spaces. Simultaneously, there exists a tension wherein these advocates wish to maintain both an insider and outsider positioning. In essence, they strive to promote Outsider Art within a mainstream context while simultaneously emphasising its marginal and radical status.

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[8] While not exclusively about Outsider Art, this text discusses painting practices that Hunt considers "marginal and undervalued" (2022:4), with a focus on artists who are self-taught, experience mental health challenges, are learning disabled, and/or incarcerated, as well as artists who are represented by commercial galleries who employ a style he refers to as "new naïve" (2022:17).

Fundamentally, the concept of Outsider Art is contentious because it relies on a binary between inside and outside that is difficult to define and sustain. It also rests on those already 'inside' to recognise and validate the work against the critical framework established by contemporary art. This paradox of Outsider Art raises questions about who has the power to validate some artistic production as valuable, by what criteria they make these inclusions (or exclusions), and how living artists who appear to move 'inside' should then be understood against their initial positioning as outsiders. The continued attempts at ringfencing Outsider Art also risk the fetishisation of the 'other', or as artist Amy Sillman puts it, "mythologising marginality" (2020:11).

Since Venture Arts collaborates with contemporary arts organisations and employs professional artists to support the learning-disabled artists they work with, it is untrue to claim that they are practising outside of the mainstream. McLaglan's 'shadow', McAuliffe's 'productive difference', and Hunt's 'outliers' provide a clearer picture of the enmeshment of Outsider Art and contemporary art, while also explaining why the notion of Outsider Art endures for people on both sides of the imagined binary. For those inside, it offers a radical difference from established norms (a primary preoccupation of contemporary art), while for those positioned as outside, it offers historical contextualisation and an established route into the validation of contemporary art.

Disability Art and Outsider Art show that people with disabilities may be associated with alternative histories of art as a result of their social and cultural exclusion. Art by learning disabled artists has been labelled as peripheral to contemporary art because of these historical constructions of the art canon. However, the slippages in the terminology and the contemporary interest in diversity and inclusion demonstrate a less compartmentalised art world that is looking to open up these boundaries and platform new creative perspectives. This research pushes against the categorical binaries set up by Disability Art and Outsider Art by recognising the broad creative capacities and networked practices of learning disabled artists working today.

1.2.4 Social practices and supported studios

The supported studio model involves the employment of non-learning disabled artists as 'facilitators' who must have both disciplinary expertise and be capable of effectively and appropriately supporting learning disabled artists. The relational aspect of supported studios aligns with frameworks associated with socially engaged art (Helguera, 2011), participatory art (Matarasso, 2019) and collaborative practices (Kester, 2004; 2011), collectively labelled by art historian Claire Bishop as 'the social turn' (2006). Specifically related to learning disability, Alice Fox and Hannah Macpherson coined the term 'inclusive arts practice' (2015) to describe collaborations between learning disabled and non-disabled artists. Their research provided a guide for non-learning disabled artists, but can be criticised for only briefly capturing the voices of learning disabled artists and giving little attention to the networks and professional development of learning disabled artists outside of collaborative encounters or supported studios.

While research into community-based participatory art projects has focused on aspects relating to personal change, societal change, educational change, and economic change (Newman, Curtis, and Stephens, 2003), art critic and historian Grant Kester focuses on the enmeshment of art and ethics in social practices. Kester (2011) considers social practices on a continuum, ranging from those with a nominal or choreographed level of interaction to those stimulated by an environment or context (usually external to the museum or art gallery) that work with people in a relational and responsive way. Although art historian and critic Claire Bishop (2006) was largely critical of practices that privilege ethical processes over aesthetic significance, other theorists and practitioners propose social practices as part of the continued identification, displacement, and redefinition of art. Artist and educator Pablo Helguera (2011) argues that acknowledging the artistic value of social practices that border other disciplines, such as sociology, is necessary both to allow new insights to arise and to take advantage of the disruptive potential of art. Kester (2011:7) considers the disruption of traditional forms of art through relational interaction to be consistent with movements in art history, stating that "the greatest potential for transforming and re-energising artistic practice is often realised at those points where its established identity is most seriously at risk", though he acknowledges that social practices do not fit within

existing art theory models (Kester, 2012). Social practices, therefore, offer a broader understanding of what art can be. Despite this, social practice artists note "a form of 'second-class citizenship' in relation to the mainstream art world" and being "side-lined when positioned in gallery and museum education contexts" (Ravetz and Wright, 2015).

The focus on relationality in social practices challenges the idea of the solitary genius artist, an "epistemological template for much contemporary criticism and curatorial practice" (Kester, 2011:3) that is evident in the construction of both 'insider' and 'outsider' artists. Art criticism that normalises the sovereignty of the artist implicitly rejects people who require support to access the arts. Creativity research also emphasises the impact of social and environmental factors on creative output, challenging the notion that creativity is solely an individual endeavour (cf. Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Amabile, 1983). Social art processes denaturalise the notion of authorship by "[calling] attention to exchange itself as creative praxis" (Kester, 2011:28). This corresponds to disability studies literature that highlights interdependence and positions competence as a distributed rather than individual trait (cf. Goodley, 2000, 2005; Shakespeare, 2000; Williams and Shoultz, 1982).

Supported studios operate between social art practices and disability and open up questions about what can be art and who can become an artist. Supported studios are art-focused environments, which does not correspond with the emphasis in social art on broader social life. Supported studios offer support through the employment of facilitator-artists, but do not set up formal collaborations. Learning disabled artists also produce 'traditional' artistic outputs that they retain ownership of, including painting, photography and sculpture. Therefore, the totality of practices contained within supported studios is not fully understood through a social art model. The focus of this research on individual artists and the shift to working from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic affords a move away from a social practice framework to platforming learning disabled artists on their own terms, while exploring relational aspects in their wider networked lives that inform their artist identity.

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Having provided a brief overview of inclusion and diversity in contemporary art, art therapy and arts and health, Disability Art and Outsider Art, and social art in 1.2, the next section will focus on models of disability, including the British social model and the affirmation model, to frame how learning disabled people are positioned in the broader social world.

1.3 Models of disability

The following section draws on disability studies to identify the points relevant to this research in two models of disability: the British social model and the affirmation model. I evaluate how far these models have contributed to or hindered this research and establish the need for less binary approaches. These contexts are active phenomena that inform and are sometimes pushed against in my critical reflections on the research engagement and practice research that follow in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

1.3.1 The British social model of disability

Many UK arts organisations, including Arts Council England (2017) and Tate (no date), employ the British social model of disability. This section outlines the model and its benefits, as well as its drawbacks.

Disabled people have faced "a consistent bias" throughout history (Barnes, 1991:unpag.) that has rendered them "targets of intervention" (Grue, 2011:535). Social models of disability challenge individual and medical models by refocusing attention on political, attitudinal, and environmental barriers. The British social model,[9] "arguably the most powerful form which social approaches to disability have taken" (Shakespeare, 2013: 216) has its origins in a (1975) discussion by The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). UPIAS sought to define 'disability' as social processes of oppression that are "imposed on top of [people with] impairments, by the way [they] are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society" (UPIAS & TDA, 1975:3). The uncoupling of impairment from disability represented a radical shift away from a "personal tragedy theory of disability" (Oliver, 1996:31). This leads to an understanding that the

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[9] From this point, the term 'social model' refers to the British social model.

experience of disability is culturally and historically contingent (Abberley, 1987) and, therefore, can be altered through changes to environments, social attitudes, and policies. Using 'disability' to "refer to disabling barriers of prejudice, discrimination, and social exclusion" (Morris, 2001:2) rather than an individual biological failing (Oliver, 1990) engendered collective political power for disabled people. The social model has been called "the big idea" of the British disability movement (Hasler, 1993:280), and has "played a seminal and defining role in disability studies" in the UK (Thomas, 2004:22). Tom Shakespeare (2013) identifies political, instrumental, and psychological strengths of the social model as it examines "the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (Davis, 2013:1). Through the social model it becomes possible to assert that there is "no single acceptable mode of embodiment" (Shildrick, 2012:40) because impairment in itself does not result in exclusion or stigma. The social model "[enabled] disabled people – for the first time in history – to claim a proud cultural identity, rather than one based on shame" (Rice et al., 2015:517).

The social model has been critiqued for its binary stance on disability and impairment and for focusing on materialist dimensions of oppression more closely than psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2012; Thomas, 2007). Contemporaneously with UPIAS, The Liberation Network of People with Disabilities (LNPD) (1981) presented a more "dialogic, inclusive and feminist" perspective than the "hard-lined, male-dominated and determined" UPIAS (Shakespeare, 2013:215; cf. Thomas, 1999). While LNPD noted the economic basis of exclusion, their intersectional and feminist approach asserted that "the power to sustain the situation [of disablism] is primarily of a psychological nature" (LNPD, 1981:unpag.).[10] Unlike UPIAS, LNDP did not divide disability from impairment and noted that impairment is an experience specific to disabled people that separates them from other groups oppressed by social conditions. While some disability scholars remain committed to the 'strong' social model (cf. Finkelstein, 2001; Oliver, 2004; Oliver and Barnes, 2012), "the distinction between biological/individual impairment and social/structural disability is conceptually and

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[10] Notably, Sutherland (2006) recounts strong links between LNPD and the Disability Arts movement, including members who were working artists and/or went on to found high-profile organisations, including Graeae Theatre, Shape, and Disability Arts in London.

empirically very difficult to sustain" (Shakespeare, 2014:21-2). Whilst the critique of the social model is well documented, particularly from feminist disability scholars (Morris, 1991; Crow, 1992; Fren 1993; Thomas, 1999), for this research the main stumbling block of the social model is the materialist lens that gives less attention to the "socially engendered undermining of [disabled peoples'] psycho-emotional wellbeing" (Thomas, 2007:73). This research follows the view that disablement is often most strongly felt in the relationality between disabled and non-disabled people (Tregaskis, 2004) and that relationality can affect self-concept, as it explores the learning disabled artists-participants' artist identities.

Learning disabled people have not explicitly adopted the social model or contributed to its development (Chappell, Goodley and Lawthom, 2001). Shakespeare (2013:217) suggests that if UPIAS had included people with a broader range of disabled embodiments and experiences in their discussion, including those with learning disabilities, "it could not have produced such a narrow understanding of disability". Disability studies has been charged with overlooking learning disabled people (Chappell, 1997; Walmsley 1997, 2010), including in writings about the social model (Chappell, 1998; Goodley, 2000; Scott-Hill, 2002), resulting in "discursive othering" (Dowse, 2001) or disempowerment (Roets et al., 2004). While the social model addresses the socially constructed and material dimensions of disablism relevant to learning disabled people, research has shown that it fails to address the specific barriers faced by learning disabled people (Aspis, 2000) and that many do not find the model accessible (Docherty et al., 2010). The social model enabled the building of a positive disabled identity, but the slogan of the international People First movement, 'label jars not people', and research with learning disabled people demonstrates that learning disabled people have distanced themselves from the label of 'disabled' to instead focus on their common humanity (Goodley, 2000; McVittie et al., 2008; Taylor, 1996). The political and material focus of the social model also draws attention away from personal experiences, which are often important to learning disabled people (Walmsley, 1997), though feminist approaches have called to redress this omission (Morris, 1991; Crow, 1996).

The marginalisation of learning disabled people from dominant discourses in disability studies led to an alternative approach of normalisation and social role valorisation (cf.

Wolfensberger, 1972; 1983; Nirje, 1982), which focused on the rights of learning disabled people to live a life corresponding to dominant cultural norms. This approach focused on issues around housing, service provision, and support, positing the idea that when people occupy normal and valued social roles they will have a more ordinary relationship with the rest of society, negating the risk of being devalued and excluded. While this view supported the move towards deinstitutionalisation, it has been criticised for prioritising service development while ignoring "more subtle issues like self-identity, or more structural issues like poverty or the social construction of disability" (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003:47). Other criticisms include not involving the views of learning disabled people in its development (Oliver, 1990), denying or devaluing difference (Culham and Nind, 2003; Jenkinson, 1997; Peters, 1995), and the assumption that achieving normalcy is desired by learning disabled people (Morris, 1991). While proponents suggest that normalisation is "NOT [about] forcing people into an arbitrary stereotype" (Jones, McWade and Toogood, 2016:2), critics suggest it relies on a contested set of standardised and easily recognisable social norms (Chappell, 1999).

This research recognises the political power of the social model in reframing questions about environments, services, and social attitudes that produce the exclusion of disabled people. Its adoption in the arts highlights the material and attitudinal barriers that have excluded learning disabled artists from the dominant frameworks of validation. This research aligns with the social model when reviewing testimonies from the artist-participants on their interactions with external structures and institutions. It also recognises that personal experiences, including those around impairment, are important to understanding the artist-participants' self-concepts as artists. The criticisms of normalisation warn against frameworks that deny or reject difference, so this research engages closely with learning disabled artists' perspectives without expecting them to conform to a cultural image of the artist. This research aims to avoid either reifying or denying difference, and to instead produce new ways of understanding artist subjectivities through a matrix of individual and relational factors.

1.3.2 The affirmation model

The affirmation model offers a framework to understand how disabled identities are formed at the intersection of personal experiences and social structures, and more closely focuses on cultural and psycho-emotional dimensions of disability. The authors of the model, John Swain and Sally French (2000), argue that whilst the social model is not compatible with the idea of disability as personal tragedy, it does not offer an inherently non-tragic view of disability because it positions disability as oppression and leaves space for impairment to be viewed as a personal tragedy, while "the writings of disabled people expressed a far more varied and positive picture" (Swain and French, 2008:65; cf. Kohli and Atencio, 2023). The affirmation model counters cultural stigmatisation by positing that positive social identities and "a lifestyle of equal satisfaction and worth" (Swain and French, 2000:570) can be brought about by disability and impairment. This builds on the social model's relocation of 'the problem' to society by "directly [challenging] the notion that 'the problem' lies within the individual or impairment" (Swain and French, 2000:578), a view the authors expect may threaten or challenge non-disabled people. In this way, the affirmation model not only affirms the disabled identity but also affirms bodies with impairment. It does not "deny there can be negative experiences resulting from impairment, but … [makes] the point that this is not all that impairment is about" (Cameron, 2023:1892) and impairment is "to be expected and respected on its own terms in a diverse society" (Cameron, 2010:113). Affirmation is defined as "being different and thinking differently about being different" (Swain and French, 2008:185). It is notable that the affirmation model draws heavily from Disability Arts as a space of identity affirmation and collective, politicised expression of personal experience (Swain and French, 2000).

The affirmation model addresses the construction of the disabled identity and suggests that it is not the circumstance of having or not having an impairment that sustains the divide between disabled and non-disabled people, but rather "perceptions of disability, in terms of the meaning it has in people's lives and social identity" (Swain and French, 2000:570). This highlights the interdependence of disabled and non-disabled identities, and that the "problematising of impairment by those identifying as normal involves a transactional exchange which validates their own sense of self" (Cameron, 2014a:6; 2014b; 2023).

Because non-disabled identity is "constructed on the basis of being non-disabled" (Swain and French, 2000:574), disability is viewed negatively because its onset would be an identity disruption that links to fears of mortality (Shakespeare, 1994) and is associated with dependence (Oliver, 1989). Negative perceptions are then transferred to disabled people through "value-laden assumptions" (Swain and French, 2008:74) that deny the possibility of a positive disabled identity. Goodley (2011) takes this further in suggesting that the distinction between able and disabled identity is socially produced and sustained for reasons of power, so that non-disabled people maintain dominance.

While disabled and non-disabled subjectivity is produced through positionality and relationality within a disabling society, the meaning of these narratives can be written differently by paying attention to the accounts of disabled people. Swain and French (2000, 2008) drew on interviews to illustrate how disability and impairment lead to opportunities to develop a different kind of life that "transcend[s] the constraints of non-disabled norms, roles and identity" (Swain and French, 2000:576). The examples centre around: freedom from the expectation to work and engage in heteronormative relationships; being able to better empathise with others; finding community, excitement, and empowerment through becoming politicised; and access to additional services and benefits, for example, 'special' education providing better life chances for working-class disabled people than mainstream education does for working-class non-disabled people. Learning disabled artists accessing supported studios can be understood through an affirmation model, as they are able to undertake art practice without engaging with some of the potentially negative aspects of normative artist careers, such as art school tuition fees and a competitive public funding landscape.

While Swain and French concede that the ability to live a chosen lifestyle requires sufficient resources,[11] the overall concept of the affirmation model is that disabled people are frequently happy with their lives, do not desire to be 'normal', and consider the primary

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[11] In the UK, Personal Independence Payments (PIP), Disability Living Allowance (DLA), and other financial benefits may support this. However, it is essential to note that significant criticisms exist regarding access to welfare (cf. King, 2023; Machin and McCormack, 2021).

'tragedy' of their lives not to be impairment but the undermining of their identity and the oppression they experience in a disabling society. The positive representations created in the Disability Arts movement support this. The model "not only [looks] towards a society without structural, environmental or attitudinal barriers, but also a society which celebrates difference… [leading to] the construction of a better society" (Swain and French, 2000:580-7). Celebrating difference allows consideration of the unique contributions that disabled people can make "to the history of humankind" (Campbell and Oliver, 1996:180), leading to "new ways of conceiving and living life" (Goodley, et al., 2019:973). From this perspective, it is possible to desire disability as something with the potential to "disrupt, destabilise and shake up the normative foundations of culture and society" (Goodley, et al., 2019:983; McRuer, 2006). Within the affirmation model, normative culture is shown as restrictive by having a narrow view of valued personhood. Disruption creates new possibilities.

Relational and affirmation models provide addendums to the social model, bringing attention to the correspondence between body and environment, enhancing understanding of the cultural, psycho-emotional and interpersonal dimensions of disability, and affirming the identities and experiences of disabled people. Disability and identity are shown to be formed at the intersection of the personal and the social (Woodward, 2000). While some experiences and barriers may make alternative identities impossible to take up, there is a level of contingence that makes new possibilities imaginable. Relational and affirmative approaches are taken up in this research by considering the diversity of experiences of disabilities and engaging with the productive potential of difference to reframe disabled/non-disabled subjectivity.

Having reviewed contexts from contemporary art (1.2) and disability studies (1.3), a concurrent theme of social and cultural constructions that either deny or normalise learning disabled artists is evident. The interest in inclusion and diversity in the arts is based on an ethical case without paying attention to the specific cultural contributions of learning disabled artists. Disability Art was a powerful movement for disabled people to explore and express their experiences and build new identities, but to stay true to its original political intentions, it cannot be a catch-all for all artistic work by disabled people. Outsider Art seeks

to sustain a problematic relationship with mainstream contemporary art, accepting neither its adoption nor its exclusion, which can have material consequences and does not represent the contemporary practices of learning disabled artists today. The social model of disability is a powerful tool for politicising disabled people and drawing attention to their structural and material oppression. Still, its approach to impairment and the psycho-emotional effects of relational experiences has sometimes resulted in the exclusion of learning disabled people. Normalisation brought positive changes to service provision but did not involve learning disabled people in the construction of what is 'normal'. The above contexts provide a backdrop but are incomplete in exploring the artist identities of learning disabled artists practicing today. This research views the reports of interactions between the artist-participants and external institutions through the lens of the social model while also considering relational effects on artist identity. It seeks to avoid normalisation by exploring the artist-participants' own ideas about being an artist, and, by paying attention to the specific practices and artworks of the artist-participants, it addresses a weakness of the *Creative Case* in regards to establishing a link between diversity and innovation in art practice (Newsinger and Green, 2016). The following section takes up the relational and affirmative approaches outlined, to develop a method of research engagement that affords space to question and challenge the construction of artist identity.

1.4 Methods

Through sections 1.2 and 1.3 I have identified the need to adopt a relational and affirmative approach to the research methods. This section outlines Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity and nomadic ethics (1993; 1994; 2005/2006; 2006; 2013a; 2013b; 2014) and relates these to practice research, which underpins the exploration of shifting identity and affirmation of the artist identity of both the artist-participants in Chapter 2, and myself in Chapters 3 and 4.

1.4.1 Research stages

The research unfolded in three stages: a three-month preliminary study in the Venture Arts studio where I worked alongside the learning disabled artists between November 2019 and February 2020; a long-term research engagement over eleven months with seven learning disabled artist-participants, five of whom are presented in the thesis, conducted online

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using the Zoom platform between May 2020 and June 2021; and a solo period of practice between July 2021 and September 2023, primarily conducted from my studio at Assembly House, Leeds. Before these stages, during my first year of enrolment in the PhD programme, I volunteered weekly in the Venture Arts studio between October 2018 and August 2019 on different days of the week to get to know the studio, the facilitators, and the artists working there.

During the preliminary study, I sought to move away from the role of volunteer, which aligned me more closely with the facilitators and contributed to the sense of a hierarchical relationship between the learning disabled artists and myself that I have problematised throughout the research. After a break of two months, I re-entered the studio in a position alongside the learning disabled artists. This involved prior communication with facilitators to establish that I could not be called upon to support other artists or carry out tasks on their behalf, and instead, I sat with the learning disabled artists and focused on making art alongside them. During this preliminary study, I made works discussed in 3.2 and considered the entangled zones of practice in the studio, for example, the social practice of the facilitators and the material practices of the learning disabled artists. I also considered the new subjectivities and relationalities performed by the position shift, noticing strange inversions, contradictions, and circularities. These included the notion of trying "to act like myself" and the facilitators treating me as they would the other studio users "while an implicit value of the studio is to treat the studio users as they would any other artist" (Atkinson, 2020). The intention of conducting this preliminary study was to engender peer-relationships between the learning disabled artists and myself to set up the period of research engagement that was to follow, rather than beginning from a position encoded with authority and leadership. The timing of the COVID-19 pandemic closures disrupted a smooth transition into the following research engagement. Still, I sought to hold on to the idea of peer-relationships, in the online space the pandemic necessitated.

To respond to the context of the COVID-19 lockdowns that occurred at the time the participatory research engagement began, I had to return to recruitment, as only one of the interested artist-participants I met in the preliminary study was willing to undertake the

research engagement online. The participant information sheet was made available in easy read from the start[12] (Appendix 1). I had intended to meet with interested parties in person to ensure their understanding of the information presented, and I scheduled enough time for interested parties to review the information at their own pace and ask questions before committing to joining the research engagement. To support online recruitment, I created video version of the participant information[13], conducted online 'taster sessions' with small groups with support from Venture Arts staff, and updated the consent form to include online working. My intention throughout recruitment was to make the project information and consent process as accessible as possible, drawing on inclusive and emancipatory research methods (cf. Oliver, 1992; Oliver, 1997; Walmsley, 2001; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003; Barton, 2005; Bigby et al., 2014) that challenge disabling research relationships. Consent forms were co-signed by supporters where appropriate. Concerning the ethical approval of the research, care was taken to ensure that the artist-participants could elect to be credited by name, reflecting their public profile as artists. Table 1 outlines the recruited artist-participants and the number of sessions and engagement hours spent with each:

Table 1:

Name	No. of session	From	To	Engagement (hrs)
Roxy Maguire	30	May 2020	April 2021	26
Amy Ellison	31	July 2020	April 2021	28.5
Sally Hirst	28	July 2020	May 2021	11.5
Louise Hewitt	37	July 2020	May 2021	32.5
Emlyn Scott	24	July 2020	June 2021	20.75
Josh Brown*	24	July 2020	March 2021	15.75
Rory White*	25	July 2020	April 2021	20.5
* Not written up in this thesis, see Introduction.	**Total 199**			**Total 155.5**

Noticing in the online 'taster sessions' that online group working created difficulties in communication, I decided to meet with each artist-participant individually, which created a

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[12] 'Easy read' refers to a method of presenting text that includes short sentences, simplified language and/or defining of specialist terms, and using images to represent the text. It is an accessibility measure that supports the inclusion of learning disabled people and people with other conditions that affect information processing.
[13] The participant information video can be viewed here using the password 'venturearts': https://vimeo.com/412306763?share=copy

significant increase in the number of engagement hours. I posted packs of art supplies[14] to each artist-participant in advance of sessions to ensure they had access to basic materials and a separate space to create and keep work for the research. Without knowing from the outset the extent of the pandemic impact that was to come, the artist-participants and I went through it together in real time, sharing the difficulties while engaging in a virtual space of exchange. An unintended outcome of moving online was the production of "new forms of social relations, aesthetic encounters and affective responses" (Thorpe et al., 2023:3421) in digital space, producing a more intensive research period and the forging of more intimate relationships. Transcripts from the research sessions are not included in this thesis due to the quantity, the inability of the transcription software to make accurate representations of the speech of the learning disabled artist-participants, and to avoid overfocusing on the discursive. Sessions were participant-led, so the balance of conversation and material making was unique to each artist-participant. Making activities were drawn from the artist-participants' existing art practices and the sessions provided an opportunity to develop a new body of work. I offered feedback on the works made and reflections from my experiences as an artist where relevant. The research engagement resulted in the production of several artworks and events that went into the public realm, discussed in the Conclusion, and two of the artist-participants also contributed to *632700* (2022), a co-produced work I developed as part of the research, discussed in Chapter 4.

The art making element of the research was also impacted by the home-working environment, and consequently, my most significant period of practice research came after, rather than during, the participatory research engagement. In this stage, I reviewed the recordings of the participatory research engagement and processed the experience materially to see what forms emerged and what they illuminated. I developed works including ceramic, installation, drawing, and text-based pieces, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. In committing to the knowledge-generating capacity of material engagement (Bolt, 2007), I avoided overfocusing on the loss and difficulty of the pandemic and instead considered my shifting relationship to artist identity that arose from the sequential

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[14] Packs contained an A4 folder, an A5 sketchbook, sheets of black card, white tissue paper, and clear acetate, blank postcards, an OHP marker, Staedtler HB pencils, and Stabilo fine liner pens.

engagements with the artist-participants and materials, highlighting that digital engagement can produce new subjectivities and relationalities (Thorpe et al., 2023; Postdigitial Intimacies, no date).

1.4.2 Nomadic subjectivity as a move beyond binaries

> *"My subjectivity is the basis for the story that I am able to tell. It is a strength on which I build. It makes me who I am as a person and as a researcher, equipping me with the perspectives and insights that shape all that I do … Seen as virtuous, subjectivity is something to capitalise on rather than to exorcise."*
> Glesne & Peshkin, 1992:104

> *"'I' is a habit of repetition, a convention invented by the dogmatic image of thought. 'I' is an old concept that weighs us down, one that, from the beginning, was an inadequate response to a problem the world posed."*
> St. Pierre, 2019:8

These two quotes gesture towards the underpinning conflict regarding the role of subjectivity and single authorship in this research. They represent multiple splits, correlating with the shortcomings of the contexts outlined in 1.2 and 1.3, which produce categorisation and inherent power imbalances to the exclusion of learning disabled artists. The two quotes also link to my anxiety around using my artistic practice in the research to explore the practices of others. As an artist, subjectivity is important because it is the place from which one draws an individual practice, but in conceptualising the research method, I was conscious of the risk of over-centring myself and therefore marginalising the learning disabled artist-participants. I sought to avoid presenting subjectivity as a singular, stable position as that could further produce boundaries and obstacles to alternative becomings, and I similarly wished to avoid denying difference or undermining the subjectivity of the artist-participants. There is power in claiming an identity, especially for those who have "never quite made it into full humanity" (Braidotti, 2013a:81), as it engenders the possibility of solidarity and social justice (Braidotti, 2013a:29), as the disability rights movement has shown. Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity (1994) and the broader context of posthumanism (2013a) provide a framework for thinking about identity in response to the problematic of subjectivity and forms the basis of this research methodology.

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Nomadic subjectivity refers to a way of being that "stress[es] heteronomy and multi-faceted relationality, instead of autonomy and self-referential disciplinary purity" (Braidotti, 2013a:145). Posthuman subjectivity is set up in contrast with the rigid identity categories of the classical Humanist subject that constructs a normative and regulated centre, represented as white, male, European, and able-bodied and is "hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination" (Braidotti, 2013a:26). Writer and activist James Baldwin summarises the failures of categorisations as leading "unforeseen paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning" (1955:19), as outlined in relation to this research in 1.2 and 1.3. Medical and individual models of disability produce rigid identity structures by drawing on the Humanist human as an embodied ideal, a position challenged by social, relational, and affirmative models. Nomadic subjectivity contributes to the critical disability studies project of "dislodging and deconstruction of the fantasy of ableist human one-ness" (Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole, 2014:452) and "[replacing] a fixed biological ontology of being with a social process and an ontology of becoming" (Roets and Goodley, 2008:unpag.). The bounded, aggrandised Humanist human also provides the template of the sovereign artist critiqued by Kester (2011). Nomadic subjectivity offers "a move beyond these lethal binaries" (Braidotti, 2013a:37).

Nomadic subjectivity counters the notions of fixed, stable identities by foregrounding subjectivity and relationality as a site of a continual process of becomings. Braidotti defines 'becomings' as "sustainable shifts or changes undergone by nomadic subjects in their active resistance against being subsumed in the commodification of their own diversity" and orients becomings towards "actualising possible futures" (Braidotti, 2005/2006:unpag.), suggesting a positive project of creating and realising new identities. Nomadic subjectivity is taken up in this research as a tool to draw attention to the processes that assign and ingrain particular identities into us, such as 'disabled' and 'non-disabled', 'artist' and 'non-artist' and renders the "boundaries for producing meaning, difference and subjectivity … subject to flexible reconstruction" (Roets and Goodley, 2006:unpag.). The plural 'artist subjective becomings' is used in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 to refer to this position, where subjectivity is characterised as fluid, unfixed, and mobile and includes aspects of internally and externally informed identity and affirmation that unfolds in multiple and co-existing strands. Nomadic

subjectivity can be seen as partly aligned with new materialist approaches where the self is understood as multiple and entangled with multiple others (Vu, 2018). It is also aligned with post-qualitative methodologies that critique qualitative research that is "grounded in Enlightenment humanism's description of human being" and are instead characterised by ontological openness (St. Pierre, 2014:4). Braidotti does, however, recognise the need for subjectivity to be held, not completely receding into the flow of intra-actions as a non-distinct "individual element" (Barad, 2007:33). She explicitly holds onto the importance of subjectivity in moving towards collectivity: "[one] needs at least some subject position … [as] the site for political and ethical accountability, for collective imaginaries and shared aspirations" (Braidotti, 2013a:102). This corresponds with Kester's argument that collaborative art practices "seldom involve a complete suspension of identity" and a "provisional coherence" is maintained that allows artists and collaborators to meet across difference without dissolving it (2004:157-158). Nomadic subjectivity is conceptualised as malleable and permeable without becoming completely vaporous. Braidotti's call for an account of "creativity and imagination, desire, hopes and aspirations … without which we simply cannot make sense of contemporary global culture" (Braidotti, 2013a:52) affirms the specific knowledges of artist subjectivities and production while continuing to recognise how such positions emerge through relationality.

Braidotti also pays attention to how subjectivity is rooted in embodiment as "[the] first and foremost of locations in [one's] reality" (1993:7). She calls on researchers to "be as aware as possible of where one is speaking from" precisely because "it does make a difference to have the historical memory of oppression or exclusion" (1993:8). In this way, she affirms both disability and impairment as specific experiences and physio-psycho-emotional generative positionalities that contribute to the web of relations. Braidotti defines embodiment as "neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological" (1993:7), both a situated corporeal physicality engaged materially in the world, and discursively and relationally produced. This highlights the "political project" of nomadic subjectivity (Roets and Goodley, 2008:unpag.) and points to its application in disability studies. In this research, the nomadic subject brings attention to both the artist-participants and myself as

differentiated subjects with specific intersectionalities, histories, and inheritances, as well as to the ways that we emerge through relationality with each other and the contexts and conventions of meaning-and-material making and remaking.

The issues of language and representation are important to this research because learning disabled people may experience barriers to communication. The problem of writing a thesis *about* and not *with* the artist-participants weighed on me, as discussed further in the next section and through the practice presented in 3.2. Barad's concept of the "post-human performative" (2007:135) suggests a method to address discursive othering by questioning the power of language and considering what other phenomena organise our flows and becomings. Spoken or written language may not be the most salient form of communication for learning disabled people, and the necessary use of the label 'learning disabled' in this research is itself problematic if we accept that identity is not fixed. The use of labelling is problematic because of what those labels omit, and the boundary between in and out of a category is rarely clear-cut. The use of nomadically informed art practice research provides a generative space that temporarily renders subjectivity and relationality provisional, and so responds to scholars that critique the notion of an 'authentic voice' (cf. Grant, Short and Turner, 2013). Conducting research in this way requires attentiveness to material that might not otherwise count as 'data' (St. Pierre, 2013). This approach recognises that "knowing is as dependent on the coming together of things, places and feelings as it is on language" (Mellander and Wiszmeg, 2016:99) and the totality of subjectivity cannot be captured in language and representation, so the researcher must engage in a process of "becoming-with" the data (Haraway, 2008:16). Being reflexive also requires me to question how the material and discursive configurations of the research enable or inhibit certain lines of thought. The political problematics of the research become not something for me to overcome, but something to hold and interact with.

1.4.3 Nomadic subjectivity as creative and affirmative ethics

Nomadic subjectivity manifested in how I conducted the research engagement by providing an ethical position of affirmation and accountability that operates from my particular subjectivity, but also recognises that part of us all always remains unfinished and open to

the world. Braidotti's posthuman nomadic subjectivity is positive and affirmative in its "[urge] to think critically and creatively about who and what we are in the process of becoming" (Braidotti, 2013a:12). She offers "pragmatic experimentation" (Braidotti, 2013a:45) as a method to make and remake subjectivity, an approach that aligns with artistic practice.

Disability is a site where subjectivity is produced through different relationships to dis/ability, and interrogations of these constructions can lead to the creation of alternative ways of being and relating (Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole, 2014; Roets and Goodley, 2008:unpag.). The categorical divisions presented in 1.2 and 1.3 lead to learning disabled artists being understood in a different way to artists generally, either as outsiders or beneficiaries of an ethical case for inclusion, or their art practices and artist identity are wrapped up with their disabled identity. While I may not have overcome these problems entirely, this research problematises this position by building on a nomadic subjectivity and nomadic ethics by considering artist identity as shifting and porous. Experimentation with new identities must contend with the "dominant morality and social order" (Braidotti, 2013b:355) as inherited social identities are disrupted and challenged (Nagar, 2018). This correlates with the political and social challenges to identity formation made by the social model and the Disability Arts movement. Braidotti's ethics is deeply aligned with rights movements as she rejects normative constructions and the practices of privileging and exclusion they entail (Braidotti, 2014), and so further correlates with the social model critique of the devaluation and oppression of disabled people based on socially constructed identity stigmas. She suggests that nomadic subjectivity opens up a "partial form of accountability based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building" (Braidotti, 2013a:49). While nomadic ethics shares characteristics with covenantal ethics, which calls on researchers to go beyond an understanding of ethics based on legalistic exchange and to develop relationships of care and respect (Hilsen, 2006; Brydon-Miller, 2009), it extends this by not "responding … as if the other is the radical outside to the self" (Barad, 2007:178).

Braidotti's affirmative and relational approach to subjectivity makes me also consider a nomadic ethical handling of the self. At times over the research journey, my struggle to work with the identified 'splits' and problematic of subjectivity identified in 1.4.2 led me to great confusion, depression, and shame. Ruminations on the ethical imbalances inherent in the thesis writing were an obstacle to my possibility of 'sustainable shifts or changes'. The practice discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 visualises and works through these confusions. It is difficult to fully describe depression after the fact, but "[based] on the principle that we do not know what a body can do" (Braidotti, 2013b:365), engaging with the self in the mode of the nomadic subject was a tool that supported me to begin to take on the possibility of productive alternatives. Nomadic subjectivity "is a place we create when – in hosting others – we change, hybridise our discourses and identities, and let others teach us, from the beginning, how we are different and multiple *within ourselves*" (Gregoriou, 2001:146 [original emphasis]). In accepting the possibility of my multiplicity, I was disengaged from negativity, shifted my subjectivity, and entered into a new, softer, "creative affirmation" of self and other (Braidotti, 2006:355). In this research, nomadic subjectivity is used as a tool for engaging with the self and others in an ethical, affirmative way without denying difference, a position explored in *632700* (2022; discussed in Chapter 4). Recognising that, like the artist-participants, I am a fractured, dispersed, intra-connected, difficult-to-know subject, a nomadic approach avoids pointing to a coherent self that necessarily creates hierarchy. My account of depression in this paragraph is one way I have responded to Braidotti's call to be as aware as possible from where I speak. Reflections on my solo practice works in Chapters 3 and 4 are another response to this call, as I dig into my relationally affected, materially-realised subjective becomings.

To summarise, the methodology of nomadic subjectivity engenders the creation of research tools including: a reframing of the self and other as a process of interdependent relationalities that do not deny difference or the significance of embodied subjectivity; an ethical and political accountability that avoids discursive othering and challenges the power relations in concepts of fixed and hierarchical identities; and an affirmative and creative relationship with shifting subjectivity. As I have suggested, nomadic subjectivity correlates with practice research, as it too resists categorisation (Coemans, et al., 2015; Leavy, 2009),

proposes diversity and multiplicity (Lélé and Norgaard, 2005; Finley, 2008), and draws on subjectivity (Barrett, 2007).

1.4.4 Practice research, nomadic subjectivity, and becoming artists

This section positions the role of practice within the research. A review of the literature reveals that various terms are used to describe practice research in both the arts and broader qualitative inquiry fields such as education and healthcare. Reviews and proposed classification frameworks have sought to delineate these terms and their associated focuses (cf. Frayling, 1993, Niedderer and Roworth-Stokes, 2007; Borgdorff, 2012; Coemans et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2017). However, terms are sometimes employed interchangeably, used without clear definition, or may be interpreted differently, depending on the researcher, context, or time period in which they appear (Bulley and Şahin, 2021). The field has a complex history and continues to evolve, requiring researchers to be specific about their position on practice, as "[for] each practice researcher, the way that practice functions as the significant method conveyed in a research output will likely be different" (Bulley and Şahin, 2021:19). The following section briefly outlines the approaches and elements that are left behind or taken up within this methodology, in order to adopt an approach to practice rooted in artist identity.

Important to this research is the difference between approaches arising from social sciences and those of artists. The term 'arts-based research' (ABR) is commonly associated with social sciences and involves the integration of creative methods, such as drawing, alongside traditional qualitative techniques like focus groups, to expand the methodological toolkit for investigating social issues (c.f. Levy, 2008; Barone & Eisner, 2012). This research departs from ABR by differentiating between creative processes used as a methodological tool and instead approaches practice for the positionality of artist identity and ways of thinking that follow "the inner logic of artistic processes" (Cotter, 2024:14). In this research, practice is understood as a generative, epistemological mode in its own right.

Focusing on the field of art, there are further splits in terminology and understandings around the function of practice in research, including: practice-led research, practice-based

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research, practice-as-research (PaR), and artistic research. Hannula, Suoranta and Vadén (2005:9-10) use the term 'artistic research', which they define as "the self-reflective and self-critical process of a person taking part in the production of meaning within contemporary art". They argue that this mode of inquiry is distinctive because it generates knowledge through the specificities of artistic thinking, methods, and production, and is therefore inevitably entangled with the meaning-making processes, disciplinary traditions, and critical debates of contemporary art. This aligns with Hickey-Moody's (2015:169) framing of PaR as a "philosophically informed making, and thinking about making", shaped by and responsive to contemporary creative discourses. She goes further by arguing that such PaR approaches not only intersect with existing disciplines but actively reshape them, reconfiguring the conditions and definitions of research (2015:175). Artistic research and PaR move away from the conventional approaches to research method contained within ABR, such as having pre-determined questions, following instructional methodological systems, or viewing creative outputs as illustrative or supplementary. Recent scholarship in this mode has sought to further recentre the capacity of artistic practice to produce new research paradigms and refuse the instrumentalisation of art within institutional research agendas (cf. Cotter, 2024: Cramer, 2021). This reclaiming of art's epistemic capacity resonates with my own approach, in which knowledge arises through open-ended, experimental making alongside encounters with people, materials, and contexts that may not be fully knowable in advance, particularly in relation to the huge changes that had to be made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Linda Candy's (2006) distinction between 'practice-led research' and 'practice-based research' offers a pragmatic account of the role of practice within research in the arts. She defines 'practice-based' as "an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice", while 'practice-led' "is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice… [and] may be fully described in text form without the inclusion of a creative outcome" (2006:3). While this distinction is useful for mapping the position of practice, in this research, the two approaches co-exist and intersect. The knowledge produced in this thesis is inseparable from practice: it emerges *through* the

process of making in shared and solo spaces, and is made legible through the outcomes of practice (including drawings, installations, photographs, and digital media, presented in Chapters 2-4). These outcomes are not simply illustrative but constitutive of the thesis, necessary for a full understanding of the knowledge claims by analysis and contextualisation provided of the works, and the works themselves. In this respect, this research aligns with the practice-based definition. At the same time, this research has qualities that align with Candy's (2006:3) description of practice-led research as it reflects critically on how artistic practices are shaped, constrained, and transformed through social, institutional, and relational dynamics, particularly as experienced by the learning disabled artist-participants and myself as the artist-researcher encountering one another within complex cultural, aesthetic, and social fields. My practice was altered through the research encounters, and as such, the research also investigates *how* practice shifts when it becomes a site of interdependence, co-production, and ethical responsiveness across difference. In this sense, the research leads to new understandings *about* and *within* practice, particularly how it is formed relationally, rather than autonomously. As this research also interrogate artist identity, which is bound up with processes of creative production, practice is simultaneously the method, a site of investigation, and the mode of knowledge generation (Barrett and Bolt, 2007; Nelson, 2013). This highlights how taxonomies and terminologies may blurr within the doing of practice research, and is concurrent with scholars who do not draw distinctions between terms, such as practice-based and practice-led research, or use them interchangeably. For example, Graeme Sullivan (2006:21) considers 'practice-led' and 'practice-based' to refer to the same research phenomenon, and the introduction to Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt's (eds. 2007) *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* uses a range of terms interchangeable, including: practice-led, practice-based, studio-based research, artistic research, and creative arts research. Hazel Smith (2009:7, [original emphasis]) refers to 'practice-led research' as "*both* to the work of art as a form of research and to the creation of the work as generating research insights which might then be documented, theorised and generalised", merging Candy's (2006) definitions. Rather than fixing my research within a rigid terminology, I frame it as an inquiry that is open-ended, experimental, "personally situated", relational, and "necessarily emergent" (Barrett, 2007:2,6). In this research, knowledge arises through practice, comprising activities of

making and reflection on both process and outputs, in conversation with contemporary art histories and discourses. This leads to insights both in the making process and the creative outputs, which are folded back into the creation and development of artist identity, highlighting the "interdependence of these domains" (Sullivan, 2014:48). To cut across all variants, along with Bulley and Şahin (2021) this thesis refers to 'practice research' to reflect that practice appears in different ways at different times in the research journey, while always being connected to the positionality of an artist identity.

The significance of practice in this research is its ability to work beyond the discursive by introducing multiple materialities and processes. In this way, practice research breaks from research that uses life stories with learning disabled people in order to represent their "disqualified knowledge and creative life worlds" (Roets and Goodley, 2008:unpag; cf. Atkinson, 2004; Goodley, 1998) by also engaging with material and embodied dimensions. When engaging with the learning disabled artist-participants, the history of disablism and dehumanisation – built on the "lethal binaries" identified by Braidotti (2013a:37) that produce categories of exclusion – is part of our inheritance that informs our relationalities and subjectivities. Through a nomadic subjective engagement with practice, new relationalities and subjectivities can be actualised (Braidotti, 2013b) by attending to "an assemblage of diverse materialities in motion" (De Freitas and Sinclair, 2014:5). Art materials, processes, and resulting artworks are active contributors to artistic becomings in conversation with discursive practices. Braidotti's (2013a) notion of enmeshment with technology is realised in practice research where artistic materials, tools, and processes are technologies that afford extensions beyond the self. Learning disabled artists are a discursively misrepresented community (1.2 and 1.3), and practice, as an experimental and subjective process, draws attention to additional materials that inform artist identity.

'Becoming artist' is what links the artist-participants and myself and brings us together. Making alongside the learning disabled artist-participants afforded a level of embodied connection in the generation of "tacit knowledge" (Barrett, 2007:4) and the shared subject position of artist, offering momentary relief from our constructed differences. Rather than conceptualising creativity as the generation of novelty (cf. Morgan, 1953; Hausman, 1984;

Hennessey and Amabile, 2010), Tim Ingold's concept of the 'creativity of undergoing' proposes sustained engagement with materials and processes attends to a world constantly in formation and engenders communities of practice (2014). Ingold's concepts of attention, knowing from the inside, and correspondences (2022; 2020; 2011) also support the approach to analysis in this research, which involves both "perceptual attunement" and "submission … to a world that is not yet settled in its dispositions" as well as the capacity for "mutual responsiveness, of answering and being answered to" (Ingold, 2022:6). This approach aligns with Braidotti's "embodied and embedded" nomadic subjectivity (2013a:51), and in the correspondences entered in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, I am thinking with and alongside both the artist-participants and the contexts identified in 1.2 and 1.3 to draw out what struck me as an artist.

Through my practice development discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, I came to conceptualise my practice as 'undisciplined' (Sobchack, 2004), 'adhocist' (Jencks and Silver, 1972), and expanded collage (3.3.4). Responsive improvisation and continual repurposing of materials – Braidotti's "pragmatic experimentation" (Braidotti, 2013a:45) – are features of practice in this mode. Collage arose as a process that requires both destruction and creation and brings disparate pieces onto a shared plane. I approached collage not to produce fixed compositions but with an interest in the process of continually creating new relationalities. I resisted sticking pieces down and kept them in motion, destabilising the idea of finality or single meaning. Approached in this way, collage is a generative process that proposes new potentials, highlighting both the "internally differentiated" quality of each element and its emergence through relationship to the whole (Braidotti, 2013a:49). Unfixed collage can shift through balance and dissonance, drawing together inconsistencies and interruptions as a space for taking apart old ideas and making new futures. The relationship between my practice and nomadic subjectivity emerged through the making of collages, especially the work *632700* (2022) discussed in Chapter 4.

Other material approaches I used arose through the process of making and were prompted by the learnings from the artist-participants. Observing their focus on materials reenergised my desire to make, and the use of drawing and clay was stimulated by the artist-participants

(Chapters 2 and 3). Aesthetic strategies that developed over the practice research included gestural mark-making, transparency, tracing, transference, double-sided works, and pairings of works (Chapter 3). The physicality of gestural mark-making, when used in practice research, follows Braidotti's conception of embodiment as the overlap of "the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological" (1993:7). The qualities of transparent and translucent materials such as acetate and tracing paper, and processes of layering and pairing, allow phenomena to be seen through and against each other, highlighting artworks as both distinct elements and actors in multiple relationalities. Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity (1994, 2013a) is, therefore, applied both in my reflections on artist identity becomings, and to readings of material qualities and effects in the artworks produced, as shown in Chapters 3 and 4. As well as expanded collage, at times I considered I was working in an 'aesthetics of overwhelm' (Chapter 4) as I sought to make through and alongside the research splits and problematics. Conceptualised in the affirmative, overwhelm points to Braidotti's disunity-as-abundance (2013a:156), and abundance as resistance to scarcity/competition. The adoption of multi-and-interdisciplinary approaches eschews "disciplinary purity" (Braidotti, 2013a:145), operating within a relational flow whilst also arriving somewhere affirmative.

1.4.5 Summary of methods

The methodology outlined in this section is in and of practice. Different strategies of material making occurred at different points in the research journey in correspondence with each artist-participant, and the different contexts of working online and in the studio. Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity and nomadic ethics (1994, 2013a, 2013b) provides a template for relating across difference without denying the subject, as a route to identity experimentation and production of new futures. These dovetail with practice research, which involves material making to engage with embodied processes and subjectivities. This section sets up the correspondences with art practices, artworks, and artist identity shifts described in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Chapter 2: Learning disabled artists: art practice and artist identity

2.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the research artist-participants' art practice and its relationship to their artist identity. Moments where that identity was affirmed or challenged are illustrated using excerpts of conversations recorded during our research engagement and images of the artist-participants' artworks. The analysis of these materials elucidates the process of becoming and being an artist for individuals facing various barriers, with artistic identity understood as an unfixed and fluid subjectivity that is informed by historical, social, and cultural contexts. The chapter asserts that artist identity is formed and affirmed through the act of practice, as well as through moments of positive relationality.

2.2 Roxy Maguire

2.2.1 Approach to art and the artist

Roxy Maguire's practice includes photography, drawing, writing, and collage. She has been attending Venture Arts since 2015. In our first session, Maguire introduced herself by describing her interests and hobbies. She showed me drawings depicting a punching bag and a pair of boxing gloves with the word "Venum" on them (her boxing name), as well as other drawings that she calls "signs", such as a snake with long teeth and a flame. Maguire is a strong woman who attends the gym and boxing classes. She is broadly interested in alternative subcultures, such as rock and goth, and knowingly uses symbols from these subcultures in her drawings to associate herself with these cultures.

Maguire and I met weekly during the research engagement. Discussions focussed on the intersection of her personal interests and her art. Maguire's work frequently focuses on her transition into adulthood and imaginings around her future. Through one series of drawings (Figs. 2.1-2.3), she articulated her developing identity by exploring elements such as personal style through stylistic line drawings of people that she describes as "bit weird". The

resulting collection of work borders portraiture, character design and fashion illustration, featuring elements such as hair dyed in non-natural colours and facial piercings as signifiers of bodily autonomy, personal decision-making, and preference towards subculture aesthetics.

Figs. 2.1-2.3: Roxy Maguire, examples of drawings of people, 2020-2021.[15]

In our first session together, Maguire and I attempted to draw together using Sketchpad, an online drawing tool.[16] Once Maguire was comfortable using the software, she drew a watery heart. I added a bold arrow through the heart, an attempt to build our friendship by referencing Maguire's interest in rock/alternative iconography, such as tattoos. She proceeded to add mossy and lilac webs across the heart and then titled the work *Cage With a Heart In It* (2020) (Fig. 2.4). The heart, representative of love and life, was trapped and held in place. This provided a starting point for much of the work produced in later sessions, where Maguire shared her desire for self-development and self-expression that would let the heart out of the cage.

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[15] All images and screenshots that are not attributed to another person are the author's own.
[16] Available at: https://sketch.io/sketchpad/
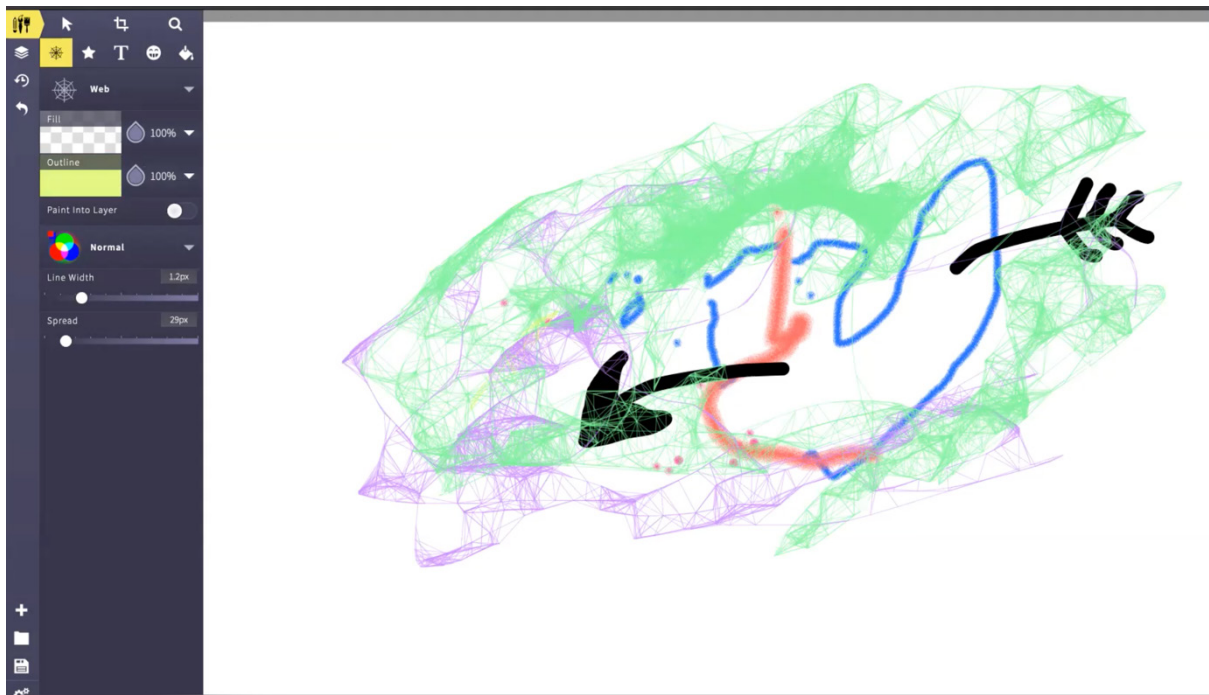
Fig 2.4: Roxy Maguire and Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Cage With a Heart In It,* 2020.

The heart icon appeared again in a drawing by Maguire featuring her "dream boy" (Fig 2.5). Both characters have a lip ring and wear matching statement earrings in opposite ears, signifying their connection. The image of Maguire has rainbow hair in three shades of red and the word "Tattoo's" is written on the page between the two characters above an arrow-studded heart. The identity of the boy is currently unknown, with an arrow pointing to him asking "Name" with a large question mark underneath. Esther Ignagni et al., (2016:132) highlight the "fragile" condition of intimacy in the lives of people with learning disabilities "despite the fact that rights to pursue several spheres of intimate life, including sexual identity and expression, friendship, marriage and cohabitation, family life and parenthood, are enshrined in the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities". Drawing on a workshop conducted with learning disabled self-advocates on the subject of intimate citizenship, the researchers report participants describing the ways they are "not allowed to love" as a result of being positioned as "passive recipients of care" rather than people capable of and desiring to give care (Ignagni et al., 2016:133). While intimate relationships are not exclusively sexual, disabled people are traditionally depicted as asexual. Kirsty Liddiard (2018) demonstrates that the sexualities and sexual practices of disabled individuals are often viewed as either deficient or excessive rather than simply present and

neutral, as with non-disabled people. Maguire's depiction of herself alongside a future boyfriend disrupts this notion by identifying her as a person who 'dreams' of an intimate romantic relationship that mirrors those found in the mainstream. She represents herself as a person seeking romantic love and reciprocal relationships and not simply as a cared-for person. In creating this image, she imagines and proposes a future for herself that goes beyond the prescribed social roles of learning disabled people.

Fig 2.5: Roxy Maguire, *Dream Boy*, 2020.

In a discussion about Maguire's drawings, she commented "I can't draw." This generated immediate surprise, and I exclaimed, "You can't draw?! What are you saying?!". Maguire laughed and thew her hands up, confidently saying: "Oh yeah, I can!". I recounted some of Maguire's drawings that I had seen previously, to which she added "Horse", counting her drawings with her fingers. This sudden reappraisal of the self is engendered by the context of our working together, creating a space and moment where Maguire's practice is recognised and affirmed. Through discussions, Maguire showed a flexibility of mind where she occupies a different relationship to drawing and her practice depending on the context and the people around her, but she is also able to shift between those modes and retains a sense of humour in the shift.

Maguire and I approached the concept of the artist through drawing. After we both drew a blank outline of a person, I asked: "When you think of a person who's an artist, what do you think of?" (Fig. 2.6).
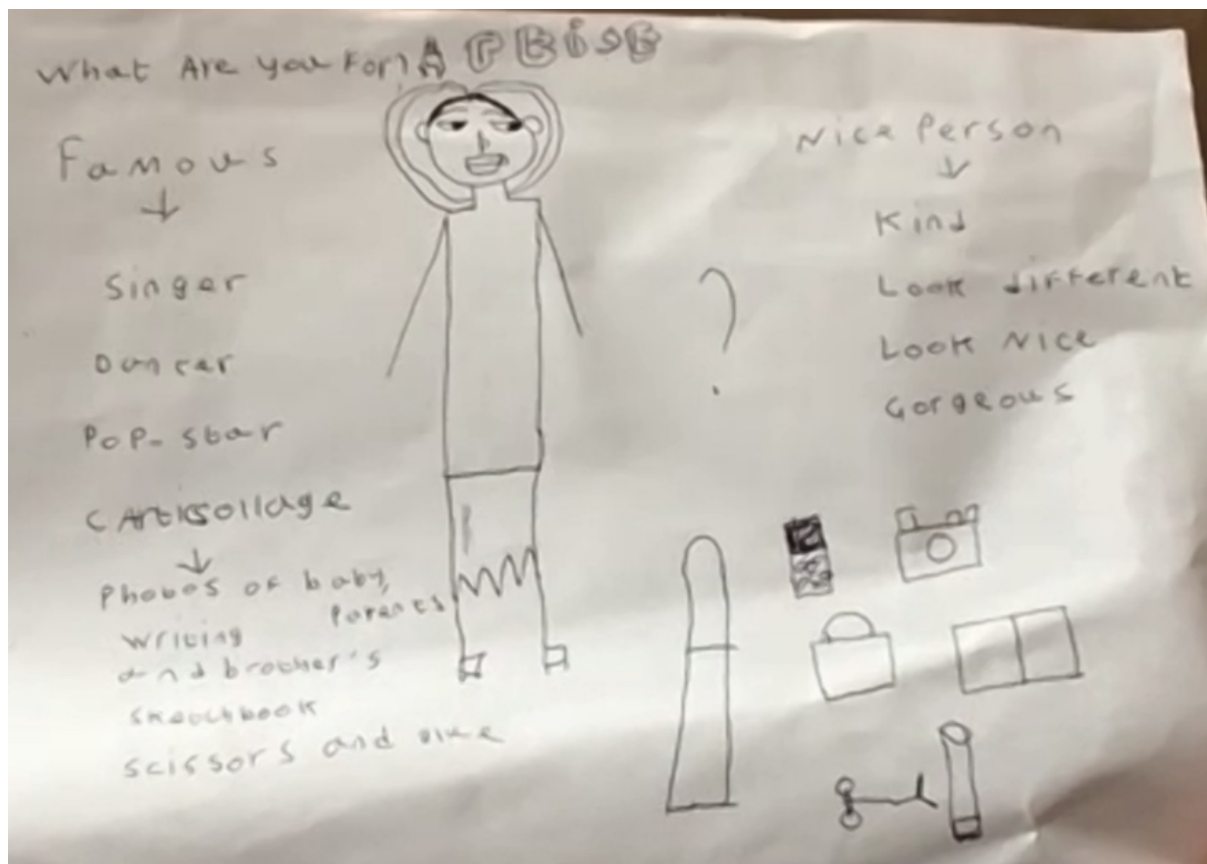
Fig. 2.6: Roxy Maguire, *Artist*, 2020.

Maguire's first answer is "famous". Her instant association of the artist with fame suggests a separation of the artist from the everyday person, someone who has achieved highly and been marked out as worthy of praise and attention. This is backed up by Maguire's focus on disciplinary specialities, such as "dancer", "singer", and "pop star". To be an artist, in this narrative, is to dedicate oneself to a particular craft and be recognisably associated with that craft to the point of label-specificity. In this exercise (Fig. 2.6), the figure of the artist is aspirational, rather than something that can be embodied right now. Maguire positions an artist beyond the reach of people unable to dedicate time and resources to disciplinary development. Maguire's artist also "looks different", "looks nice" and is "gorgeous", suggesting they possess a particular and aspirational visual appearance. When I probe Maguire to explain what she means by "looks different", she responds with the word "change". This is where the possibility of the artist identity becomes more relatable. Maguire highlights the transition that the person has gone through to become an artist, not as an innate characteristic but as a process of becoming. She links this to her own transition into adulthood and independence, giving the example of a "change of clothes". By defining her own personal style, Maguire has undergone her own process of change and feels more self-empowered. This also relates to the aspects of outward appearance that individuals can control to present a particular identity to others (Goffman, 1961/1995). By linking the idea of artist identity to the possibility of change and becoming someone "different", the possibility for others to become artists is made more achievable. Artist identity is conceived as a process rather than a fixed condition.

Maguire's interest in identity and difference was also highlighted in her relationship with disability. While recording a short video statement to accompany her work in a public Open Studio event, Maguire talked about being bullied at school for being "different" and how this had impacted her sense of self. She explained the support she needed when younger: "I can't write, I can't read, I can't drawing, I need help, teacher, mum and dads". She contrasted this with her current situation, saying she no longer needs support with those things: "Learn, believe in yourself, good, speak". She positions her support needs as changed and, alongside this, no longer identifies with the label of disabled. This challenges the binary between able and disabled and realises these categories as "complex [and]

moving" (Goodley, 2018:313), emphasising identity formation as shifting and developing in response to context and relationality.

Maguire's testimonies reflect an acute self-awareness of the evolving concept of self as a creative individual through interaction with others, including family, peers, and other artists. Engaging in creative practice, along with the gained confidence, allowed Maguire to assert her new identity as an individual, rather than as a labelled person. This focus on individuality rather than disability has been found in other research on disability and identity (cf. Brown, Dodd, and Vetere, 2010).

2.2.2 The space of practice

During research engagement, Maguire was keeping a notebook, saying, "That book, my life". She uses this to record information about upcoming Zoom sessions with myself and the Venture Arts facilitators, demonstrating a personal system she has developed to organise her week and be accountable to others. She is also using it to write her autobiography. This is a self-motivated project that shows Maguire's desire to document and reflect on her experiences, relationships, and developing identity. To dedicate time to writing, Maguire chooses to stay up late and work when everyone else in her household has gone to bed, using her room as a quasi-studio space. Many significant artists have sought to work in the quiet of the night and have found their most productive hours are late, with Louise Bourgeois' (1911–2010) *Insomnia Drawings* (1994-1995) providing a famous example.[17] One benefit of working at night is enhanced potential for privacy. Maguire's choice to write during time and space away from her family – with whom she has positive relationships – is indicative of her decision to bring unbroken attention to her practice, a component of creative flow.

James Hall (2013) discusses how the space of artistic production shifted from the public realm to a place of private and solitary study during the Renaissance era. This shift reflected changes in the artist's cultural role and deliberately fostered a sense of mystery around the

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[17] Captured in two monographs: Bronfen and Bernadac (2001); and Morris and Larratt-Smith (2013).

artist and the creative process. This triggered what Rachel Esner (2013:123) summarises as the "long-standing notion of the artist's place of work as the private domain of the autonomous master" and the artist's impulse to "[hide] making while consciously displaying one's creativity and artistic persona". Esner (2013:133) illustrates artists' changing relationship to the studio since the 1960s through models including studio as laboratory, studio as stage, and studio as work of art, and concludes that "the studio, with its many connotations, tropes and topoi, has remained the foil with and against which artists have thought through questions of production and identity". In all of its iterations – whether private refuge or place of social exchange, as with the Venture Arts studio – the studio provides a site and frame of artistic identity formation. This was exemplified during the research period in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns.

Maguire's case study suggests the following key markers that contribute to her artist identity: being able to express individuality, personal transitions, and propose future worlds through art practice; that identity formation is affirmed by context, relationships, and personal development; and the value of having access to private space (bedroom or studio) and time to focus on practice.

2.3 Amy Ellison

2.3.1 Approach to art practice

Amy Ellison's practice includes photography, painting, and digital art. She has worked with Venture Arts since 2010 and has taken part in several prominent exhibitions and projects with the organisation's support, including *Other Transmissions* at The Whitworth, Manchester, in early 2020. She takes clear ownership and pride in her work during our first session, pointing to the many pieces on the wall behind her: "I did that one, I did that one, I did that one" (Fig. 2.7). When I ask whether the pieces were created as part of a project at Venture Arts, she replies, "No, I did them myself, I think. I like doing things like that… I made it at home… My name on it".

Fig. 2.7: Amy Ellison, collection of works on the wall of Ellison's home studio.

This sense of independence and pride in her artwork continues as I open the discussion around defining our roles in the research. I asked Ellison whether she thinks of me as an artist or a teacher. She initially laughs and says she doesn't know. I state that I see myself as an artist and contextualise by adding that "A teacher might tell you what to do, or tell you how to do things, or give you instructions." Ellison quickly rejects this way of working, saying, "I like doing it myself… I do things myself. I like to go out to shop, I like to hand money myself, my bank, my bank account. I do it myself. I don't need mum and dad 'cause I do things myself", though she does reappraise that statement to add, "I can do things myself, but I do need mum and dad, that is very important." Ellison recognises both her independence and her interdependence, linking this in particular to staying safe and the shared role of looking after the family dog. Returning to the question of our roles, Ellison affirms "Artists, yes, artists".

Ellison's care and attention extend to her materials and tools. During an activity using permanent OHP pens and sheets of clear acetate, Ellison opts to lay the acetate over her iPad to use it as a lightbox. Not being present in the room, I was anxious to ensure the pen didn't damage her iPad. Ellison responded to my repeated checking with exasperation and an eye-roll, stating, "I be careful with my things!" and then went straight to work on her

piece, showing no hesitation in adopting a new material process. Ellison also expresses her preference for high-quality materials, lamenting the loss of the use of the A3 laser printer in the Venture Arts studio as she now must use her home printer while working from home over the pandemic. Ellison often mentioned the possibility of selling her artwork and talks about making a colouring book and badges to sell. She seeks to pursue a professional pathway and make money through her practice.

Ellison demonstrates her independent approach to her art practice in her approach to working with her iPad. She was clearly comfortable with the technology when she showed me her collection of digital portraits depicting characters from her favourite TV shows (Fig. 2.8). I asked about the process of creating the portraits, and here she initiated, engaged, and drew me into some gossip and banter about her experience at Venture Arts:

> "Well, I draw with my hands, but erm… [Facilitator at Venture Arts] don't like me copy and paste, 'cause I do like drawing, but I'm not good straight from hand, or nose. [Facilitator] help me drawn, make erm, draw it on iPad. But I copy and paste because I can't draw nose, I can't draw mouth, I can't draw ears, I can't draw eyebrows and eyes and thingy. I just copy and paste… [Facilitator] not happy… not happy with me because I like copy and paste… It's so hard, it's so hard drawing… [Facilitator] don't know about it. Secret. Don't tell [Facilitator] about it…"

Adobe Photoshop, the software Ellison uses, allows the user to work in layers and then reorder or remove layers. Ellison has devised an approach to resolving what she sees as a deficiency in her hand drawing that involves dropping an image sourced from the Internet into the software, tracing over the image in a new layer, and then removing the reference image, leaving only her drawing behind. Professional artists using Photoshop will likely be familiar with this process, but it is notable that Ellison had developed this approach independently of tuition. It also demonstrates Ellison's technical proficiency and commitment to developing her art practice. She laughed throughout this testimony, suggesting her exchanges with the facilitator about her use of this 'industry secret' are all in good fun.

Ellison's assertion that she can't draw, despite her creation of distinctive portraits, suggests she perceives hand-drawing and her current process using Photoshop to be qualitatively

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different. The expectation of a particular technical proficiency before a creation can be called 'drawing' links to criticisms of the UK national curriculum. Dennis Atkinson (2006:17) explains that art education in schools places emphasis "upon developing specific techniques, handling the formal elements of space, line, tone, colour, texture and developing observational drawing [rather] than on developing research skills and learning how to express meaning". As the UK national curriculum is many people's first and most prominent exposure to art practice, it is no wonder that perception of technical proficiency is significant in the psychological construction of valid art practice for everyone, whether learning disabled or not. Despite saying she cannot draw, Ellison asserts that she is "getting there, getting there… I need to practising", showing that she consciously engages in continued development of her practice.

Fig. 2.8: Amy Ellison, *Portrait of Judith Grimes*, 2020.

An element of Ellison's digital portrait process that stands out to me is the creation of a different layer for each facial feature: a layer for the mouth, a layer for the eyes, a layer for the eyebrows, etc. Each part is treated in isolation. It can be edited and moved around independently of the other parts. This fractures the face across digital space. I suggest understanding this as a metaphor for the approach to identity explored in this research. The face becomes fluid and unfixed, representing a destabilisation of the coherent identity of the humanist conception of the human and presenting a distributed identity (Braidotti, 2013a). Each piece becomes mobile, and the relationality of each piece is brought into focus through its detachment. The "boundaries for producing meaning, difference and subjectivity [become] subject to flexible reconstruction" (Roets and Goodley, 2008:unpag.) as Ellison experiments with the boundaries between facial components and constructs and reconstructs the face. This process allows for new subjectivities to emerge. This is highlighted further by the removal of the original reference image, the link to representational realism and facial coherence. As Ellison transforms the face through art practice, she also exposes the self as a process of transformation that shifts and reinvents itself continually (Braidotti, 2013a).

2.3.2 "My dreams, my life, my world"

Ellison immediately identified a thematic area and project title to pursue during the research: "My dreams, my life, my world". Like Maguire's focus on her 'dream boy' and aspirations as an independent adult, Ellison points to her future desires and the world she would like to build for herself. She portrayed a strong sense of herself as someone with dreams and in a state of growth. When I asked what things might be covered in the project, Ellison said, "Out [with] my friends. Out somewhere nice. Zumba, bowling, pub. And love. And golf". The first thing Ellison identifies to begin exploring this theme is to find photos of her friends, events she has attended, and dates she has been on with her boyfriend to apply her drawing method to, departing from her focus on fictional characters. Of the 'dreams' component, Ellison identified the possibility of marrying her boyfriend, though she says, "We need more dates" first. Another dream pertained to the COVID-19 restrictions: "I want to get out again, get out again. Out of the lockdown, lockdown, I want to go out again.

Myself. I don't need mum and dad… I do it myself, not mum and dad." Living under national lockdown restrictions was experienced as a curtailment of personal/individual freedoms to engage with friends in real space and time, which intermingled with Ellison's persistent desire to develop independence outside of her family. This suggests that disabled people may have been more impacted than non-disabled people under lockdown conditions.

Ellison developed her project by filling a sketchbook with images of her friends, outings, and previous art projects. Having undertaken this review of the important aspects of her life to date, she then wanted to "Talk about tour, my work… Tour, my work in it. Museums, art gallery stuff. My work in it… This is my dreams, see… Then people see my work, then… I want to do Whitworth". She shared her interest in getting her prints framed and seeing them displayed on a wall. Ellison had regularly exhibited her work across Manchester through Venture Arts' partnership with leading cultural institutions, and it is clear that, by this point in the pandemic, the lack of physical exhibition opportunities was being felt. She notes the support she has received to exhibit her work previously, including at the Whitworth Art Gallery. When I asked how involved she has been in turning her artworks into exhibitions – for example, by considering things like the paper stock her digital works are printed on, the scale of the prints, framing options, and the process of physically curating a space and hanging the prints on the wall – she is clearly less familiar: "I've not done it yet, I want to do it". These activities (or the medium-specific equivalents) are all ones that artists engaged in artist-led exhibition-making will likely have some familiarity with. For example, the BA (Hons) Fine Art course that I teach into at Manchester Metropolitan University has a Level 5 unit that requires students to work in groups to find an exhibition venue, produce a curated exhibition of their work, and carry out all marketing and adjacent tasks. The purpose of this unit is to prepare students for artist-led activity after graduation, with the expectation that, for a while at least, they will have to act in this self-sufficient (though networked) way to get their work into the public realm. Only when working with institutions of a certain size are artists able to hand over some of these jobs to others, and some artists will only ever work in this artist-led mode.

Goodley and Moore (2002) and Gee and Hargrave (2011) highlight the lack of role models and training opportunities for young people with learning disabilities in the professional arts. Venture Arts aim to address this by delivering a supportive, inclusive environment for learning disabled artists to develop their practice and by providing opportunities to exhibit. However, excluding these artists from the exhibition-making process deprives them of valuable experiences and skill-building activities. Without access to the areas of artistic practice that extend beyond initial making, it is unclear what kind of opportunities are available to learning disabled artists should they wish to continue their practice and careers without accessing a supported studio model like Venture Arts. Chapman (2014:49), in a study on the role of non-learning disabled supporters of self-advocates, found that "although supporters were seen to be reflexive in many areas of their work … unnoticed aspects of facilitation were impacting on the balance of power for members". The issue of power dynamics between disabled people and those who support them has been explored extensively in disability studies literature (cf. Oliver, 1997; Morris, 2001). Jennifer Goddard's (2015:242) research on a theatre company that works with learning disabled people in Northern Ireland suggested that their lack of input into the structural processes of the organisation left them "marginalised in their own artistic development". Regarding curation, Jade French's (2020:3) inclusive model aims to "demystify curating by breaking down curatorial tasks and decisions to enable more people to express their exhibition ideas as critical inclusive curators". While French's model, grounded in a case study, focuses on working with learning disabled people as curators, a gap in knowledge exists in how to enable learning disabled artists to prepare their own work for public presentation and engage in artist-led public activity.[18] This study could lead to further research into the significance of developing networks beyond supported studios, organising and participating in artist-led initiatives, and exhibition-making to develop and sustain learning disabled artists' careers.

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[18] French's later work *The Irregular Art School* (2023) and *Finding the Flex: A Flexible Studio Model For Learning Disabled Artists In Leeds* (in progress, 2024-2025) addresses some issues of professional development by bringing learning disabled artists into contact with higher education and an artist-led studio space and exploring a flexible model of studio provision.

Following the discussion about Ellison's interest in exhibiting, she develops the project over time by depicting galleries through hand drawings (Figs. 2.9-2.10). This began with sites she is familiar with, such as The Whitworth and The Lowry, and evolved to include galleries she learned about over the project, some that I introduced her to and some that we found out about together. In total, she created drawings of at least 26 locations in the UK, Europe, China, and the USA. After the initial hand drawings, Ellison photographed and coloured them using her iPad, creating fantastical neon scenes (Figs. 2.11-2.12).

Fig. 2.9: Amy Ellison, *The Grundy, Blackpool*, 2020.

Fig. 2.10: Amy Ellison, *The Whitworth, Manchester*, 2020.

Fig. 2.11: Amy Ellison, *Manchester Museum*, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 2.12: Amy Ellison, *The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds*, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist.

Ellison's drawings capture monumental historical buildings that represent high culture, spaces that many artists desire to show their work in because doing so signifies that their practice is valued and validated. But what opportunities exist to exhibit in these spaces? Recent reports highlight deep inequalities in the creative workforce and conditions of low (or no) pay, disproportionately affecting working class people, disabled people, younger workers, those who have not engaged in higher education, and people from a minoritised racial group (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor, 2020; Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor, 2021; Industria, 2023; Wreyford, O'Brien, and Dent, 2021). The *Structurally F*cked* report from Industria (2023:14) concludes that "only a tiny fraction [of artists] with the material resources or exceptional good fortune and tenacity needed to keep afloat will survive to remain practising artists without taking on substantial additional employment". These conditions hinder many artists from developing their practice and networks to the level required for exhibiting in high-level institutions. Learning disabled people face additional barriers in the broader workforce. Despite many learning disabled people desiring employment (Sayce, 2011), in the UK less than a third are in paid work (Powell, 2024). The combined inequalities in the creative workforce and the additional barriers to employment for learning disabled people mean that galleries remain elusive and exclusionary spaces. Beyond a statement of desire, I read Ellison's artistic intervention into these spaces as a gesture of reclamation and reversal. The scrutinous observation required for drawing makes them something knowable, and the application of vivid colour and texture adjusts them to her own tastes. The stark facades, representative of cultural control, are rendered dynamic, energetic, and riotous, destabilising their authority. Ellison's drawings reterritorialise the image of the gallery space by bringing them into her practice.

Ellison's case study suggests that the following are key markers that contribute to her artist identity: being able to express individuality and propose future worlds through art practice; taking pride in and ownership of the work produced; having an interest in developing one's art practice through craftmanship and innovation, experimenting with new materials and accessing high-quality materials and tools; aspiring to professional pathways, including selling work; and a relationship with structures of external validation, such as gallery exhibitions.

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2.4 Sally Hirst

2.4.1 Approach to creative practice

Sally Hirst is an ambitious artist who is interested in textiles, drawing, poetry, and collage. She has attended Venture Arts since 2017 and, at the time of our research engagement, was undertaking several personal projects. Hirst is fully committed to her artistic practice, dedicating much of her available time to developing works. Hirst also uses creative practice to capture, document and process events in her life. For example, she recounted creating a drawing before meeting with a new collaborator as a reminder not to "overthink". Hirst has an ambition to undertake an Art Foundation[19] degree and demonstrates her commitment to professional development by reinvesting any money she makes from commissions back into her practice, for example, to upgrade equipment.

In our opening session, Hirst told me about one of her personal projects: making miniature artworks to place in jam jars and then distributing these in locations around her neighbourhood, inspired by Manchester-based artist Lynda Sterling's *Jam Jar Gallery* (2020) (Figs. 2.13-2.14). Hirst recognised that the jam jars functioned "like an art gallery" that would allow "people to spot it as they walk by" but went beyond engaging with Sterling's project as a spectator and immediately saw the potential to use the format to distribute her own artworks. Like Ellison, Hirst had an enduring desire to exhibit her work, but rather than relying on the gallery system to provide opportunities, she had identified creative solutions to the restrictions of the lockdowns. Hirst was clear in distinguishing her work, "[Sterling] did photography, but I'm doing plastic bag monsters with a weaving background". After seeing the tag provided with Sterling's artworks as an invitation, she also contacted Sterling to let her know about her intervention and seek technical advice. This shows Hirst's active evaluation of the artworks she views in reference to her own creative pursuits and her proactive approach towards networking with other artists.

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[19] An Art Foundation course is a one-year programme that occurs between A-levels and the undergraduate degree. It allows students to experiment with different areas of art, such as fine art, textiles, and graphic design, in order to develop their portfolio and choose an area of specialism. Hirst reports that one of her siblings decided against doing an art degree after their Foundation "because artists don't get paid as much", which supports the discussion earlier in this chapter about experiences of artists' pay.

Figs. 2.13 & 2.14: Sally Hirst, two examples of plastic bag monsters inside jam jars, 2020.

The use of jam jars and outside space reflects Hirst's broader practice interests in sustainability and environmentalism. Hirst consciously selects waste materials and processes them multiple times to get as much use from them as possible, demonstrating her ability to locate creative potential in readily available vernacular materials: "I thought I'd get some cardboard and repurpose it loads and loads of times, as many times as I could. So, I started off using it as a canvas, so I painted on it. And then I used it as a weaving loom. And then, when I finished with it as a weaving loom, I turned it into a mask". In contrast to Ellison's preference for using professional-quality materials, tools, and methods of display, Hirst's approach shows that recycled materials and street audience encounters can equally affirm the artist identity.

Hirst's critical engagement with other artists, artworks, and materials was also observed in a session after Hirst had returned from a trip to Tate Modern in London:[20] "I've just taken photos of the [artworks] that I really liked so I can use them, use them for inspiration on my own pieces". Hirst saw a relationship between the works in Tate Modern and her own ideas. She referenced specific material techniques and how she would modify them to achieve her own practice goals. For Hirst, viewing artworks is not a passive moment of spectatorship but

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[20] This trip occurred during a brief break in the national COVID-19 lockdowns in August 2020.

an active process of critique and assimilation into her own practice. Hirst also makes use of social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, to store and curate her images in a form of online sketchbooking. This method is free and accessible, allowing Hirst to archive and future-proof her images.

During the period of research engagement, Hirst was participating in Future 20 at HOME in Manchester, a professional development programme for regionally-based artists aged 18-25 that resulted in a virtual reality (VR) exhibition exploring climate change.[21] Venture Arts had supported Hirst to attain this opportunity, which brought Hirst into contact with a cohort of non-learning disabled artists in a professional setting where she engaged in collaborative decision-making and a model of mutual support among the cohort. Hirst's intentions for the programme included shifting her sewing practice from everyday mending into a contemporary art context and developing her collaborative experience. Discussing the experience of sharing her practice with the cohort, Hirst pointed to a qualitative difference in engaging with other artists in comparison to the broader public: "I think [it's] just a different experience. Because it's interesting to hear views of people who aren't artists because that's your audience, but like, so you're learning more about your audience, the public. But with an artist, you can share ideas with each other and learn different skills and techniques". Hirst gave the example of a moment of learning during Future 20 after she shared an artwork depicting herself slashing an image of Earth. The cohort responded negatively to the literal interpretation of climate destruction, and Hirst reflected, "I used to worry about making my art really realistic. But it's actually more perfect to make it not perfect. People preferred my more abstract art work than my more realistic work. Like my plastic bag monsters are quite abstract, but everyone loves them". By presenting a range of creative strategies to the group and engaging with feedback, Hirst moved away from the expectation to create 'realistic' and 'perfect' works and developed an appreciation for works that are more subtle and leave the viewer room to develop their own interpretations. Through peer feedback in a traditional 'crit'[22] format, Hirst developed a more nuanced

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[21] The exhibition was presented as VR in response to the pandemic.
[22] The 'crit' format involves sharing art and getting peer feedback. This process is familiar to Fine Art degrees, and artists may continue this tradition in an artist-led format after graduation.

reading of her practice and an appreciation for abstract approaches. This was compounded during a discussion about preparing a portfolio to apply to an Art Foundation course. Hirst expressed surprise that the portfolio could include examples of work that the applicant doesn't like, having expected that a portfolio would prioritise applicants' best pieces. After consideration, Hirst noted that evaluating 'failed' pieces provides an opportunity for critical reflection on the process of making.

Through Future 20, Hirst's artist identity was affirmed by having the opportunity to engage with other artists as a peer through activities such as discussing ideas, sharing skills, and critiquing artworks. This contrasts with the main studio provision at Venture Arts, where learning disabled artists are affirmed by being able to explore their ideas with support, but the peer relationship is complicated by the distinction between facilitator and studio-user. This raises questions about the potential for models of mutual practice development, which this research seeks to explore in Chapters 3 and 4 by reflecting on how my own practice has developed through engagement with the learning disabled artist-participants. Another question raised by Hirst's experience is the potential for critical feedback in supported studios. Future research could explore the quality of critical feedback offered by facilitators and the extent to which this supports learning disabled artists to question and develop their practice.

2.4.2 Experimental and multisensory practice

As the research engagement progressed, Hirst continued to make progress on her artwork in between sessions, demonstrating self-motivation and a non-reliance on outside guidance and support. Hirst evidenced her perseverance and commitment to continual skills development when discussing one of her stitched collages: "I probably made the sky too detailed because it was really tricky, but I did it in the end". In another example, following a wrist injury that prevented her from undertaking some art processes, Hirst identified drawing as a way to continue creating and stay connected to her practice, and used YouTube tutorials to improve her technical skills: "It's not perfect because I'm only practising… I think I need to get a bit better at that, like more practice". Hirst identified another value in watching these videos: "I found [the YouTube tutorials] quite relaxing and

calming… It's just really nice to do them, every now and again. They're just calming".
Introducing the element of mindfulness into her practice balances the formal and
organisationally-driven projects she is working on and shows that creativity is embedded
throughout her life.

Hirst frequently expressed interest in making multi-sensory artworks: "I think if you have
multi-sensory art, it is like you're actually there, so all of your senses are there". She had
reflected on the potential risk of damage associated with audience interaction: "I've thought
quite a lot about that. Because if lots of people touch it, it might damage the work. But I
thought to make that, to think about that, is to have hidden layers. So, when you damage
the work, you reveal another layer of art, which might be quite cool". Rather than
presenting her works as static, finished objects, this strategy allows for interaction and
potential damage to contribute to the artwork rather than detract from it. Works are
understood as evolving over time, enabling each viewer to have a unique experience. This
can be seen in her iterative approach to collages (Fig. 2.15), which began with two layers:
"I'll probably have to experiment ... But then I might try and experiment with more layers as
I get better at it". The focus on experimentation demonstrates a shift away from
perfectionism and towards an incremental process of testing, reflecting, and developing
over time. In early versions, Hirst was less concerned with the choice of materials, and she
considered the results to be "quite boring" but "a good start". Over time, Hirst became
more selective regarding materials, began incorporating an element of storytelling, and
invited family members to interact with the collages so she could gauge their responses.

Fig. 2.15: Sally Hirst, multi-layered collage work in progress, 2020.

Hirst demonstrates familiarity with the sanctified space of the gallery and the rules of engagement usually expected of audiences: "It feels a bit naughty, which I think is part of it. But if you put it on a wall in an art gallery, you wouldn't want to touch it … You have to really be in the moment to enjoy it". Hirst also reflects on new qualities achieved in the process of destruction through engagement, including the sound of the tearing and the resulting textured, distressed look of the piece. This shows Hirst's critical engagement with her practice as she questions the aesthetic look, material quality, level of innovation, and experience of the viewer:

> "I've just thought about different things as I kept doing it… I thought, what could make this better? And I thought about doing lots of different things… But a lot of the time, when I make something, I think of a meaning after I've made it. I don't know why, but it's like a subconscious thing… You start thinking about lots of different things whilst doing it and afterwards. Because when I finish a piece like this, I'll just look, I'll just spend ages just looking at it for a while, and thinking about it."

2.4.3 Accessible and inclusive practice and political art

Hirst's interest in multi-sensory art feeds from her broader interest in making politically engaged work and being disability inclusive. This extends beyond the creation of her works to a consideration of exhibition curation and interpretation. As an example, Hirst shared an easy read version of the Future 20 exhibition interpretation text that she had translated from HOME's original version produced for their contemporary art audience (Fig 2.16): "I thought... the original description was a bit tricky to understand. So, I made my own easy read, which is less jargon... It was quite long and wordy [and contained] no pictures... It was just, I didn't understand it". Hirst's intervention both illuminated and corrected the alienation and linguistic exclusion she felt from HOME's version and made the exhibition more accessible to a wider audience. This example suggests a model of inclusive practice that institutions could replicate when working with learning disabled artists and audiences.
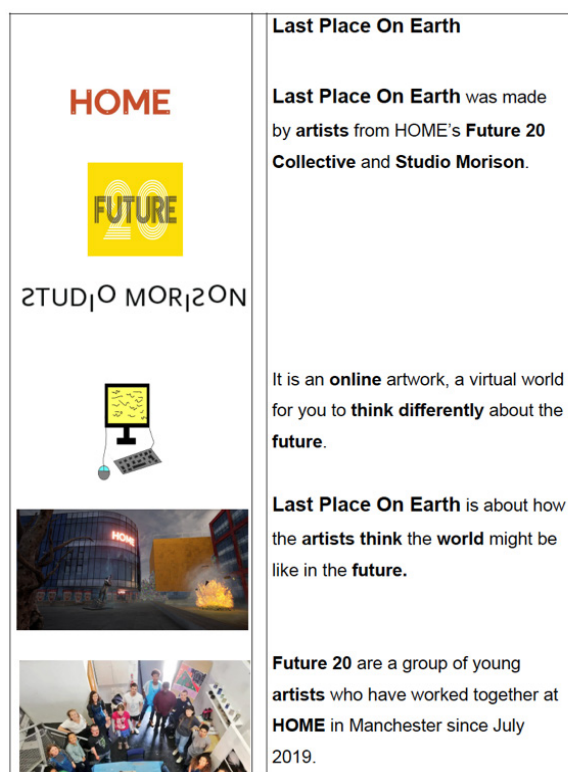
Fig. 2.16: Sally Hirst, page 1 of Hirst's easy read interpretation for Future 20 at HOME, 2020. Image courtesy of the artist.

Discussing this intervention led to a conversation about the political effect of art. Hirst considered it a positive thing for artists to make politically engaged work: "If you have visuals, it's easier to see the problem, and it's easier to make the point… And people are more likely to see it. More likely want to want to see it rather than reading an article on the news. And people might understand it more because it's more visual." Hirst recalled the creative interventions of Black Lives Matter, as well as artworks responding to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, as "more engaging than the news, and easier to understand… I didn't understand certain political things until I saw an art piece about it… When I see art, it just makes sense". Gerald Raunig (2007:19) laments that political art has been "marginalised by structural conservatism in historiography and the art world", yet Hirst's perspective is that art can make politics accessible and support audiences to better understand the world. Hirst also contests the dichotomy of whether the inclusion of politics risks damaging the integrity of art: "If I have strong feelings about something, like it's still, there's still emotion in the art. And I'm not, I've learned to not be literal and it still makes an impact as well. If it's abstract, it doesn't matter… You can still be creative with it, you can still be creative and political at the same time."

Hirst's case study suggests that the following key markers contribute to her identity as an artist: engaging in peer exchange and collaboration with other artists; testing out ideas and experimenting with materials and processes to incrementally develop her practice; viewing and evaluating the work of other artists and incorporating this learning into one's own practice; opportunities for external validation (e.g. from galleries and professional programmes) and to present finished works to an audience; and incorporating materiality and issues encountered in the everyday into the development of practice.

2.5 Louise Hewitt

2.5.1 Clay, socially engaged practice, and relationality

Louise Hewitt's practice encompasses creative writing, poetry, ceramic, and design. Hewitt's prose is personally informed and describes fantastical worlds populated with symbolic creatures. Her ceramic sculptures depict a series of monsters, which provided a theme to explore throughout the research engagement. Before joining Venture Arts in 2018, Hewitt

had undertaken several training courses in subjects including ICT, creative writing, business administration, and customer service. Hewitt had completed a PTLLS-level qualification[23] and was interested in seeking classroom work once pandemic restrictions allowed. She had a volunteer job at a charity shop, but this was halted during the COVID-19 lockdown, so she was using the extra time at home to advance her artistic practice.

Hewitt's interest in pedagogy informed how we related to each other as artists. Hewitt prepared a session to teach me how to make one of her monster sculptures out of clay. Hewitt was professional, organised, and enthusiastic. She expressed a connection to the materiality of clay, describing it as "lively", and showed sensitivity to qualities of the material and its symbolic deployment: "It's like… it's natural stuff, 'cause clay is an earth, is an earthy material. And you feel like you're connected to something, you bring something to life out of it, aren't you?" As I had only limited experience with clay, Hewitt guided me in setting up my space, introduced the tools and materials, and then demonstrated making the monster piece-by-piece while I followed along. Hirst defined terms like 'slip' and 'scoring'[24] as they came up.

Fig. 2.17: Louise Hewitt, demonstration of making a clay monster, 2020.

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[23] PTLLS was the acronym for a qualification titled Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector that was awarded from 2006 to 2018 and aimed at those new to teaching.
[24] Slip is liquid clay. It has multiple uses, including casting, decoration, and joining clay pieces together. Scoring aids adhesion in joins by scraping a criss-cross pattern before applying slip.

There was a generosity in Hewitt's approach that allowed me to let go into the process. Her encouragement made me reflect on the balance of release and control in my work between 2012 and 2019 when my practice was more socially focused (informed by writers such as Kester, 2006; Helguera, 2011; and Matarasso, 2019). The experience of being supported and facilitated by Hewitt presented a moment of role-reversal, flipping the conventional relationship set up in socially engaged or collaborative practices. In this engagement, our inherited positionalities (disabled/able, normative/marginalised, researcher/participant, artist/community) are challenged through a practice engagement. Hewitt confidently took up the role of artist-facilitator, and I shifted into the participant position. In undertaking a self-guided practice and opening this up to a workshop participant (me), Hewitt formed and affirmed her artist identity.

2.5.2 Creative blocks

Hewitt identified a further experience of working with clay: "I still when I'm writing stories, I used to find I'd get writer's block, and I used to find clay used to clear that ... because my mind was stressed out because I was thinking about it too much. It allows your mind to relax a bit… A form of distraction." Hewitt acknowledges experiencing creative blocks and stress as part of the artistic process, but rather than retreating from the source of stress, Hewitt views creative practice as the solution. For Hewitt, shifting between media distracts her from stress and fosters a conducive mindset for creative thoughts to emerge, keeping the artistic process in motion. By proactively approaching issues, Hewitt demonstrates commitment to her practice.

Expanding on her ideas around creative blocks, Hewitt separated her experience into two categories – writer's block and designer's block: "I came up with that myself. I thought, there's writer's block, so if I'm designing something, I've got designer's block." In delineating medium-specific blocks, Hewitt demonstrates a sensitivity to the specificity of different creative processes, suggesting familiarity and expertise. Referring to herself as a designer in relation to the experience of a creative block, the process of identity affirmation is informed by what is absent, as well as what is present. Hewitt knows she is a designer because she experiences designer's block. Hewitt also highlighted the importance of structure to avoid

creative blocks: "I sometimes feel like I could do with a bit of structure, a bit of guidance, and then I can get on with it." Familiar with the student-position from the many training courses she has undertaken, and armed with knowledge about pedagogy from her teacher training, Hewitt requested support from me by setting "homework" for in-between sessions and sending email reminders, formalising our working structure and building in accountability. I expressed a desire to avoid slipping into a teacher/learner relationship, so Hewitt agreed that homework tasks would arise naturally from our discussions rather than being provided solely by me. This shows that Hewitt values a balance of structure and freedom to support the creative process. This corresponds with Arthur Cropley's (2006) research on creativity, which emphasised the role of both divergent and convergent thinking. Hewitt also anticipated and empathised with the potential for me to experience writers block during the writing of this thesis, and compiled several comprehensive documents about her work to provide me with information and inspiration. This further illustrates her desire to facilitate the practice of others.

Furthering the idea of switching processes as a form of distraction when experiencing a creative block, Hewitt also highlights using creativity processes to block out other negative life experiences, including those that originate externally. Reflecting on her experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, Hewitt said: "Well, I've just been focusing on the artwork, really, you know, my textiles, just to just try and block it out, really." Hewitt employs creative practice strategically and productively as temporary relief from the stress of the pandemic, utilising immersion in the creative process as a tool to focus her field of perception and for personal wellbeing.

2.5.3 Demons and personal growth

Hewitt also used creative writing as a route to address stress and blocks in other areas of her life. In her book *The Demon Chronicles* (Hewitt, 2015)*,* she used an array of demons to represent different challenges, such as confidence, fears, and anger, as well as to personify external issues. Examples include the Two-Faced Employers Demon and the Childish Jobcentre Demon. The demons can also be "very useful" to Hewitt who describes that (despite his name) the Angry Demon supports her to process things on her mind by stacking

boulders in baskets. This is Hewitt's metaphor for creating priorities. Hewitt uses symbolic visual language and her creative practice to address challenges and changes in her life. In doing so, she recognises herself as someone who has confronted demons and come out stronger. This shows Hewitt's willingness to be vulnerable in her art practice, and the utilisation of the creative process for personal growth and identity formation.

During the research engagement, Hewitt used her demon poetry to develop her pedagogic practice in a workshop session plan with activities that invite participants to explore their own personal demons. I arranged for Hewitt to deliver this session to a group of artists I work with under the name Proximity Collective.[25] Hewitt grounded the workshop activities in her own creative practice and experiences by including readings of her poetry and reflections on the experience of writing the poetry. This eschewed a purely facilitator/supporter role in the workshop (in support of participants' free creative expression) and allowed Hewitt to retain some authorial connection to the delivery and outcomes of the workshop. She also recognised the participant experience and expressed desire to make the workshop fun, even though it dealt with personal struggles. Hewitt was nervous at the onset of the workshop delivery but quickly settled into it and found it "easy to flow". By opening up her practice to a group of artists from a leadership position, Hewitt had the opportunity to develop confidence as a facilitator, as well as understand the wider resonance of her themes and practice, affirming her artist identity. Hewitt noted that the process of sharing her practice allowed her to foster connections with other people: "It also proves everybody has to face their demons. You're not alone out there, you feel like there's somebody you can connect with, and you can work with, and understand people for who they are and get to know your true self as well". The workshop participants commented that personifying and exploring the character of their demons was a useful exercise in either overcoming or befriending the issue, bringing new personal insights. Their feedback reflected Hewitt's intention for the workshop: "The more you visualise it and carry it in, the more likely you are to face it, [instead of] just put it to the back of your mind and forget about it, which lets it get bigger and bigger". Participants also pointed to the potential for

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[25] Proximity Collective comprises Ann Carragher, Sarah-Joy Ford, Antony Hall, Jackie Haynes, Rebecca Howard, and myself. Hall and Haynes attended the workshop led by Hewitt.

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the workshop to be delivered in places that provoke demons, such as the Job Centre. This highlights the potential for artistic practice to change the relationships between artists and difficult sites or experiences in the world. It suggests a model of artistic practice or creative interventions in non-art spaces that could engender better interpersonal relationships across institutional processes (e.g. Job Centre workers and service users).

Fig. 2.18: Louise Hewitt, slide from a PowerPoint to support workshop participants, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist.

Hewitt's case study suggests that the following are key markers that contribute to her artist identity: engaging with other artists as a peer and facilitator/leader to demonstrate expertise, develop an understanding of the broader resonances and applications of one's practice, foster connection, and shift received positionalities; a symbolic and embodied connection to the chosen materials, processes, and themes of practice; using creative practice to explore and address personal issues and challenges and to develop positive wellbeing; retaining an authorial relationship to practice when delivering participatory activities; opportunities for immersion in the creative process; and having a set of strategies for overcoming creative blocks.

2.6 Emlyn Scott

2.6.1 Artistic expression and political connection

Emlyn Scott's practice includes graphic illustration, painting, and photography. He began attending Venture Arts in February 2020, just before the COVID-19 lockdowns, and was exploring sculpture with clay and cardboard with the support of the facilitators. Scott is driven to share the disabled experience publicly to advocate for social and political change. Scott's politically charged artworks highlight both his personal struggles of living as a disabled person in an ableist world, along with the experiences of others that he has learned about through disability-focused blogs and internet forums. Scott has a comprehensive understanding of different accessibility measures and aims to be inclusive of diverse disabled experiences, including those which often lack representation. In our first session, Scott introduced these themes by sharing examples of his paintings. Fig. 2.19 depicts a man wearing a medical helmet, which Scott created to submit to a magazine produced by Creative Support.[26] On the helmet is the inscription, 'Helmets are a lifeline for some of us, don't knock what you don't understand'. Emlyn directly links this piece to damaging representations seen in popular culture: "Because a lot of the time when I'm out in public, I get called 'retard' and stuff like that. Just for, just for wearing a helmet, and people don't seem to care. They see it on, like, South Park. That's where it came from, the whole abuse and things… Even Family Guy, they did an episode with a medical helmet, and they made it look ridiculous as well. It's just stupid… They don't understand them." By creating a counter-representation grounded in his own experience, Scott uses artistic practice to challenge the cultural representation of access tools.

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[26] Creative Support is a not-for-profit support provider based in Stockport.

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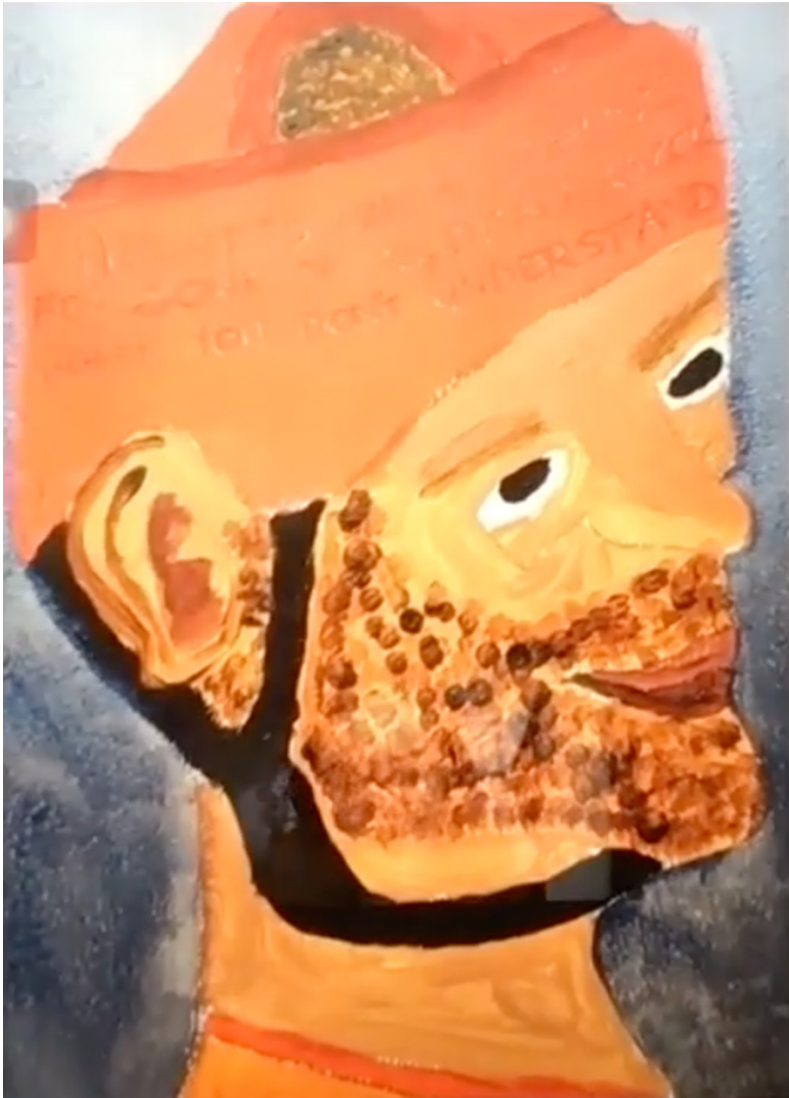
Fig. 2.19: Emlyn Scott, *Man wearing a medical helmet*, date unknown.

When discussing a painting of a dog, Scott refers to making it abstract and not "proper". I asked what he meant by this: "For me, proper is when you do the shading right, the fur looks real, and I couldn't do that. It just, I can never get the colours to go right, the shades right, and the fur right." Scott's expectation of representational realism stemmed from negative feedback he'd received on Facebook, Instagram, and DeviantArt and mirrors testimonies from Ellison and Hirst (though Hirst had since moved away from this position). Scott describes the negative effect this feedback had, making him believe his art was "crap", showing once again the power of one's perception of technical proficiency and craftmanship in the formation of the artist identity. Scott also noted that attending Venture Arts made him begin to believe in himself, highlighting that positive and supportive relationships can

shift self-perception without the actual content of the art practice having to change. Prior to the pandemic, Scott had been selling his art on Shpock, an online marketplace, showing that he had sought out and received external validation through non-art focused platforms, though he stated his biggest ambition was to get into an exhibition.

2.6.2 Insight into Judith Scott

Scott analysed artworks by American artist Judith Scott (1943-2005), who worked at supported studio Creativity Explored, California, USA, in relation to his own experience with institutions and research into disability issues (Fig 2.20). Scott commented on the use of colour and shape and, in relation to a piece that contains several looped and joined appendages, his critical reading drew a relationship to methods of restraint used on disabled people in America. He wondered out loud whether this was part of Judith Scott's experience. This was not a connection I had read in the piece prior to Scott illuminating it to me. Engaging with Scott's reading opened up a new experience of an artist's work that I thought I was already familiar with. Where we are each positioned on the dis/abled binary informs our critical cultural understandings. Engaging as peers, discussing cultural artefacts, brought me into contact with previously unthought perspectives. As I summarised to Scott in the session: "Whether she was thinking that or not, it's opened up a whole avenue for things for us to talk about. That one, one piece of work". My process of becoming-artist – having an enriched visual and symbolic language – was informed by engaging with Scott.

Fig 2.20: Judith Scott, Untitled, 1989. © Creative Growth Art Center. Photo: © Sylvain Deleu.

Available from: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/judith-scott-untitled-7

Scott created a portrait of Judith Scott, which he presented to me as "a surprise". Dedicating a portrait to Judith Scott reflected Scott's empathy and desire to bring attention to learning disabled people and their experiences. Scott had also undertaken research into Judith Scott's life, and told me that, during her time in an institution, Judith Scott had her crayons taken away and was told she could not draw. Scott wondered whether this influenced her choice to work with fibre and sculptural forms instead of drawing and painting. Scott also related Judith Scott's experience with institutions to his own, again positioning Venture Arts in opposition to this, emphasising the societal and environmental factors influencing creative potential. The support of Venture Arts opens up potentiality for everyone who inhabits the space. Reflecting on Judith Scott's incredible legacy, Scott says: "I thought it will make her, show her in a happy way. Whether she was happy or not, I don't know. But you know, I thought to make it, make the picture the best as I could". Through this gesture of connection through practice, Scott associated himself with the rich history of learning disability culture. This illustration of Scott's practice and critical engagement with art objects demonstrates his assimilation of research and subjectivity, and his identification through artistic practice: Scott is an artist who made art depicting an artist.

Fig. 2.21: Emlyn Scott, *Portrait of Judith Scott*, 2020.

2.6.3 Political Posters

Over the research engagement, Scott shared a number of artworks he had made previously and developed new ones that we grouped together under the title *Political Posters*. Scott's art serves not only as a personal expression but also as a medium to raise awareness about disability issues, highlighting the potential of artistic practice in advocating for societal change. Through creating the posters, Scott uses art practice to develop connection to other disabled experiences. The *Political Posters* collection depicted experiences of disability, barriers, and injustice through painting and graphic illustration. While Maguire, Ellison, Hewitt, and Hirst all deployed their practice to imagine other worlds, Scott's *Political Posters* are very much grounded in the world we are in now.
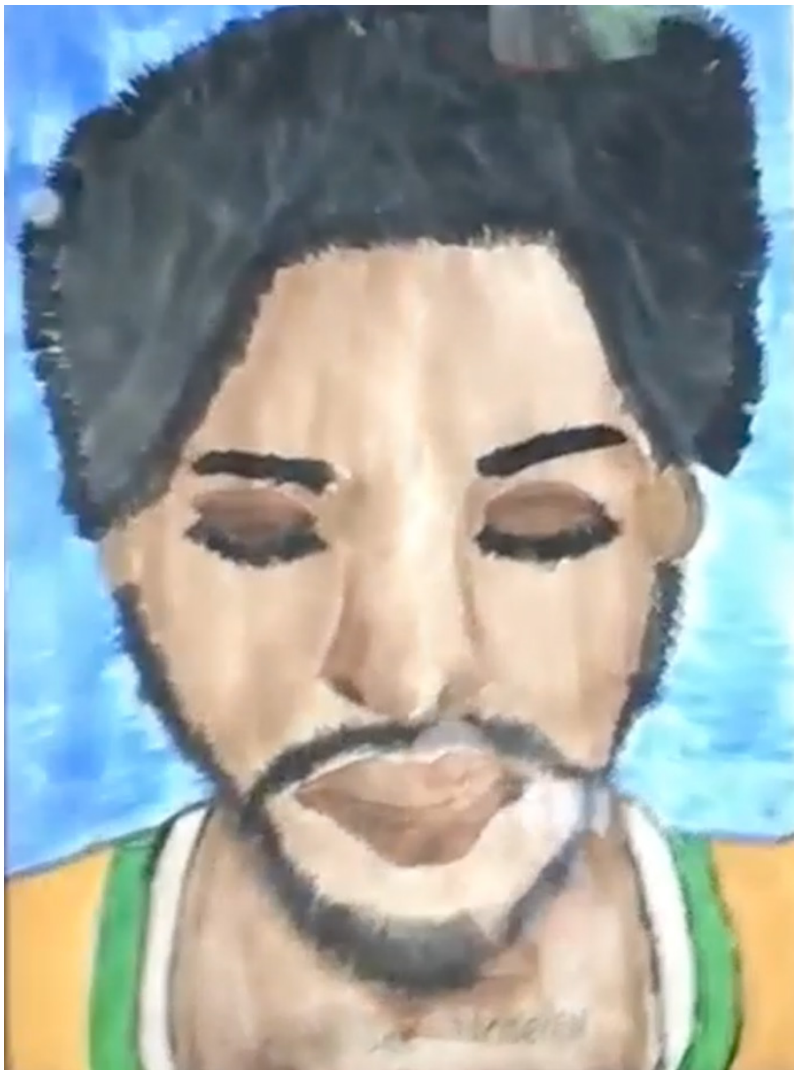
Fig. 2.22: Emlyn Scott, *Learning disabled man on death row*, date unknown.

Fig. 2.22 is an example of Scott's willingness to engage with difficult issues. The person depicted was on death row for a violent crime, but Scott argued that his learning disability was not considered in his institutional treatment. Advocating for even the most vulnerable, Scott demonstrates the inclusive nature of his representation. Scott described the reception of this image when he shared it online, saying some people saw it as supporting the crime committed by the person depicted. He refuted this and made an appeal to humanity: "That's what a lot of people have looked at, they don't seem to look at it. Like, he was a guy with LD[27] who should have gone to an LD service, you know, a forensic LD hospital, not a prison where they would take advantage of him." By creating and sharing this poster, Scott highlighted where disability support is applied unevenly, and dignity and humanity is challenged at the intersections and margins. Scott's practice brushes up against the more uncomfortable parts of disability rights and representation.
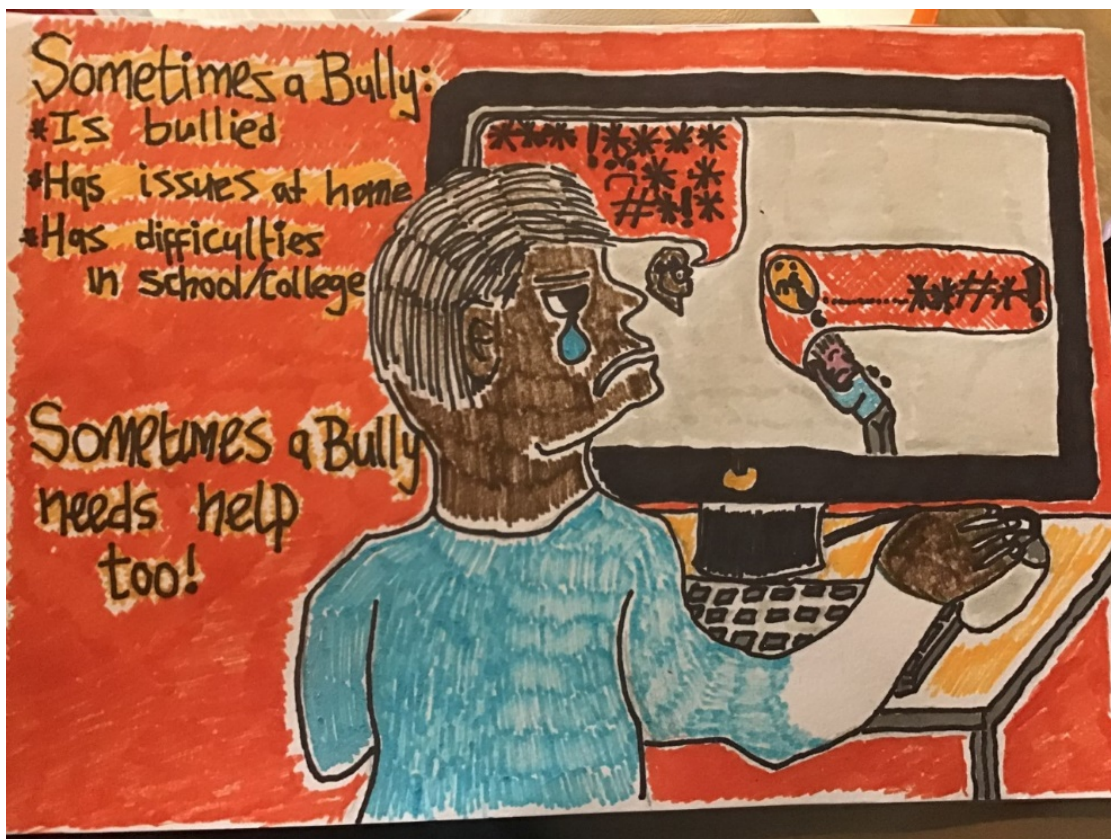
Fig. 2.23: Emlyn Scott, *Sometimes a Bully*, 2021.

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[27] LD is an abbreviation of learning disabled. This is a direct quote from Scott.
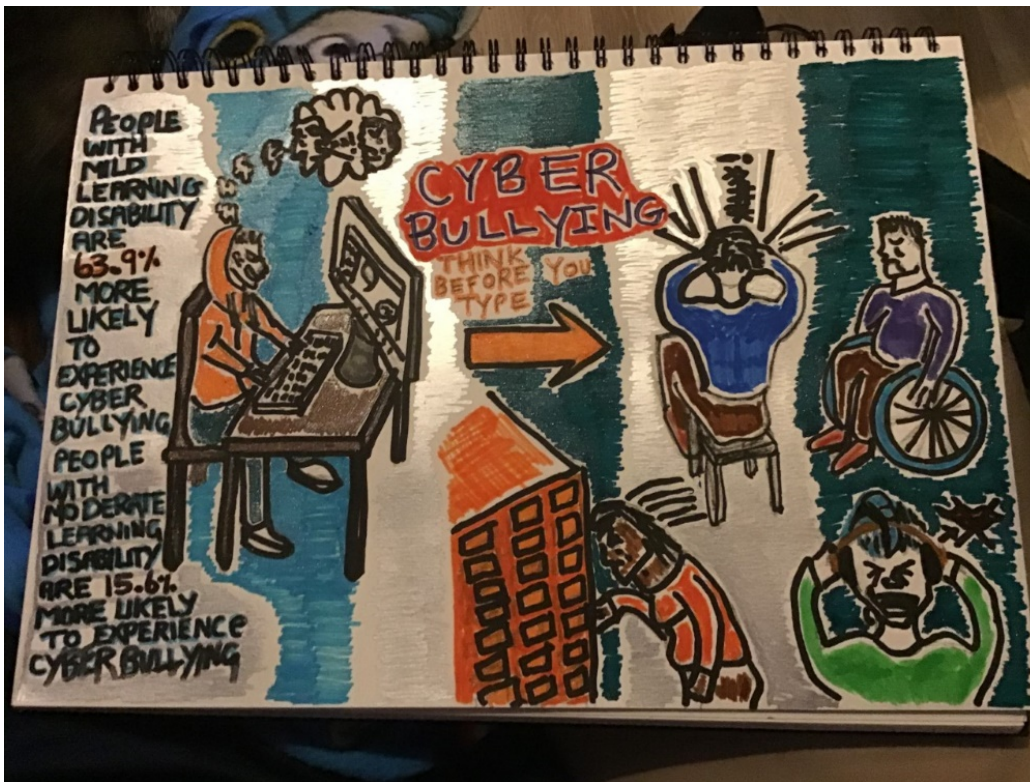
Fig. 2.24: Emlyn Scott, *Cyber Bullying*, 2021.

Fig. 2.25: Emlyn Scott, *Communication Barriers in Society*, 2020.

Fig. 2.26: Emlyn Scott, *Representation in games*, 2021.

Figures 2.23-2.26 exemplify the range of issues and the inclusive nature of the figures represented in Scott's work, from detailed consideration of situations and tableaux-like compositions (Figs. 2.24-2.25) to utilising taglines and statistics, referencing awareness campaign posters or protest placards (Figs. 2.23 & 2.26) that demonstrate areas of inequality that learning disabled people experience. *Communication Barriers in Society* (2020) (Fig. 2.25) utilises icons and symbols that appear instructional, embedding the aesthetic of easy read, making a piece about communication as accessible as possible. Single

characters are also depicted in order to talk about a particular issue (Figs. 2.23 & 2.26). This range of approaches demonstrates Scott's ability to appraise situations from multiple perspectives, apply a disability lens to his critical interpretations, and communicate through practice with an imagined viewer. This suggests a flexible and fluid subjectivity, through which Scott can imagine other positionalities and develop the self in conversation with those positionalities. Scott summarises the body of work:

> "So I did this, *Political Posters*, I've been doing it anyway for a long, quite a while. And it's always interested me to do about activism, anything around that area. And I'd like people to, yeah, just to know that I like to see things from different areas and not just my own view.

Fig. 2.27: Emlyn Scott, *Meltdown*, 2021.

Scott depicted another aspect of his experience as a disabled person by sharing an image of the experience of a meltdown (Fig. 2.27). Appearing without interpretation as an abstract painting focusing on shape and movement, Scott explained that the perspective shows a

figure from above, with a barrier of energetic brushstrokes between the person and the world: "If you notice, the reds and the greens, it's about the block that, between you and reality, when you have a meltdown." This depiction moves the focus from external barriers and onto the psycho-emotional effects of disability. While inaccessible environments and negative social relationships can lead to a meltdown, the framing of the image shows the effect of this concentrated in the individual. Living in a disabling world affects the self-concept of disabled people, as the weight of the status quo bares down, moving barriers from the external to the internal as subjectivity adopts ideas and then reproduces them. This work brings me into empathy with Scott, because of my mental health experience. As discussed in the case studies of Hewitt and Maguire, Scott was another artist-participant who made me consider including my subjectivity and personal experiences more within my practice. Scott's strong political and personal connection to his work underscores the emotional and communicative motivators of artistic practice. His desire to represent his personal experiences, connect with other disabled experiences, and utilise his practice as a vehicle for disabled advocacy provided him with material for continued practice development and affirmed his artist identity.

Emlyn Scott's case study suggests the following are key markers that contribute to his artist identity: an exploration of the intersection of personal and political issues; utilising art practice to raise awareness about issues and challenge representations, holding a mirror up to the world; being able to be vulnerable with art practice and letting go of hang-ups around 'representative realism'; having access to supportive environments and relationships; and opportunities to engage with different perspectives through art making to engender rich new understandings, foster connection, and connect to cultural heritage.

2.7 Chapter insights

This chapter outlines the research artist-participants' experience of and feelings about artist identity in relation to their art practice. The research process sought to identify moments where that identity was affirmed or challenged in order to elucidate the process of becoming or being an artist and any specific barriers the artist-participants faced due to learning disability. All of the artist-participants have an artist identity. For Ellison, Hewitt,

and Hirst, the artist identity is firmly held, while for Maguire and Scott, the artist identity is in formation in response to shifting personal and socio-cultural contexts. Analysis of the experiences the artist-participants described in their testimonies and artworks highlights the importance of both internal and external factors, as well engagement with art practice, in fostering the artist identity. Findings are grouped below under the subheadings: 'personal insights', 'practice insights', and 'relational insights'.

2.7.1 Personal insights

A desire to utilise art practice as an opportunity to explore and express personal identity was particularly evident in the research engagement. Maguire used symbols to connect herself to subcultures of interest and autobiographic writing to appraise her developing independence. Hewitt's art practice illuminated and processed personal issues, some of which were related to her disabled experience, and linked these to renewed understandings of the self. Scott consciously recognised and enriched his identity as a disabled person through art practice and connected to the history of learning disabled culture and the disability rights movement. Hewitt and Scott also presented a willingness to be vulnerable through work that engaged with profoundly personal experiences. Scott dealt with subject-positions that engender negative reactions, including themes of bullying and capital punishment. The challenging aspects of mental health struggles and psycho-emotional effects of living in a disabling world were shared openly; this fostered connection between these artist-participants and myself and led me to question aspects of my own artistic practice that will be explored further in Chapter 3.

Hirst and Hewitt also described using the creative process to enhance wellbeing, through an immersive or mindful approach to making. Hewitt described a strategy of task-switching to overcome creative blocks, while Hirst followed YouTube drawing tutorials for their calming effect while dealing with an injury that prevented her engagement with other processes. The artist-participants understood art practice as an outlet that goes beyond professional aspirations. As a result, their artist identity is connected with the enmeshment of art practice and everyday life experiences.

2.7.2 Practice insights

Hirst's and Scott's art practice was presented as a method of advocacy and awareness-raising for broader political issues, going beyond an internally-focused process. In creating representations of the disabled experience, Scott demonstrated how historical, social, and cultural issues have informed his subjectivity. While Scott's *Political Posters* were grounded in his research into disability issues and statistics, Maguire, Ellison, and Hirst deployed their practice to propose future or alternative worlds. For Maguire, this was focused on her self-development and personal aspirations, while Ellison and Hirst created visions that challenge the status-quo of the gallery system and climate breakdown. A proliferation of potential futures was explored through engagement with the artist-participants' perspectives, while Scott's critical reading of Judith Scott opened up new ways of understanding another artist's work.

All of the artist-participants had an interest in experimenting with a range of materials and processes. Ellison was fearless in taking up a new material and connected her artist identity to a preference for high-quality materials and tools and a willingness to treat these with care. Hirst was developing an approach of incremental experimentation and reflection, as well as critical reflection on failure. The use of household waste embedded Hirst's artist identity in everyday materiality. Hewitt reflected on her embodied and symbolic use of clay, and by leading workshops for others she demonstrated her material and thematic expertise. Hewitt also abridged the idea of free experimentation by saying that structure, accountability, and clear goals prevented her from experiencing overwhelm and creative blocks. The self-perception of drawing ability and a connection between artistic expertise and representative realism was salient for Maguire, Ellison, and Scott. This highlights a push-and-pull between realism and expression, which is differently weighted in the UK national curriculum than in art schools and supported studios. Each of these artist-participants reappraised this idea in the context of the research engagement with a non-learning disabled artist-supporter, which shows how environmental and relational factors inform the development of the artist identity.

2.7.3 Relational insights

Ellison, Hewitt, Hirst, and Scott stated their professional aspirations, including seeking opportunities to exhibit and sell work, engage with other artists as peers, and facilitate workshops. This shows that external validation, for example, from galleries and audiences, is important in the development of an artist identity. Ellison took a highly independent approach to her work with a desire to engage with high-level institutions such as The Whitworth and Manchester Art Gallery. The research engagement identified a gap between the creation of works and the creation of exhibitions. To address the lack of experience towards exhibiting work, supported studios and galleries could offer accessible professional development programmes that support learning disabled artists to exhibit their own work, by covering topics such as preparing work (printing, framing, staging, etc.), curation, and writing interpretation. The consultation of learning disabled artists in the development of their own exhibitions would positively inform the developing artist identity by creating opportunities to expand artistic skills and enhance the quality of representation, enabling them to figuratively and literally take control of the framing of their own work.

Opportunities for collaboration and peer engagement with other artists were valued as these provided artist-participants with a platform for skills development, as well as providing critical insights into their own and others' practice. While the supported studio model brings learning disabled artists into contact with professional artist-facilitators to develop art practice, it was noted that the opportunity to engage with other artists on the level of a peer, collaborator, or leader supported the development of artist identity and shifted the power dynamics for learning disabled artists as members of a community that goes beyond their socially and culturally inscribed identity as disabled.

At moments, there was evidence of conflict (or perception of conflict) between individual and external expectations. Examples included a drawing being thrown away by a caregiver, keeping a digital drawing process hidden from an artist-facilitator, and the inaccessible art-speak of exhibition interpretation and the requirements of application for Higher Education. These examples show how negative experiences with those in the position to support can affect the artist identity. Braidotti's (2013a:100) call for a "collectively shared, community-

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based praxis" asks us to reconsider relationalities for an "accountable recomposition of a missing people". These examples from the research engagement also revealed the flexibility of mind and creative workarounds of learning disabled artists.

As the research engagement took place during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, I was not able to empirically research the artist-participants' relationship to the Venture Arts studio.[28] However, all artist-participants commented on the enabling environment of Venture Arts and how this had positively informed their confidence as artists by affirming the value of their work. Maguire also highlighted the value of a private space to bring focused time and attention to her practice, while Hewitt pointed to immersion in process and the need to block out external distractions. All of the artist-participants made use of their home spaces to continue their practice in between sessions and did not see their practice as being contained within the formal structure of the research engagement. This suggests that achieving a balance between social interaction and working in solitude supports the development of practice and the artist identity.

2.7.4 Summary of insights

The potential for art practice to be a vehicle for personal identity exploration and expression, a conduit for improved wellbeing, a route through which to connect to others, a professional aspiration, and a channel linking the individual to historical and contemporary social and cultural issues was evident across the research engagement. The development of an artist identity in learning disabled artists can be connected to one or all of these potentials, therefore these key markers should be considered in any model of support for learning disabled artists. Supportive and affirming relationalities were paramount in the developing artist identity, especially in the disruption of power dynamics when the expectations of learning disabled artists differ from those of their supporters. Opportunities for immersion in process, experimentation, and critical reflection (including failure), which may sometimes be undertaken privately, were also valued, highlighting that these aspects

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[28] My preliminary study in the Venture Arts studio between November 2019 and March 2020 (Atkinson, 2020) is discussed in Section 1.4.1.

of art practice inform artist identity. Engagement with other artists as peers and in a leadership position further strengthened the artist identity.

A key finding of the research engagement is the identification of shifting subject positions through attempts to trace the boundary between self and other, highlighting a flexible approach to identity formation, shaped by context, relationships, and personal development. The following chapter explores further how this process of engagement with learning disabled artists has altered my own self-concept as an artist and practice development.

Chapter 3: A practice response to learnings from the learning disabled artist-participants

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter established the artist-participants' approach to art practice and relationship to artist identity through their testimonies and examples of their artworks encountered during the research engagement. Also noted were moments where the artist-participants' artist identities shifted through relationality with others. This chapter will draw out how my extended engagement with learning disabled artists has altered my own self-concept as an artist and developed my practice and practice research. It tracks the iterative art making process and the "gradual, cyclical speculation, realisation or revelation leading to momentary, contingent degrees of understanding" (Gibson quoted in Candy, 2006). In considering how I have been changed by engagement, I approach my artist identity through the lens of nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 1994, 2013a). As someone not positioned as learning disabled, this chapter also follows the critical disability studies refocus on 'the abled' (Campbell, 2008a; 2008b; 2009)[29]. The research materials comprise examples of artworks, excerpts from my reflective journals, and reflections on the process of making. As an artist, I began the research working in the mode of socially engaged and inclusive practices (Chapter 1.2.4). As shown in Chapter 2, the participatory research engagement identified that material handling, experimental process, incorporation of personal experiences and vulnerability, and relationship to space were significant in the artist-participants' work. By critically revisiting my own practice and adopting these learnings from the artist-participants, I seek to avoid appropriating their artworks, instead positioning them as peer-artists from whom I have learned and gained insights into my own artist identity and practice.

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[29] While my mental health condition discussed in 1.4.3 and this chapter is salient, it is important to recognise that different structural conditions impact the research artist-participants and myself differently. "Everyone may be impaired, but not everyone is oppressed" (Shakespeare, 2014:87-8).

Artworks in this chapter include drawing, collage, text-based works, and installation and represent a studio-based practice. Works were selected that best illustrate moments where my artist identity went through "sustainable shifts" (Braidotti, 2005/2006:unpag.), entering into new subjective artist becomings. Also selected are works that illuminate learnings from the artist-participants in relation to materials, processes, or concepts. Practice research was tied to particular moments in the research journey, especially late 2019 and mid-2021 onwards. The period of interruption was an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, and reflects the non-linear nature of practice development and artist subjective becomings. Some of the works were in production simultaneously, and some of the themes of earlier works were returned to in later works. Works are presented in chronological order to demonstrate my changing perspective as the research developed, except in the case of text-based works, which are grouped thematically. Images of works appear before their discussion. The key markers I have identified for my practice include processing the problems of language through practice, playful remixing, following the traces of practice, claiming private space, taking materials from life, accessing vulnerability, immersion and personal references, and accessing expertise and professional resources. I have presented this chapter under these key markers as subheadings.

3.2 Processing the problems of language through practice

In Chapter 1, I traced the breakdown of categorical distinctions between different areas of artistic practice and referenced learning disabled people's rejection of the disabled identity (Goodley, 2000; McVittie et al., 2008; Taylor, 1996). This rejection was also observed in Maguire's case study. Labelling and categorisation are antithetical to a nomadic subjective approach that recognises fluidity and relational becomings. Prioritising language is also problematic when working with learning disabled people, for whom speech and writing may not be salient forms of communication. The problem of the potentially inaccessible language of this thesis is one I struggled with throughout the research journey because it fails to adhere to the disability rights adage of 'nothing about us without us'. Though I recognise Jan Walmsley's argument that learning disabled people "are just too important to be left entangled in a marsh of political correctness" (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003:16) and intend for this thesis to be ultimately of use to the artist-participants and their

contemporaries, the issue of language and labelling was keenly felt throughout the research (Goodley, 2018) as I attempted to avoid the cultural normativity that places a value judgment on non-normative approaches to language (Marks, 1999; Goodley, 2011). I sought to address this concern through practice research as a method that brings attention to other materials and modes of communication.

The challenge of the thesis for presenting the research was the focus of early works made alongside learning disabled artists in the Venture Arts studio (November to December, 2019; discussed in 1.4.2). The following series of works titled *Theses* (2019) (Figs. 3.1-3.6) are the results of exploring these issues through material experimentation. These works and others using text made later can be read alongside Hirst's endeavour to demystify the art-speak of the HOME exhibition interpretation outlined in 2.4.3 as different approaches that highlight the inaccessibility of language when working with learning disabled people. While the problem of language does not really go away, I have become more comfortable in my shifting position from facilitator to peer-artist, which happened because of the research engagement and the hours invested in it.
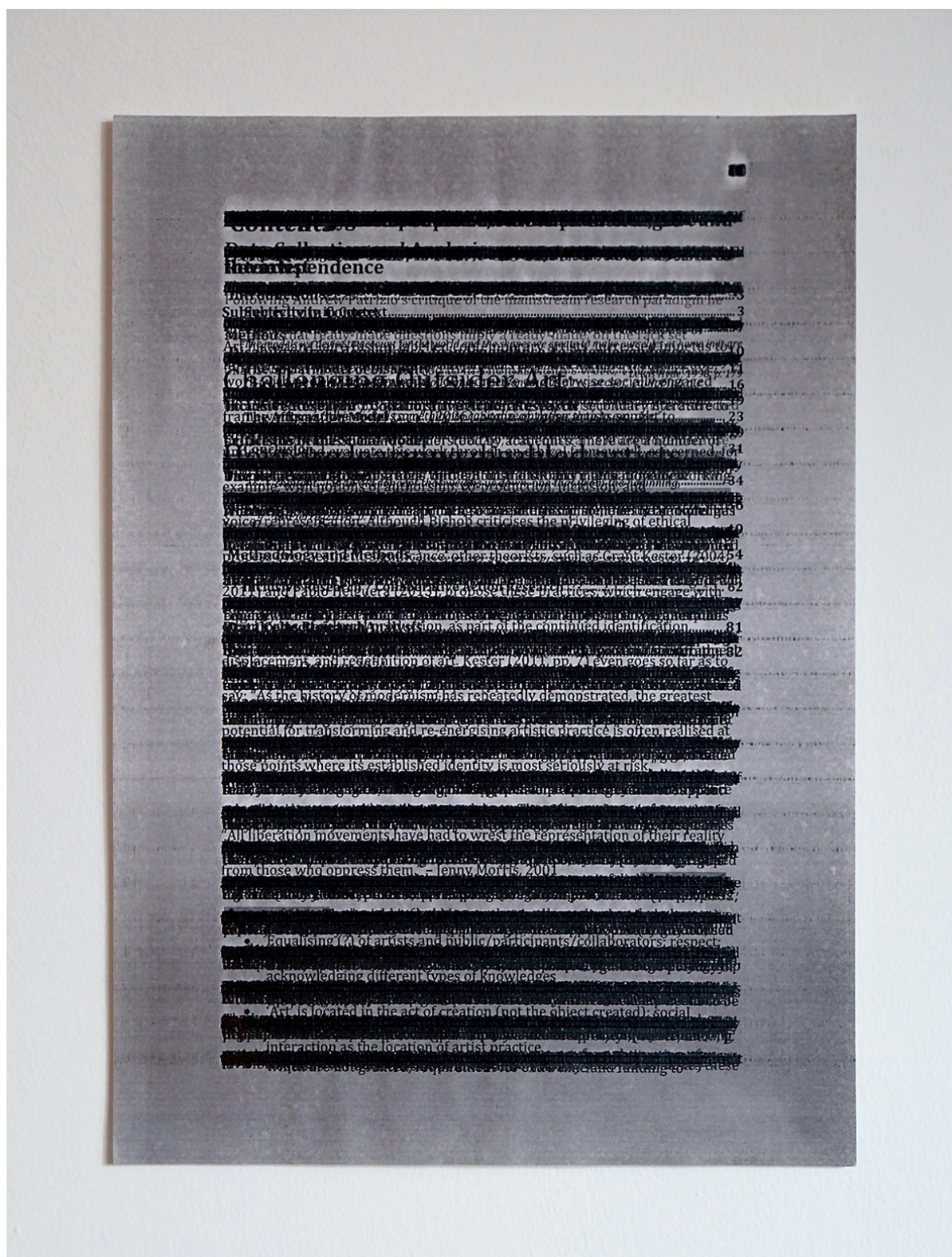
Fig. 3.1: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Theses - Print*, 2019.

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Fig. 3.2: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Theses - Print*, 2019, detail.
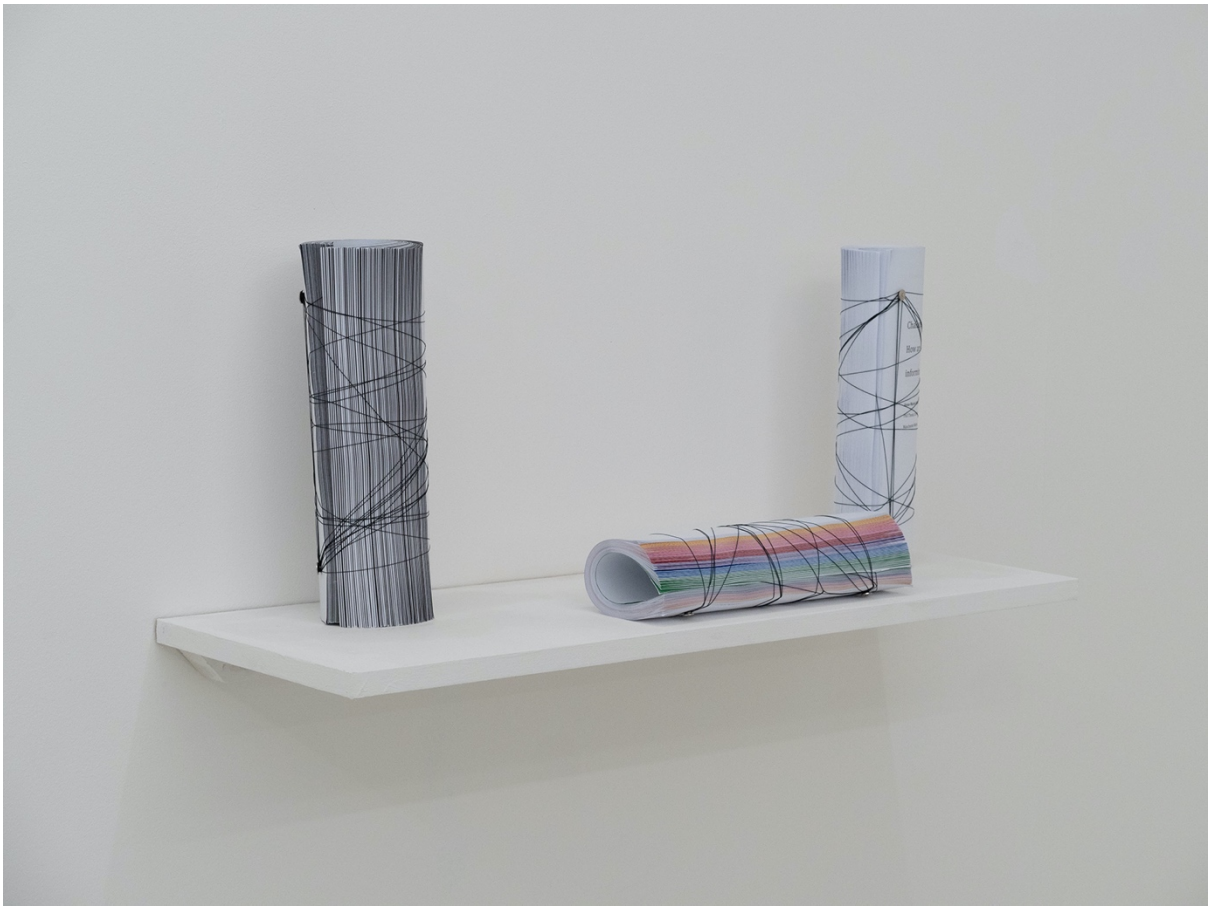
Fig. 3.3: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Theses - Bound 1*, 2019, installed at Paradise Works, December 2019. Image courtesy of Anya Stewart.

Fig. 3.4: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Theses - Bound 2*, 2019, installed at Paradise Works, December 2019. Image courtesy of Anya Stewart.
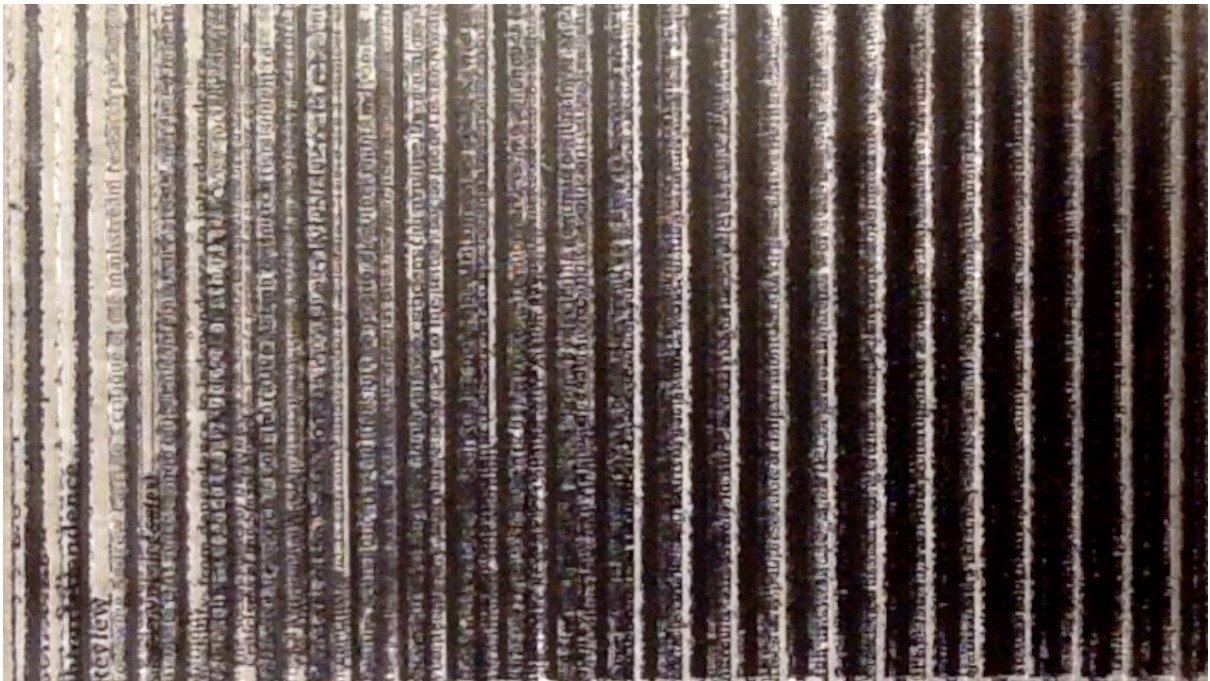
Fig. 3.5: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Theses - Film 1*, 2019, still from film.
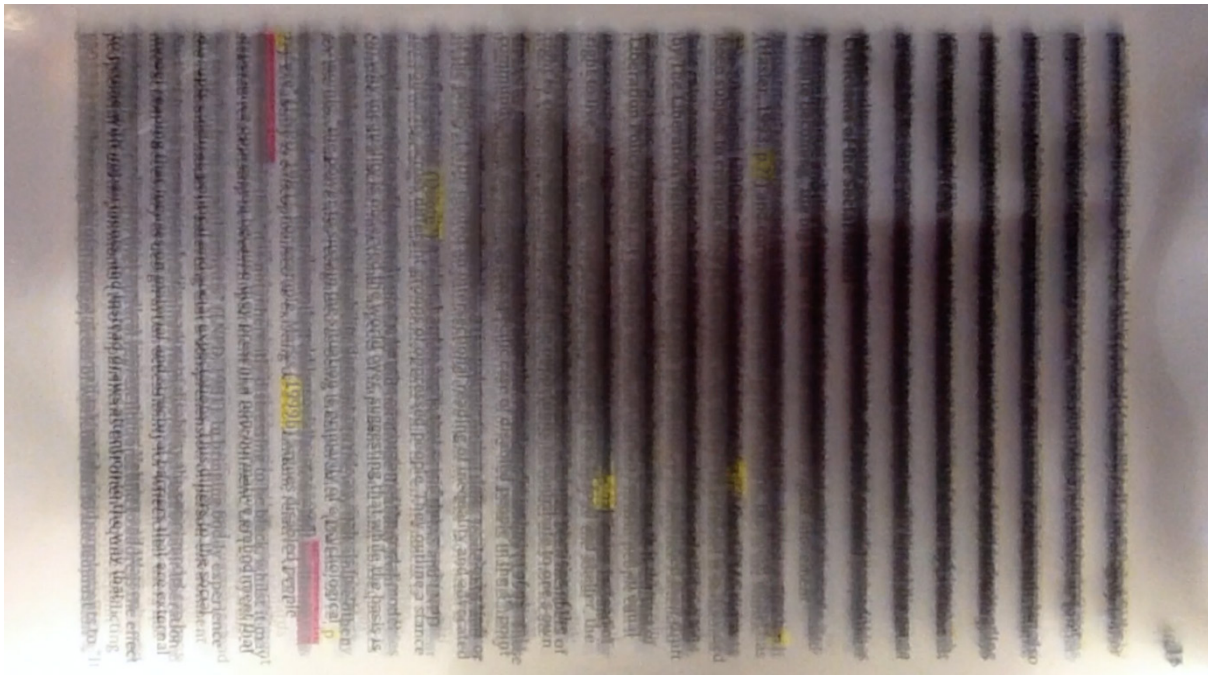
Fig. 3.6: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Theses - Film 2*, 2019, still from film.

The works comprising *Theses* (2019) took my draft thesis text as material. I treated these experiments as an opportunity to approach text as form and introduce it to the space of encounter, reducing the separation between encountering, making, and writing. *Theses - Print* (2019) (Fig. 3.1) was made by printing my thesis text on a single sheet of A4 paper that was continually reloaded into the printer. Fig. 3.2 is a detail of *Theses - Print* (2019) (Fig. 3.1), showing the build-up of ink becoming textured and glossy, calling attention to the surface of the print and the material qualities of printer ink. *Theses - Bound 1* (2019) (Fig. 3.3) is three objects made by interleaving copies of the text with different materials (black card, white tissue, and multicoloured cellophane) and binding them closed with bookbinding thread. *Theses - Bound 2* (2019) (Fig. 3.4) was made by printing the text onto clear acetate and binding it on both sides with binding rings. *Theses - Film 1* (2019) (Fig. 3.5) is a looped film[30] made by manually manipulating a photocopy of *Theses - Print* (2019) (Fig. 3.1) on acetate, placed on top of the original. *Theses - Film 2* (2019) (Fig. 3.6) is a looped film[31] made using stop motion animation, with each frame adding a page of *Theses – Bound*

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[30] *Theses - Film 1* (2019) can be viewed here: https://vimeo.com/390973622
[31] *Theses - Film 2* (2019) can be viewed here: https://vimeo.com/400629439

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2 (Fig. 3.4) (prior to it being bound) on top of the last. From the form of layered text emerged strong vertical lines that became horizontal when rotated for the screen, making me think of the bars of a jail cell. In all works in the series, words pile up to the point of obliteration. The totality of the thesis information is contained, but it is obscured and made inaccessible, hinting at itself and then receding. These works undercut the text, trouble its primacy and perceived power, and show that single words and sentences belie the layers and layers of meaning they hold, teasing at meaning while ultimately remaining illegible. In *Theses - Film 1* (2019) (Fig. 3.5), the images nearly line up before shifting out of sync again, never reaching a resolution, and both that work and *Theses - Film 2* (2019) (Fig. 3.6) are looped films that can play indefinitely. In the *Theses* (2019) series, I created visual objects and films that could be accessed equally by both learning disabled people and non-learning disabled people. The authority of language is challenged through its use and refusal.

During the participatory research engagement, a change in emphasis on speech and screen-viewing was necessitated by the Zoom platform. The quality of the session recordings and ineffectiveness of transcription software when dealing with the speech of learning disabled people added further complications to the research centred around language. Accordingly, this theme was returned to in further works.

Fig. 3.7: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Tectonic Fieldnotes*, 2020. (Atkinson, 2020).

Fig. 3.8: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Research Voice (after Ellison)*, 2021.

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Tectonic Fieldnotes (2020) (Fig. 3.7) (Atkinson, 2020) and *Research Voice (after Ellison)* (2021) (Fig. 3.8) are examples of works where I processed fieldnotes into images to disrupt the linearity of language. The fieldnotes in *Tectonic Fieldnotes* (2020) (Fig. 3.7) record my experience in the Venture Arts studio during the preliminary study (discussed in 1.4.1; Atkinson, 2020), and the fieldnotes in *Research Voice (after Ellison)* (2021) (Fig. 3.8) discussed what it was like to meet over Zoom, the loss of in-person communication cues, and the ongoing difficulty of language, labelling, and 'speaking for' the artist-participants in the thesis. By continuing to work with the fieldnotes I sought to "destabilise … inherited meanings" (Nagar, 2018:22) and treat these issues as moveable parts that could be reworked. In *Research Voice (after Ellison)* (2021) (Fig. 3.8), I traced over one of Ellison's gallery drawings to apply the institutional critique of her series to the researcher voice, challenging the idea of a stable and unitary position from which I speak.

Fig. 3.9: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Manifesto-No*, 2020, installed in Assembly House, Leeds, September 2023. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

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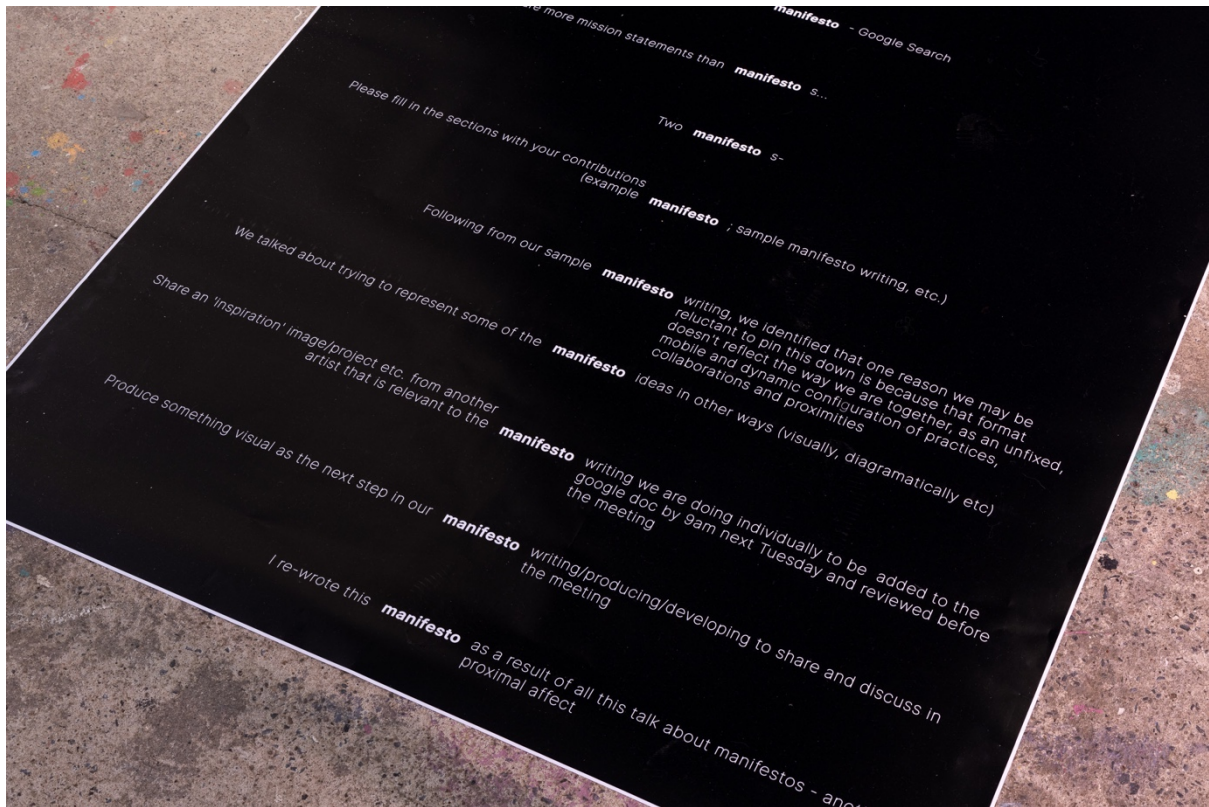
Fig. 3.10: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Manifesto-No*, 2020, detail, installed at Assembly House, Leeds, September 2023. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

I applied this approach to written language to another body of text generated with Proximity Collective (introduced in 2.5.3). In 2020, Proximity was attempting to write a shared manifesto that would communicate what brought us together to external audiences. We undertook several activities, including freewriting and analysis of other artist collectives' manifestos, and produced several drafts. Writing towards a manifesto was experienced like a continual circling around the point or momentarily drawing closer, only to ricochet in another direction when new information was introduced. Reflecting on this experience, we noted that our collective process was contained in the act of writing the texts, and not in the texts themselves. Following this realisation, I took each instance of the word 'manifesto' from our WhatsApp group chat and lined the corresponding sentences on top of one another, with the word 'manifesto' in a central column, reminiscent of a spine. The text is conversational and instructive in places and brings together the individual voices of all six members of the collective. The *Manifesto-No* (2020) (Figs. 3.9-3.10) both performs as a manifesto that demonstrates our collective process and refuses rigidity or the closing of a

conversation into a 'final draft'. It captures the fluidity of collective working and an approach that we define as 'convivial aesthetics' without being contrived or prioritising legibility for external audiences, funders, etc., resisting the institutional drive to define.
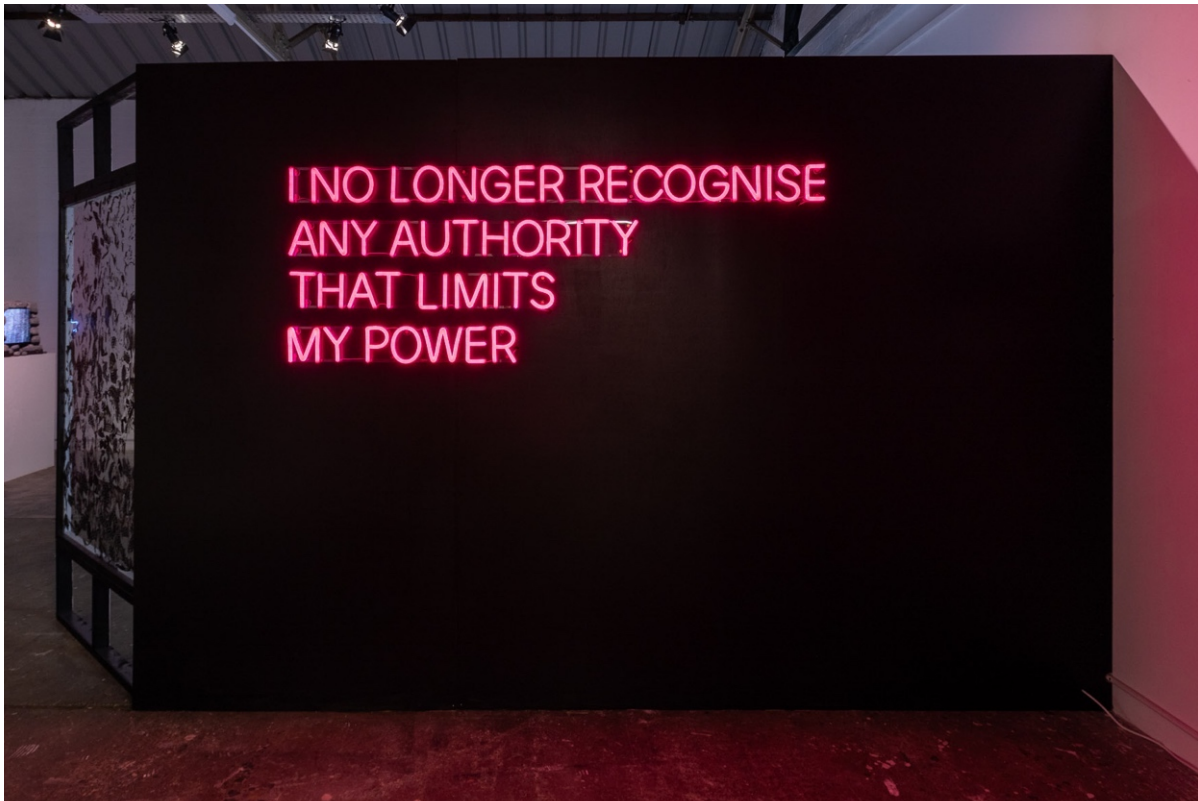
Fig. 3.11: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *I no longer recognise any authority that limits my power*, 2023, installed at Assembly House, Leeds, September 2023. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

I no longer recognise any authority that limits my power

I do not recognise any authority that limits my power

I no longer/do not **acknowledge** any authority that limits my power

I no longer/do not recognise any **system** that limits my power

I no longer/do not recognise any system **which** limits my power?

I no longer/do not **accept** any system that/which limits my power

I reject any authority/system that/which limits my power

I wish to not participate in any authority/system that/which limits my power

I refuse any authority/system that/which limits my power

I spit on/shit on any authority/system that/which limits my power

I (pour) scorn on any authority/system that/which limits my power

I spurn any authority/system that/which limits my power

I deny any authority/system that/which limits my power

I disavow any authority/system that/which limits my power

I dismiss any authority/system that/which limits my power

I dispermit? any authority/system that/which limits my power

I abandon any authority/system that/which limits my power

I cannot abide any authority/system that/which limits my power

I castoff

I discard

I scrap

I rebuff

I decline

I snub

I disallow

I repudiate

I disclaim

I renounce

I rebut

I retract from

I withdraw from

I recant

I rescind

I revoke

I cancel

I repeal

I annul

I quash

I void

I retract

I overturn

I disprove

I invalidate

I undermine

I refute

I abrogate

I countermand

I discredit

I disown

I forswear

I give up

We?

Fig. 3.12: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *The revolution will not be made in the first draft*, 2023.

Fig. 3.13: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *The revolution will not be made in the first draft*, 2023, installed at Assembly House, Leeds, September 2023. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

The problem of language comes down to a problem of power relations. This was addressed most explicitly in two paired works: *I no longer recognise any authority that limits my power* (2023) (Fig. 3.11) and *The revolution will not be made in the first draft* (2023) (Fig 3.12-3.13). The thought behind these works was initiated in 2019 as I grappled with the issues of language and power while I worked alongside learning disabled artists in the Venture Arts studio, but they were not fabricated until 2023. *I no longer recognise any authority that limits my power* (2023) (Fig. 3.11) presents a strong, sloganistic statement that rebukes external forces of power that limit subjective becoming. It was fabricated in hot pink LED neon and exhibited against a black wall with a satin finish that both provides contrast and reflects the glow of the neon. The companion work, *The revolution will not be made in the first draft* (2023) (Fig 3.12-3.13), undercuts the initial statement and creates uncertainty by presenting a long list of alternative phrasing. This text was taken directly from my sketchbook where I grappled with the 'right' way to make the statement. By subverting the

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logic of the initial statement, the pair of words eschew performative activism by presenting nuance and difficulty in arriving at firm conclusions. The companion works oscillate between the different urges to state, bind, pin down, make plausible; and ruminate, undo, release, make questionable. When these works were exhibited in September 2023 (discussed in section 3.4) they were installed opposite one another in direct conversation. Pairing work is something I return to in 3.3.5; rather than considering works as separate entities, they co-constitute each other, entering into shared community, interdependence, intra-action, and mutual becoming, reflecting the broader research concerns.
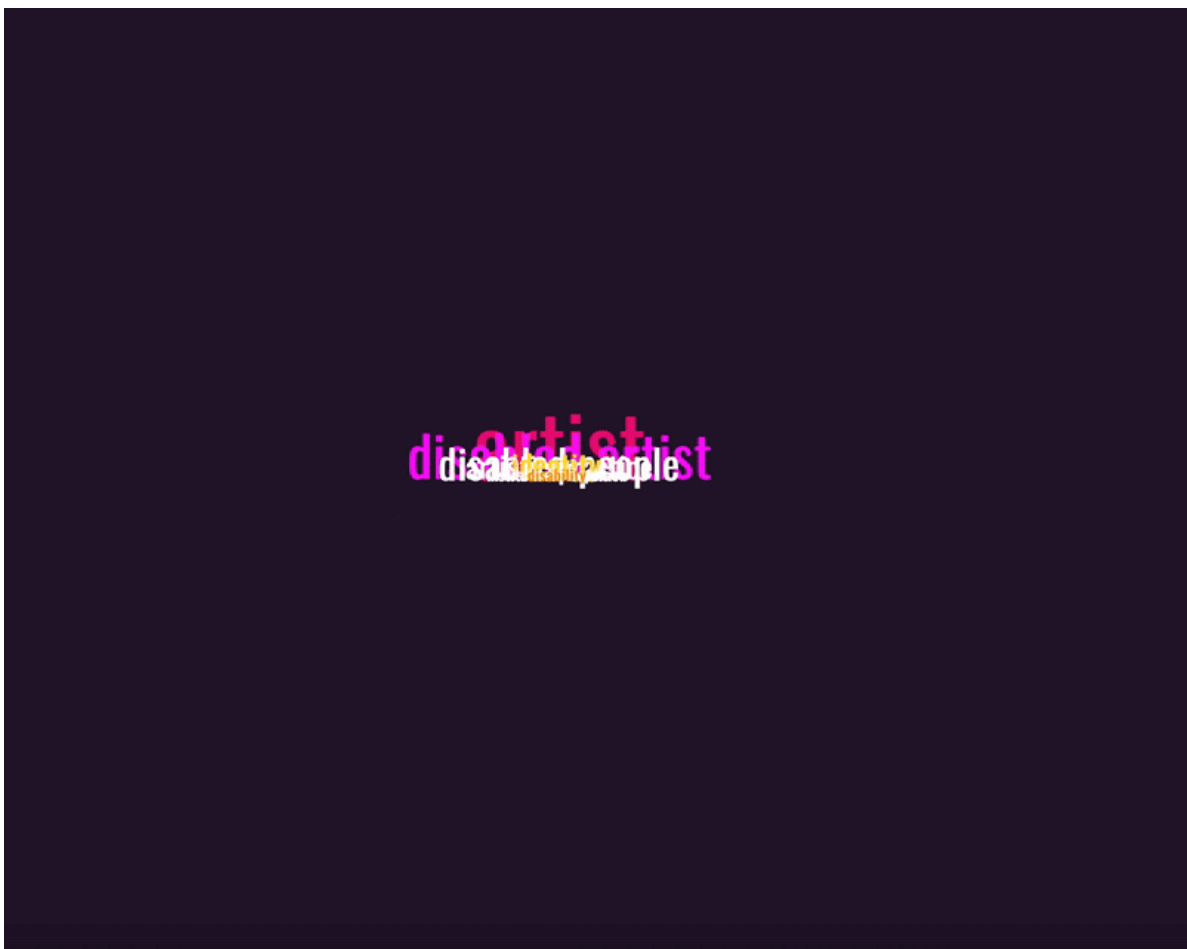

Fig. 3.14: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Research Questions 2*, still from moving GIF, 2024.

Fig. 3.15: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Research Questions 3*, 2024, still from moving GIF.

The final works in this text-based thematic thread, *Research Questions 2* (2024) (Fig. 3.14)[32] and *Research Questions 3* (2024) (Fig. 3.15)[33], are examples from a series that processed earlier drafts of research questions through a free online word-cloud generator[34] and GIF[35] generators[36] to critically investigate the reworking of research questions as I moved towards a final thesis draft. While it is expected that questions, aims, and objectives will change over a research journey, the important change in this research was the shift in focus from observer-analysis of the organisational frameworks of supported studios and the infrastructure of the cultural industries to subjective and relational becomings through materially driven practice. The change in emphasis reflects the deeper relational engagement with the learning disabled artist-participants that occurred both in response to the COVID-19 conditions and in recognising the importance of my artistic subjectivity and practice in the research. A key problem with an organisational focus is that it assumes the artist identity of learning disabled artists without exploring or affirming how that identity comes to be, and further positions learning disabled artists as service-users rather than

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[32] Available to view here: https://vimeo.com/1092753249?share=copy
[33] Available to view here: https://vimeo.com/1092753234?share=copy
[34] Available at: https://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com/generatewordcloud
[35] GIF is an acronym for Graphics Interchange Format, a format that supports short, looped, animated moving images.
[36] Available at: https://ezgif.com/maker

independent artists. The organisational focus also was not tenable during the period of the research engagement, when Venture Arts and the cultural industries as a whole were operating in a different way in response to COVID-19. What this research was instead able to explore was how the artist-participants understand their practices and relationships to the contexts of contemporary art beyond the organisational frame. This research affirms the artist-participants' artist subjectivities on their own terms. It also shows how the research engagement profoundly affected my artist subjectivity, offering validation at the personal and practice-informed level.

Having focused on works that address language as a consistent concern of this research, the remainder of this chapter looks at drawing, ceramic, and installation works that were made in an art studio environment.

3.3 Studio works

Prior to the pandemic and the research engagement, my practice unfolded almost exclusively with people and in places, informed by socially engaged, participatory, inclusive, and collaborative theories of art practice (Chapter 1.2.4). It privileged responsiveness to other people, and/or particular sites and their contexts without a strong material or aesthetic thread tying everything together. I moved from project to project, mostly in response to financial pressure, which left me with the sense that my practice was episodic. These conditions resulted in anxieties around my artist identity against a backdrop of a model of artistic success that desires consistency, recognisability, and 'style'. The pandemic suddenly halted access to this way of working and, therefore, halted my practice. Without negating the significant effect of the pandemic on the artist-participants, the research engagement highlighted that their practice was uninterrupted because their exploration of personal contexts and privileging of material processes could continue from home while the Venture Arts studio was closed, even if in a different form. Maguire's approach to writing at night also underlined the importance of private space and time.

Without a space to practice at home, and with the pandemic restrictions still impacting the possibility of returning to my previous way of working, I moved into an artist studio for the

first time in my career in July 2021.[37] This was both an environmental shift and a relational shift, as I went from being surrounded by my family unit to a cohort of practising artists, and changed my relationship with practice by locating it within a continuous space where I could absorb myself in material processes.

3.3.1 Playful remixing

Faced with an empty space and a totally new way of working, I began by unpacking a box containing remnants of previous work, treating the studio as a space to house my personal artistic archive (Sjöholm, 2014) and using that material to reflect on my artist identity. I pulled out six A5 drawings made with charcoal powder that I had made in the Venture Arts studio in August 2019 and began rearranging them into new configurations, "surrender[ing] to freely rising playfulness" (Getzels, 1975:332) unattached to pre-existing project parameters (Figs 3.16 to 3.21).

Fig. 3.16-3.17: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Six line drawings configuration 1 and 2*, 2021.

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[37] By mid-July 2021, most legal limits on social contact in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were removed in England, and the final closed sectors reopened. Artist studios were permitted to stay open during the pandemic because they were considered places of work where the work could not be done at home. Venture Arts reopened in March 2021 after 12 months of closure, following a refit of the studio to improve COVID-19 security.

Fig. 3.18-3.19: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Six line drawings configuration 3 and 4*, 2021.

Fig. 3.20-3.21: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Six line drawings configuration 5 and 6*, 2021.

Repurposing work that had initially been created in the Venture Arts studio forged a connection between the original space of making and my new studio, allowing me to connect to the embodied experience of prior making. The combined lines immediately took on map-like qualities: "Bringing these lines together is like piecing together a map or route to and through my practice, trying to understand what connects everything… but the line is disrupted by fingerprint smears, the piece is still developing, unfixed" (07/07/21).[38] The piece was brought back into motion through the proposition of a number of potential configurations, troubling the idea of a fixed end-point of the work. The continued handling of the piece created both a line of connection to previous moments in my practice and exposed a disruption, a lack of linearity, a continued smudging. This mirrors one of the anxieties that inhibits my artist identity; the worry that my prior practice was fractured into different episodes and projects that lack connection between them. The conclusion of the journal entry cited above (07/07/21) summarises this tension and attempts to reframe my thinking away from the punitively categorical and towards affirmative and multiple potentialities:

> Black/white – grey.
> Line – smudge.
> Drawing – transference.
> Path – change of direction.
> Once before – continuous.

In relation to the making process, I consider how playful I am really being: "I ask the pieces to match up. Sometimes they will not without overlapping, which I don't allow. Was I being too rigid? All of the pieces are placed either horizontally or vertically… I throw the pieces on the floor and see them align in new ways. I could get even looser" (07/07/21). The creative process involves a necessary tension between structure and disruption and the need to keep both tendencies in balance so that each supports the other (Barron, 1969), and Hewitt recalled her own need for structure to avoid overwhelm. Given my previous way of working often had parameters set by others (commissions, communities, collaborators), immediately 'getting loose' was alien and difficult, but I committed to the practice in the way of the

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[38] The date citations in this chapter are from journal entries written during the period of practice discussed.

artist-participants, dedicating space, time and focus to push through initial anxiety and towards moments of flow and connection.

3.3.2 Following the traces of practice

Fig. 3.22: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Even Dust Is Sacred*, 2021, installed at Abingdon Studios, Blackpool, August 2021. Photo courtesy of Matt Wilkinson.
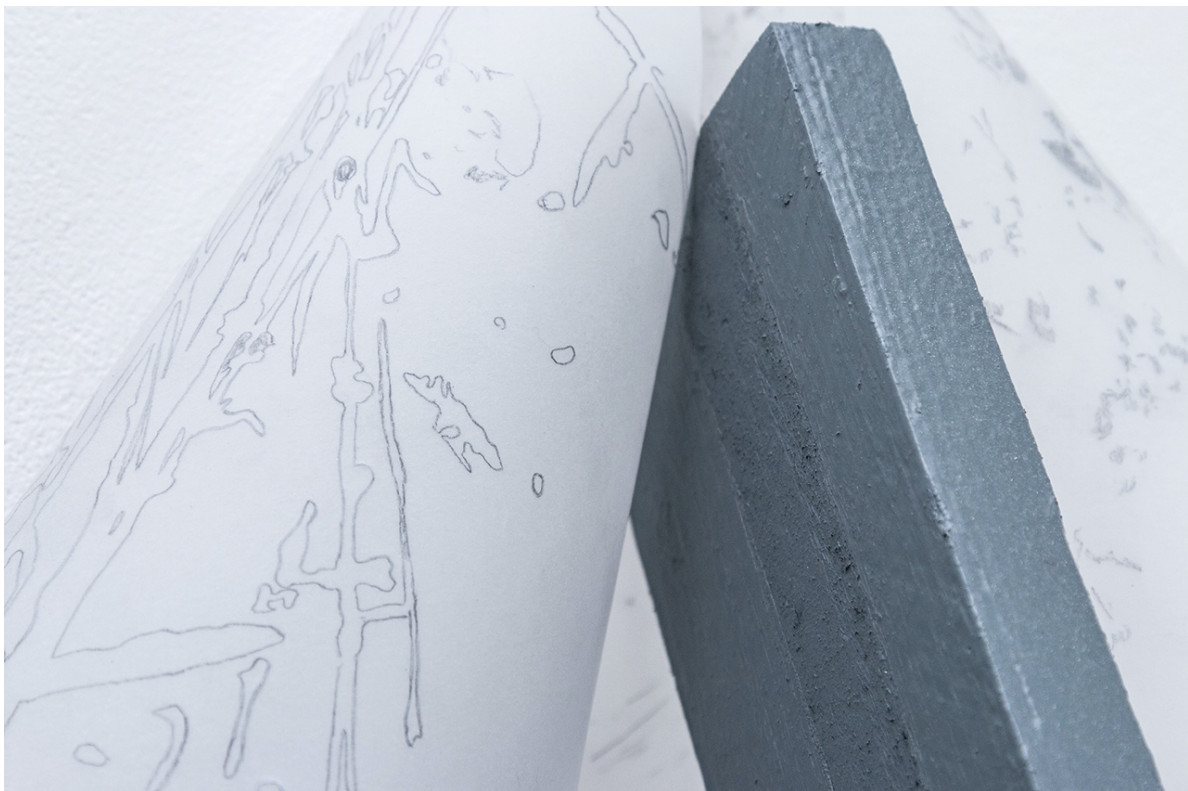
Fig. 3.23: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Even Dust Is Sacred*, detail, 2021, installed at Abingdon Studios, Blackpool, August 2021. Photo courtesy of Matt Wilkinson.

The empty space of the studio exposed another relationality. Before I renovated the studio, it was heavy with the evidence of previous inhabitants, and I sensed that I wanted to take on the inheritance of the space rather than immediately overlay it. Using tracing paper and pencil, I documented "the splashes and scratches, the mud and marks – evidence of process, remnants, the outside edges of artworks" (20/07/21) to create the work *Even Dust Is Sacred* (2021) (Figs 3.22-3.23). The decision to begin with pencil drawing was influenced by observing the artist-participants' use of drawing as either a starting point for works or a material and process that is quick and accessible. For example, drawing was used in most sessions with Maguire, and Hirst utilised drawing when an injury prevented her from working with her usual processes. Paying attention to the floor marks in my drawing relates to Mary Douglas's (1966) concept of hygiene and dirt as the conditions of order and disorder as I worked to shift my self-concept by disordering the idea of artist and artwork: "[It] is the margins, the very edges of categories, that are most critical in the construction of symbolic meaning" (Nead, 2001:6). The close attention to the details related to the

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sustained engagement with the research artist-participants, as I saw more and more in front of me. Again, I noticed the requirement to balance a systematic approach with freedom. My eyes darted to new areas, but I wished to avoid missing anything in the space I was working, as a kind of devotion to all that was there. Similarly, I considered my hold on the pencil and wondered whether a tighter or a softer grip would allow the drawing to emerge: "I feel the need for both control (systematic, rigorous) and a release (dissolving into the process)". I worked by lying on the floor, creating a full-body relationship to the subject: "Connected to the floor through my body, I feel a sense of being an artist" (20/07/21). This moment of recognition was, however, disrupted by a tension between artistic performance and artistic becoming: "I can't help wondering how I will look to anyone passing my studio. Will they see me as an artist? Is looking like an artist and being an artist the same thing?" (20/07/21). The sense of the artist identity was both emerging through the relationship to the lineage of the space and the embodiment of practice and mediated by relationality with other studio holders and their perceptions, showing that the artist identity is both self-and-other generated. This same interrogation of the relationship between being and signifying was present in the tracing; the floor marks, indexically connected to the moment/person/action of their making, worked through the paper to confuse my eyes, while the texture of the ground sometimes directed the marks I made, interfering with their representation. By mirroring simultaneously the research artist-participants' approach to space and immersion, the residual effects of previous inhabitants of the space, and engaging with the material processes of practice, "I [was] attempting to come to and stay close to practice" (27/07/21). Through these early activities, mark-making, repetitive rhythmic movement – paying attention to material remnants – a continual material reconfiguring arose as both an embodied and immersive process method and evidence of movement through practice. *Six line drawings configuration 1-6* (2021) (Figs. 3.16-3.21) and *Even Dust is Sacred* (2021) (Figs. 3.22-3.23) were exhibited at Abingdon Studios, Blackpool, in August 2021, which was an early point of external validation for new works I was developing as I interrogated my artist identity outside of socially engaged frameworks.

Fig. 3.24 and 3.25: Anne-Marie Atkinson, from the series *Floor Prints*, 2022, produced while on residency at Rogue Studios, Manchester, April 2022.

Traces left by others was a theme I returned to while on a residency with Proximity Collective at Rogue Studios, Manchester, in April 2022. I created loose ink drawings of marks on the floor of the main exhibition space, placed the drawings over the original marks, and then photographed them with some of the surrounding floor (Figs 3.24-3.25). Prints of the drawings were made at 1-1 scale, and then pasted back in their original location. Observers commented that they initially saw the gloss of the print as clear cellophane and it took repeated viewing to understand it as a photograph. Drawing, photograph, and print came together to create a strange relationship with representation, which both obscured and highlighted the original marks.

3.3.3 Claiming private space

Although the artist studio is inscribed with artistic process and becoming, it took me nearly 18 months to become acclimatised and comfortable in the space. Walls had to be moved and painted, and furniture acquired and arranged. During this period, the space did not provide the privacy that Maguire suggested as a necessary ingredient for practice. I felt

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disrupted and overlooked when others passed by or through the space. After renovating, I recorded the following observation:

> "I hammer a small plywood square bearing my name to the external studio wall, as other studio holders have done. I am the only person in the building now and enjoy making noise… Putting my name up is officially coming in, claiming the space that my practice needs. This is where my practice finds space." (01/12/22)

It is notable that I went from a dedication to 'social' practice to requiring solitude to feel truly in the embodied process of practice. A contradictory requirement is embedded in social practice: one needs to be both open to the other and the transformation of encounter, as well as to state and abide by clear boundaries in order to practice safely and ethically. Value-driven social practitioners are interested in the people they work with or alongside, and practices of care and ethics are examined and operationalised as strategies to avoid objectifying or harming participants/collaborators. The shift in boundaries experienced during the online research engagement with the artist-participants made me realise a need to balance collaborative/social impulses with periods of privacy. Once I was comfortable, I was able to become more vulnerable during the exploratory stages of artistic making. No longer working alongside the learning disabled artist-participants and having to draw entirely from myself in order to engage in the process of practice highlighted to me how aspects of my artistic voice and confidence in my positionality struggled within long-term exclusively collaborative modes of practice. I have learned how important it is for me to keep a space for my own practice to recharge and reflect after time spent in collaborative/social activity.

3.3.4 Taking materials from life

Fig. 3.26: Anne-Marie Atkinson, the process of making *Dog Hair and Dust - Bowls*, 2022-23, and the clay dust generated, January 2023.

Fig. 3.27: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Dog Hair and Dust - Bowls*, 2022-23.

Fig. 3.28: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Dog Hair and Dust - Bowls*, detail, 2022-23.

An experimental development that incorporated my personal expression and vulnerability was *Dog Hair and Dust – Bowls* (2022-23) (Figs. 3.26-3.28). Following Hewitt's introduction to clay, I applied myself to learning more about the medium. Initially, this involved the development of technical skills through a series of exercises, but when I encountered white clay, I considered that it could become a surface for drawing. My drawings involved repetitive mark-making as a way to move past fear and anxiety by providing an accessible starting point, allowing me to "get out of obsessiveness, cut into that stream of thought" (23/08/23), as with Hewitt's and Hirst's use of mindfulness and immersion in process to

support wellbeing. The repeated lines also reference fur, one of the common materials I encounter in daily life from my many non-human companions, in a similar approach to Hirst's use of everyday materials found in the home. I translated the drawings onto clay through sgraffito and inlay, methods that involve the removal of material rather than the addition, inverting the process of drawing on paper. I called this approach *drawing through deletion*. The act of scraping and removal became a metaphor for shifting the layers of doubt that restricted my artist identity, and it also created more dust, tiny remnants at the edge of practice that evidence process. "When I am touching materials, I feel myself being an artist. At other times, I am wrapped up in doubt" (23/08/23). The bowls became a container for the shift from self-doubt to an affirmed artist identity through making.

3.3.5 Accessing vulnerability

Fig. 3.29-3.32: Anne-Marie Atkinson, sketchbook pages from the development of *Moving Ghouls*, 2022-23, Nov 2022.

Fig. 3.33: Anne-Marie Atkinson, an early experiment with shadows in the development of *Moving Ghouls*, 2022-23, March 2023.

Fig. 3.34: Anne-Marie Atkinson, working onto acrylic sheet in the development of *Moving Ghouls*, 2022-23, June 2023.

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Fig. 3.35: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Moving Ghouls*, 2022-23, installed at Assembly House, Sept 2023. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

Fig. 3.36: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Moving Ghouls*, 2022-23, detail, installed at Assembly House, Sept 2023. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

To create *Moving Ghouls* (2022-23) (Figs. 3.35-3.36), I applied paint with a palette knife to a large sheet of glass another studio holder gave me. When the paint dried, I transferred it from the glass to a sketchbook, treating the paint as an object (Figs. 3.29-3.33). The paint pieces changed as they were moved, stretching and sticking, producing unanticipated forms where they landed. There was a loss of refinement in the edge details, showing their precarious nature, though I applied care as I moved them, trying to preserve their integrity. In a journal entry from early December 2022, I likened this to the act of translation required for this thesis, the attempt to move from experience to description whilst considering what is lost in that process. The continual transformation of materials opened up new potentialities, offering new forms and new subjectivities and relationalities in a continuous flow. I had to practice acceptance, following the material as it changed beyond my influence. The pieces are placed rather than painted, with the movement and air having as much effect as the two surfaces, bringing more actors into the space of creation, and they cannot be replicated but are always made through situated intra-actions. I linked this to the "unanticipated forms" generated in collaborative encounters (10/07/23), finding convergence between social and material practices.

I referred to the new forms as "studio critters… goblins and witches" (01/12/22); there is a resemblance in approach with Hewitt's demons that personify her movement through challenges. Through the development of *Moving Ghouls* (2022-23) (Figs. 3.29-3.33), the ghouls emerged processually and brought me to reflect on my internalised barriers, periods of depression and overwhelm, and anxiety around my privileged position in the research and how to 'represent' the learning disabled artist-participants. This was a visceral experience: "I think about horrible things as I place the pieces. The sensation of vomiting and the splatter of blood… bodily, but disembodied… chaotic and disjointed" (28/06/23). Earlier experiences of mental illness had interacted with my practice development and resulted in feelings of block, lack of development in my artist identity, and failure to live up to an able standard I was holding myself to (cf. Bates et al., 2017; Goodley, 2011, 2013). Moving the paint pieces allowed me to externalise some of these thoughts and inspect them as changing shapes that were affecting and being affected, just as my subjectivity was shaped in the research engagement. Following the learnings from Hewitt and Scott and

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their generous depiction of uncomfortable and stigmatised parts of the disabled experience, the creation of this work feels like the most vulnerable moment of practice I experienced, as I exposed and examined parts of myself and evoked my mental illness as subject. Bringing vulnerability into my practice meant letting these experiences be seen, but also engaging in material action to transform and rearrange them, which generated the wellbeing effects of practice discussed by Hewitt and Hirst. These experiments provided a counterpoint to the experiences of my socially focused practice between 2012 and 2019, where I could negate myself as an individual in the process and cast the perspective externally, avoiding a deeper level of personal vulnerability. Engaging in a vulnerable approach to practice allowed me to re-examine earlier negative feelings and move towards an affirmed artist identity. These works provide material for greater empathy between myself and other artists, just as Scott's willingness to be vulnerable did between us in the research engagement. During making *Moving Ghouls* (2022-23) (Figs 3.35-3.36), I was also experiencing an extreme eczema flare-up that lasted over six-months and covered my face and neck in a pattern resembling the paint marks on the glass. I peeled away sheets of skin in a process mirroring the removal of the paint. This strange (and at times uncomfortable) relationship between my body, internal states, and the material/process forged an embodied intensity in the creation of the work as we continually made and remade one another. In later experiments, I used acrylic sheets as the application surface to retain the contrast of solid and translucent areas of the paint pieces (Figs. 3.33-3.34), which led to working with the interaction of light and shadow, highlighted in the finished exhibited work (Figs. 3.35-3.36). This added an ephemeral and intangible element that further spoke of the exhumation of internal ghouls.

3.3.6 Immersion and personal references

After reflecting on the processes of removal/deletion, transference, and layering evident in previous works discussed in this chapter, I began to conceptualise my practice as *expanded collage* by late-2022 because of the use of a range of materials that were beginning to feel coherent with each other. Expanded collage slips off the page into spatial and temporal dimensions and proliferates new potentials as relationalities are formed and shifted. To collage, I have to cut away; it is a process of destruction before it is a process of creation. When I experimented with making collages, I left the pieces unfixed to test multiple

possibilities. The individuation of each component came into relief through the accentuation of relationality. I was interested in using collage in a non-representational way and bringing it into conversation with my gestural mark-making practice.
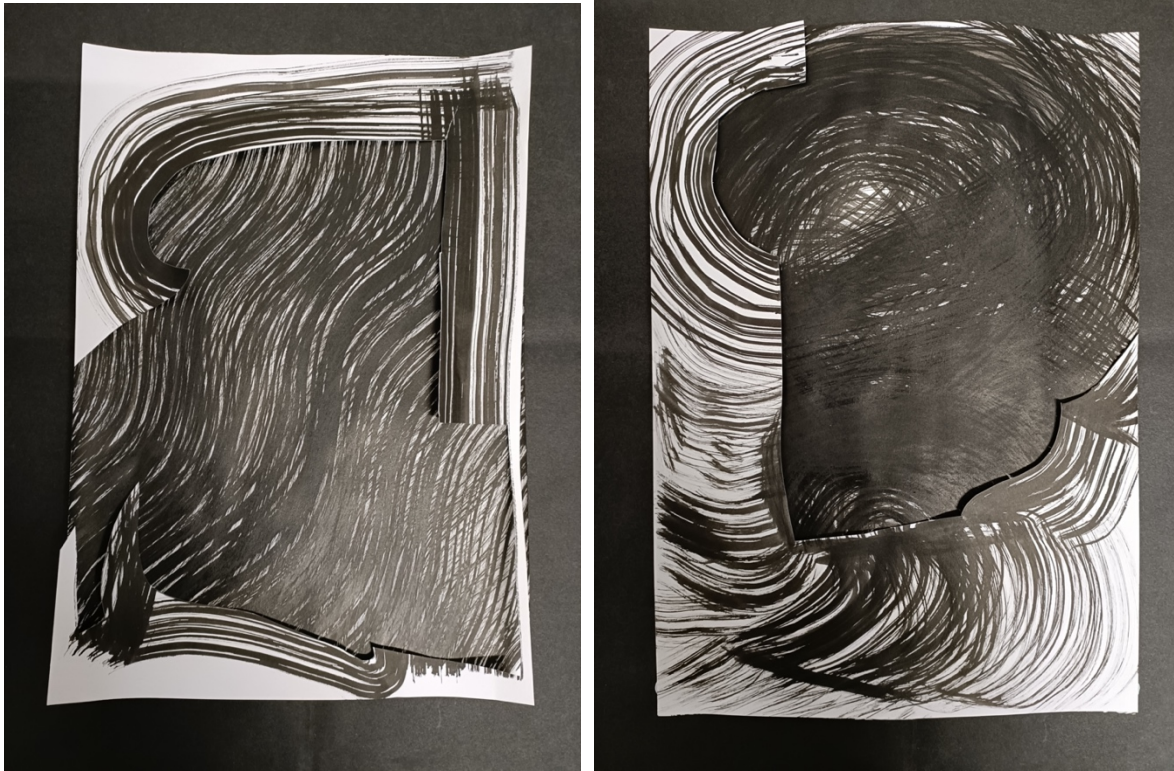
Figs 3.37 and 3.38: Anne-Marie Atkinson, test collages in the development of *Immersion (I dream of drowning)*, 2023, May 2023.

Figs 3.39: Anne-Marie Atkinson, test collage in the development of *Immersion (I dream of drowning)*, 2023, May 2023.
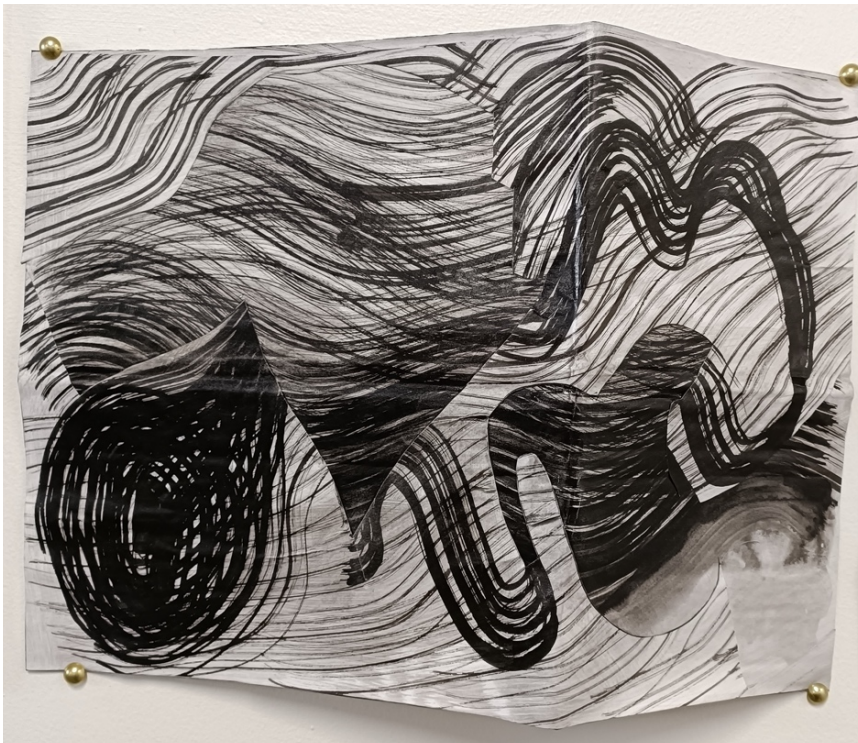
Figs 3.40: Anne-Marie Atkinson, test collage in the development of *Immersion (I dream of drowning)*, 2023, May 2023.

In April 2023, I joined a drawing group that was investigating the theme of water, including seas, rivers, and the water of the body, and intended to use the drawings I made in response to the group as materials for collages. While the conversations with the drawing group were often about the beauty and magnificence of water, my thoughts kept returning to stories my father told me as a child about working on ships in the North Sea, as well as a vivid dream I had over lockdown of drowning in a dark sea, and a first-person description of suicide by drowning in a young adult fiction book titled *More Than This* by Patrick Ness (2013). I took the motif of stormy seas as a metaphor for my mental health experience. Hewitt spoke of immersion in process as a wellbeing aid, but immersion also relates to overwhelm, a sense of being engulfed in the flow, overpowered. Again, in incorporating personal references and leaning into vulnerability in the creation of this piece, I was drawing on learnings from the artist-participants, who took material from their interior lives into their practices.

I added ink and water to my drawing tools and began working with a bigger brush and larger bodily movements than I had with the closer, more detailed drawings of *Even Dust Is Sacred* (2021) (Figs. 3.22-3.23) and *Dog Hair and Dust – Bowls* (2022-23) (Figs. 3.26-3.28). This was embodied and mindful, requiring a looseness and release of control to follow the watery medium. The experience of making the drawings contrasted with the more analytical and considered process of cutting to turn them into collages. I had to survey marks related to movement and process to find a line through which the scalpel could follow, delineating shape out of gesture, paying attention to affective flows and lifting artefacts out of time and space so that their construction could be examined and tested through new relationalities. Figs. 3.37-3.40 are examples of collage experiments that led to the creation of *Immersion (I dream of drowning)* (2023) (Figs. 3.41-3.42).

Fig 3.41: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Immersion (I dream of drowning)*, 2023, 56.5x73.5cm (unframed).

Fig 3.42: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Immersion (I dream of drowning)*, detail, 2023.

When I cut into and layered the drawings that became *Immersion (I dream of drowning)* (2023) (Figs 3.41-3.42), I interrupted the natural path of the flows, changing direction, forging new associations. While the work was initially meant to reflect the overwhelm of depression and the sense of immersion and drowning, it also appeared as a map of the research field; components overlay, rub up, disrupt, and alter. It has a sense of a web or weaving, jostling and pulling at itself. I created a slight separation between the layers of the collage with foam pads to give a slight depth and allow light and shadow to also interact with the piece.

3.3.7 Accessing expertise and professional resources

In my earlier socially engaged practice between 2012 – 2019, my experience was one of working with small budgets and having to make processes accessible and quickly rewarding for participants, especially those designed to unfold in a short time frame or on a 'drop in' basis. I reflected on how these approaches were still informing my practice development, for example by working a lot with paper and recycling materials back into further works. Ellison and Hirst had demonstrated their ambitions to work at a professional level by selecting high-quality materials and tools, and upgrading their equipment. Hirst and Hewitt would also develop works over several weeks and months, investing into laborious processes and developing skills as they went, with support as needed from the Venture Arts facilitators. To introduce a new temporality and high-quality resources into my practice, in July 2023 I joined a ceramic studio to have access to technical expertise and professional equipment.

Fig. 3.43: Anne-Marie Atkinson, first rock sculpture in the development of *Folly (complications you could do without)*, 2023, June 2023.

Fig. 3.44: Anne-Marie Atkinson, pieces of *Folly (complications you could do without)*, 2023, after first firing, August 2023.

Fig. 3.45: Anne-Marie Atkinson, pieces of *Folly (complications you could do without)*, 2023, developing the screen surrounds, September 2023.

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Fig. 3.46: Anne-Marie Atkinson, pieces of *Folly (complications you could do without)*, 2023, after glaze firing, September 2023.

Fig. 3.47: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Folly (complications you could do without)*, 2023; *Four rods for my own back,* 2023; *Theses Film 1,* 2019; *Theses Film 2*, 2019, installed at Assembly House, Leeds, September 2023. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

Fig. 3.48: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Folly (complications you could do without)*, 2023; *Four rods for my own back,* 2023; *Theses Film 1,* 2019, installed at Assembly House, Leeds, September 2023. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

Building on my earlier experiments with ceramic that led to *Dog Hair and Dust – Bowls* (2022-23) (Figs. 3.26-3.28) and following on from the exploration of water in *Immersion (I dream of drowning)* (2023) (Figs. 3.41-3.42), I chose to return to clay because of Hewitt noting a sense of connection to the earth when working with it. I reflected on sites where I feel grounded to contrast the sense of overwhelm in *Immersion (I dream of drowning)* (2023) (Figs. 3.41-3.42). This reflects a moment of artist subjective development, moving

back to solid ground, from drowning to walking again. Referencing Almscliffe Crag, Brimham Rocks, and the Bridestones in Yorkshire, I began carving rocks from heavily grogged black clay using the Kurinuki technique (Figs. 3.43-3.44),[39] which led to the development of *Folly (complications you could do without)* (2023) (Figs. 3.47-3.48). Rocks are symbols of endurance, stability, and deep time; touching them creates a direct bond to aeons. Carving the clay was firmer and more determined than the looser process of drawing with water and ink, through it had a similar sense of embodiment. I noted that having messy hands meant I had to dedicate myself to the moment, as I couldn't quickly switch to another task. This had a positive wellbeing effect as it kept me away from screens for the duration of making. With this consideration, I decided to develop the rocks into sculptural surrounds for the screens (Fig. 3.45) that would show *Theses - Film 1* (2019) (Fig. 3.5) and *Theses - Film 2* (2019) (Fig 3.6) in an upcoming solo exhibition of my practice research works at Assembly House in late September 2023 (discussed in 3.4). I titled the rocks *Folly (complications you could do without)* (2023) (Figs. 3.47-3.48) to play on work's dual role as both of and representing earthiness. The clay is a material link to past generations, culture, and earth, but the rocks are only representations. The contrast of these symbols with *Theses - Film 1* (2019) (Fig. 3.5) and *Theses - Film 2* (2019) (Fig 3.6) heightens the tension between truth and fiction, saying and doing, experiencing and reflecting. The rocks were partially glazed with a matt white glaze (Fig. 3.46), so the use of black and white is a visual echo across both pieces. Bringing these pieces together, made at different times in the research journey, was another pairing of works, as with *I no longer recognise any authority that limits my power* (2023) (Fig. 3.11), and *The revolution will not be made in the first draft* (2023) (Fig 3.12-3.13) (Fig 3.12-3.13).

In another move towards accessing professional expertise and resources, in early September 2023 I attended a masterclass in glass neon and 3D printing as I was preparing for my upcoming solo exhibition. While this was a shorter period of engagement, it exposed me to a specialised material, its properties, and history. The flames used to bend glass felt dangerous and exciting, and when I worked with the glass rods, I noted the moment they turned from solid and rigid to soft and malleable under the heat. This was unexpected but

[39] Kurinuki is a handbuilding technique that involves working with hardened clay and carving directly into it.

spoke to my sense of shifting artist subjectivity, as I dropped established ideas about myself and moved towards greater flexibility of mind. Rather than aiming to create smooth forms, I followed the experiments I was doing simultaneously with hard clay and twisted and contorted the glass into shapes resembling clouds, mountainous horizons, or scrawled handwriting, and created *Four rods for my own back* (2023) (also shown in Figs. 3.47-3.48). I chose to process the neon with argon and mercury, which turns it from the red of pure neon to blue. Researching argon, I found it interesting that it is an abundant and incredibly stable element. It seemed to link across *Immersion (I dream of drowning)* (2023) (Figs. 3.41-3.42) and *Folly (complications you could do without)* (2023) (Figs. 3.47-3.48), bringing the element of air while also visually referencing water and conceptually linking to stable, elemental material. The reference to asemic writing, in lit-up Biro blue, also spoke to the use of text in *Theses - Film 1* (2019) (Fig. 3.5) and *Theses - Film 2* (2019) (Fig 3.6). I was able to prepare these works just in time for the exhibition, so created an installation combining *Four rods for my own back* (2023) (Figs. 3.47-3.48) with *Folly (complications you could do without)* (2023) (Figs. 3.47-3.48) and *Theses - Film 1* (2019) (Fig. 3.5) and *Theses - Film 2* (2019) (Fig. 3.6). The title refers to the glass rods and also the tarot four of wands (also called rods), which relates to life purpose, creative destruction, and the completion of a project. The rods being 'for my own back' shines a light on the self-flagellation and stigma of mental illness and how this has affected my trajectory as an artist.

3.4 Drawn Through

Fig 3.49: Anne-Marie Atkinson, poster for *Drawn Through*, 2023.

Fig 3.50: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Drawn Through*, 2023, installed at Assembly House, Leeds. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

Fig 3.51: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Drawn Through*, 2023, installed at Assembly House, Leeds. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

Fig 3.52: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Drawn Through*, 2023, installed at Assembly House, Leeds. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

Fig 3.53: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Drawn Through*, 2023, installed at Assembly House, Leeds. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

Fig 3.54: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Drawn Through*, 2023, installed at Assembly House, Leeds. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

Fig 3.55: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Drawn Through*, 2023, installed at Assembly House, Leeds. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

Fig 3.56: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *Drawn Through*, 2023, installed at Assembly House, Leeds. Image courtesy of Jules Lister.

In late September 2023, I presented a solo exhibition of my practice research at Assembly House in Leeds, titled *Drawn Through* (2023).[40] I had begun to consider works in pairings in mid-2023, and the exhibition opportunity made it possible to test this in the installation. As well as the pairings already discussed, I brought *Dog Hair and Dust – Bowls* (2022-23) (Figs. 3.26-3.28) together with *Dark Light* (2015) (Figs. 3.54-3.55). This work predates this PhD but was relevant to the exhibition because it was made in collaboration with Andrew Towse, a learning disabled artist. It provided an early reference point for both my work with learning disabled artists, where many of the concerns of this research were initiated, as well as the processes of layering expanded upon in the practice research. I also created a bespoke frame to exhibit the sheet of glass that had been used for the application and removal of paint that went into *Moving Ghouls* (2022-23) (Figs 3.35-3.36), titling it *The Source* (2023) (Figs. 3.53-3.54). This linked *Moving Ghouls* (2022-23) (Figs 3.35-3.36) back to the process of

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[40] A 3D virtual tour of the exhibition can be viewed here: https://my.scene3d.co.uk/tour/assembly-house

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its making, provided a central screen in the exhibition space that directed the flow of movement, and meant that works on either side could be viewed through it. The curatorial decision to link works together and have them viewed through each other was to bring works into conversation, layering and accumulating works together, rather than presenting them as discrete objects. This mirrors the relational approach to subjectivity, seeing how distinct elements are formed and informed through their relations.

The external validation of the exhibition impacted my artist identity by giving me the confidence to produce and present works to a high quality. A lot of my works use monochrome colour palettes, so I introduced colour in the curation by painting a wall hot pink and the sides of plinths in blue to match the LED/neon of *I no longer recognise any authority that limits my power* (2023) (Fig. 3.11) and *Four rods for my own back* (2023) (Figs. 3.47-3.48). This vivid introduction served to link my solo works with a co-produced piece, *632700* (2022), discussed in Chapter 4.

I also considered the viewer experience. I aimed to make the exhibition as accessible as possible by providing easy-read interpretation, audio descriptions, a 3D virtual tour so it could be seen by people who could not attend in person, and programming masked visiting hours for immunocompromised people.

Having presented my solo practice research conducted from the studio, I have demonstrated the key markers for my practice that I have adopted from the artist-participants. These key markers were not pre-planned but arose from the process of making and reflecting while reviewing the research engagement session recordings. Chapter 4 presents a single work titled *632700* (2022), a synthesis of the practice development discussed here and socially engaged and collaborative practices with an extended group of learning disabled people, both in-person and remote. Chapter 4 responds to the learnings from the artist-participants regarding the opportunity to propose new or alternative future worlds through practice, and the learning with Hewitt about retaining authorial connection to works made in participatory settings.

Chapter 4: Towards new worlds: *632700*

632700 (2022) is a co-produced digital collage that was commissioned by Photo Fringe, Brighton, to respond to the 2022 festival theme of *Real Utopias*. The commission brief included the following provocation:

> *"The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is – it is to imagine what is possible."*
> bell hooks, 1994:133.

The festival theme appealed to me because it suggests utopia as both a plural and an actual, not only imagined, place. It also correlated with the learnings from artist-participants Maguire, Ellison, and Hirst, who used their practice to propose alternative or new worlds that create space for affirmed identities.

632700 (2022) was produced by working directly with groups of learning disabled people and their supporters and by sending out an open call to those groups via supported studios to collect their ideas about utopia in the form of artworks between August and September 2022. While the concept of utopia is complex and encompasses a broad range of scholarship and subjects beyond the scope of this research, I approached it from the view that "[all] utopias ask… whether or not the way we live could be improved and answer that it could" (Sargent, 2010:5). I asked contributors[41] to consider what they already have in their lives that they would offer to make a real utopia, and what else they would need to have or experience to move towards a real utopia. A total of 120 artworks were collected from 81 contributors. I processed the collected artworks into a digital collage that is hosted online[42] and uses an algorithm to continually alter the collage within a defined framework, generating a unique sequence of permutations each time. *632700* (2022) was first shown during the Photo Fringe festival in October 2022 at Brighton CCA Dorset Place, and was subsequently exhibited at Two Queens, Leicester, November 2022, Leeds Art Gallery,

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[41] The people who contributed artworks to *632700* (2022) are referred to as 'contributors', to avoid confusion with the research artist-participants who feature in Chapter 2.
[42] *632700* (2022) can be viewed here: https://632700.co.uk

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February to April 2023, Project Space Plus, Lincoln, March 2023, and as part of *Drawn Through*, September 2023 (Chapter 3.4). Contributors were fully credited in each exhibition and in online information about the project.[43] Photo Fringe paid for the web hosting of *632700* (2022) between 2022 and 2026, at which point it will be transferred to my own website.

632700 (2022) serves as a synthesis of this research as it draws on my practice developments outlined in Chapter 3, including playful remixing, expanded collage, peeling, overwriting/overlaying, pairing, and recontextualising, bringing these into conversation with my earlier socially engaged and collaborative approaches. Beyond identity construction or affirmation found in the process of doing practice, *632700* (2022) also represents and models subjective becomings as a visual outcome of the practice. Bringing these aspects together also responds to the learning from Hewitt about retaining an authorial connection to the processes used and artworks produced in participatory projects. While the development composition was necessarily experimental in response to the artworks provided by contributors, my contribution to the piece was the ever-evolving strategy of the collage, which draws on the abovementioned aesthetic approaches and reflects my use of nomadic subjectivity and attention to relationality in subjective artist becomings (Braidotti, 1994, 2013). The collage allows each individual contribution to be platformed while also highlighting plurality and relationality. The way the work is created enables it to continue to be added to at any time, allowing further development and emphasising an embodied and temporal process of moving towards new worlds that affords a rethinking of exclusionary politics (Grosz, 2001, 2002). The work positions utopia as an active process made in the way we engage with one another (Le Guin, 1974),[44] rather than a static place to arrive at. A balance of control and release is enacted, as the piece demonstrates an aesthetics of overwhelm and abundance while embracing new learnings through engagement. The title refers to the number of possible permutations the collage can take. If it generated without repetition, the duration of the piece would be over a week.

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[43] The project information is captured in an online PDF, which is used to communicate the work details in exhibition applications; available here: https://tinyurl.com/3r45e7xh

[44] Ursula K. Le Guin's 1974 sci-fi novel *The Dispossessed* was an instrumental part of my social and political education, particularly in thinking about the way power moves interpersonally.

Fig. 4.1: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *632700*, 2022, screenshot of the evolving collage.

Fig. 4.2: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *632700*, 2022, screenshot of the evolving collage.

Fig 4.3: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *632700*, 2022, screenshot of the evolving collage.

4.1 Virtual and actual shared space

Housing *632700* (2022) online makes it mobile and accessible. For the duration that it remains available online, it can be experienced directly by anyone with an internet-enabled device. It bypasses the gallery system to distribute the work, instead turning to the web, a platform that brings disparate images and data together and offers a continual reshaping of traditional modes of creating, distributing, and curating art (Dekker, 2021; Groys, 2016). The web format folds in the experience of engaging with the artist-participants in Chapter 2 over Zoom. It platforms the contributions of people positioned at a distance – geographically and because of their different relationship to dis/ability – on a shared plane. The algorithm acts as a non-human contributor, making it possible to draw connections that would otherwise be unconsidered. Sometimes, the collage configurations are balanced and harmonic; other times, the piece hangs together uneasily, but no one composition remains. *632700* (2022) is a continual process of renewal; old versions are not saved and cannot be returned to. The viewer must submit to the present to engage with the permutations that *632700* (2022) conjures.

The organisations I partnered with to work directly with contributors were Pyramid, Leeds, an arts organisation that works with learning disabled people; and the Halo Group at

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Hamara, the learning disability service at a community centre that supports people from minority ethnic backgrounds. I delivered four sessions that engaged 30 people. The open call was distributed internationally to supported studios and generated contributions from 51 people based across the UK, as well as Sweden and the USA. To make the concept of utopia accessible, I defined it as a perfect world where people work well with each other and everyone is supported. I used easy-read symbols on the open call and drew on my pre-existing faciliatory skills to make the in-person sessions accessible and inclusive. Contributors responded in media of their choice, including photography, painting, drawing, and collage. The different material qualities of the contributions are highlighted through their rapid juxtapositioning, emphasising the diversity of the work. Themes in the contributions included nature, employment, hobbies, relationships, and home, as well as fantastical animals, heroes, and celebrities. Sally Hirst contributed photos of her dog and a fibre optic lamp to represent sensory rooms, and Emlyn Scott sent an abstract impasto oil painting in muted greens and reds. *632600* (2022) represents the current realities of the contributors while remixing them into future propositions, interweaving disability politics with human and posthuman potentialities (Goodley, 2014).

Fig. 4.4: Anne-Marie Atkinson, open call poster for *632700*, 2022, distributed internationally via supported studios, August 2022.

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The multiple modalities of *632700* (2022) – in-person participation, participation at a distance, technological integration and distribution – create a restless production and reproduction of visual forms while also remixing the individual into a continually evolving conversation. It creates space to reflexively consider what collaborative movement towards a more inclusive world might look like, offering a positive counterpoint to "the hostile and precarious mode of existence in [the] 'dystopia of decay'" (Elyamany, 2022:1209). It proposes an enmeshed co-constitution of individual and community through the intra-action of materials, environments, objects, and people (Barad, 2007), allowing space for conflict and chaos, as well as moments of solidarity and balance, and embraces contradictions in the production of new representations (Duffy, 1987). New subjectivities and relationalities emerge in the confluence of people, technology, and communication in both the real and the virtual (Braidotti, 2013a). *632700* (2022) follows Braidotti's suggestion that "dis-unity points to over-abundance, not lack" (2013a:156). I consider the over-abundance of *632700* (2022) to be resistance to the arrangement of artists' relationalities based on scarcity and competition, as well as a personal aesthetics of overwhelm. *632700* (2022) is an act of taking apart, cutting, collage, and then reinvention, centring new perspectives in a continuous flow. *632700* (2022) shows me that my practice is necessarily pluralistic and refuses hard conclusions that close down possibility, but open-endedness can also lead to overwhelm. Reappraising many of the works discussed in Chapter 3 in the context of overwhelm illuminates an aesthetic strategy that reverberates my personal experiences and emotional states.

4.2 New approaches to socially engaged practice

632700 (2022) builds upon my previous practice in socially engaged/collaborative modes while incorporating new aesthetic approaches developed from learnings with the artist-participants in Chapters 2 and 3. Though all participatory practice creates precarious forms through the interaction of various positionalities and contexts (Matarasso, 2019), the model of a community that is both enmeshed and incongruent and the ongoing, mobile nature of *632700* (2022) is a development of my previous site-and-timebound, person-centred projects. One of the anxieties of my earlier practice was the difficulty of communicating the invisible faciliatory labour of socially engaged art, and how engagement is felt. *632700*

(2022) visualises, actualises, and transmits the methods of socially engaged practice across time and space and offers a space of engagement that is both stable and mobile. Because it is possible to keep adding to the collage, the potential circle of engagement is broadened, and the work is kept in continual transformation. *632700* (2022) is a positive and affirmative artwork that calls in "productive alternatives" (Goodley et al., 2014:343). It generates difference-affirming worlds by challenging exclusion through communal and creative practices that rethink space, time and relationality. Technology and art are used to reimagine access and inclusion, with hybrid and online practices as radical access that disrupt the ableist entanglements of the gallery system, showing how technology can operate alongside the work of disability rights (Wolbring, 2009; 2012).

Fig. 4.5: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *632700,* 2022, installed at Brighton CCA Dorset Place, October 2022. Image courtesy of Phoebe Wingrove.

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Fig. 4.6: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *632700,* 2022, installed at Brighton CCA Dorset Place, October 2022. Image courtesy of Phoebe Wingrove.

4.3 Compositional development

The composition I arrived at after experimenting with the received contributions comprises four components – a backdrop, a landscape, a person, and an object, as well as a white band, which is the only stable element. This pared-down composition allows enough space to each element while representing a total world in each permutation. The backdrop images create an abstract edge with the slowest rate of transition and utilises a grow/shrink effect and fade between each image. This gives the sense of the abstract extending outwards or pulling inwards, which one audience member likened to breathing. I relate this component to the theoretical frames that hang in the space of subjective becomings. The landscape provides a central point within the white band and changes at twice the speed of the backdrop. I relate this component to institutional and environmental contexts that shape subjective becomings. The person and object components sit in front of the white band, creating a suggestion of depth, and change at double the rate of the landscape and slightly out of sync with each other. I relate these to interpersonal relationships and material

engagements that inform subjective becomings. The white band is my addition, a static element, touching each of the permutations and providing a sense of continuity and unity. It is suggestive of a planetary form, linking back to the proposition of new worlds. It also provides a frame, but one that has fallen into the work, troubling the binary of inside and outside (Derrida, 1987).

In earlier drafts, I approached the idea of proposing new worlds more literally and organised the artworks into geographical categories, e.g. countryside and coastal, to develop different scenes (Figs. 4.7 and 4.8). This presented several problems. The scale of different contributions was vastly different, for example, some images of landscapes filled the frame while people and objects were necessarily made small to fit the world they inhabited. This visually favoured some contributions over others and resulted in a more cluttered composition. The artworks that became the backdrop components were of an abstract nature and, therefore, did not naturally fit within a geographic scene in the same way that the depictions of landscapes, or people, etc., did. I found I had to cut into the abstract contributions to incorporate them, which felt like an over-intrusion. Additionally, to retain the legibility of these worlds, elements such as the sky and land would need to stay stable, reducing these components' availability for algorithmic intervention and, again, visually favouring some works over others. Finally, because the contributions were organised into different scenes, components of one scene would not interact with components of another scene. I gave up this route and began again with a limited composition, testing pairings of works at a similar scale to seek balance and the opportunity to bring each of the contributions into dialogue with all of the others. The contributions were recategorised into the four components of the final collage (abstract, landscape, person, object), and the white band was introduced. If I had continued with the original route for the composition, the insights the work engendered would not have been realised. This shows that experimental engagement with materials and processes led to new understandings (Bolt, 2007).

Fig 4.7: Anne-Marie Atkinson, early draft of *632700,* 2022, September 2022.

Fig 4.8: Anne-Marie Atkinson, early draft of *632700,* 2022, September 2022.

4.4 Exhibition experiences

While *632700* (2022) exists online and can be accessed by anyone with an internet-enabled device, it was exhibited five times between October 2022 and September 2023. This

represents a development in my practice, as previous exhibitions tended to be one-off events specific to a particular project. The display format has varied: *632700* (2022) has been exhibited three times as a large projection, once on an iPad, and once as a multi-screen installation. The multi-screen installation further multiplied the possible permutations (=632700*number of screens). I am careful to recognise that exhibiting *632700* (2022) only presents a version while the actual work exists online, so each of the projections included a laptop or iPad to highlight this. This subverts the standard protocol of exhibiting finished works, as exhibitions can only be representations of *632700* (2022).

The most high-profile of the exhibitions was also the most problematic. *632700* (2022) was one of 90 artworks selected from over 630 entries for the Leeds Artists Show at Leeds Art Gallery (February – April 2023), the first open show at the gallery for over a decade. The exhibition was attended by over 50,000 people and was the most popular exhibition at the gallery since the pandemic closures. *632700* (2022) was the only work made through participatory methods. The show as a whole was considerately curated by Holly Grange; works had sufficient space around them while various thematic threads were woven throughout. Rather than being part of the white-walled gallery spaces, *632700* (2022) was projected on a large screen in the Henry Moore Lecture Theatre (HMLT), primarily as a solution to the technical requirements of the work. I was apprehensive about this placement because it necessitated reduced opening hours compared to the other gallery spaces, reducing audience footfall and, therefore, impact. Additionally, HTML is mainly used for conferences, seminars and lectures and is architecturally not part of the interconnected exhibition spaces on the ground floor of Leeds Art Gallery. Whilst this space was far from ideal, I felt other options were not forthcoming, and I agreed to the placement, believing the large screen and space for chairs to make viewing the work more accessible were a trade-off for the drawbacks of the space. Because of the curatorial care shown elsewhere in the exhibition, the differences with *632700* (2022) were particularly visible, raising questions about institutional experience and confidence in showing socially engaged artworks.

Fig. 4.9: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *632700*, 2022, installed in the Henry Moore Lecture Theatre, Leeds Art Gallery, February-April 2023. Image courtesy of Rob Battersby.

On the opening night, I found that the HMLT was being used as a storage space for furniture and unused signage; trailing cables and a rolled-up extension lead were left next to the iPad that accompanied the screen; and the mouse cursor was left floating in the middle of the projected image. A clothing rail left in the space was being used by visitors, making the room feel like a cloakroom, in stark contrast to the clean and considered gallery spaces on either side of the HMLT. I addressed these issues with the project team, but on further visits, I found some persisted, particularly the stored items. The HTML walls had not been recently painted and included framed artworks unrelated to the rest of the show. Stepping into the HMLT did not feel continuous with the rest of the exhibition.

Fig. 4.10: Signage and corridor to *632700*, 2022, installed in the Henry Moore Lecture Theatre, Leeds Art Gallery. The main gallery spaces are on either side and are immediately accessible.

Being physically and curatorially cut off from associating with the other works in the exhibition prevented dialogue between *632700* (2022) and the broader art scene represented. Narrative threads established elsewhere in the exhibition included issues within global capitalism, heritage and identity, and isolation/confinement balanced with fantastical expression (Spencer, 2023). There are aspects within *632700* (2022) that speak to these themes: the intersection of technological advancement and disability; the perspective of learning disabled people and carers on co-produced futures; the tension of individual and community and the diverse visuals generated in the collage permutations. One work I noted was *Ghost* (2022) by Hondartza Fraga (b.1982), which uses raw images from the Cassini

spacecraft, freely available from the NASA archive,[45] to reconstruct Goya's *Saturn* (circa 1820). A fabric print was included alongside an animation, which mosaiced different images of Saturn to build up the image. The multitude of partial circles of Saturn, the use of a screen, and the pattern of the animation movement visually corresponded to *632700* (2022). *Ghost* (2022) looks out to the edges of technology to explore other worlds, bearing a strong thematic resemblance to *632700* (2022). Fraga quotes Vega to contextualise the evocation of Goya's mythic Saturn, to "express our contemporaneity: fragmentation, bewilderment, insecurity, aggressiveness, sadness and melancholy" (Vega quoted in Fraga-Gonzales, 2024:89-90). The future-looking, affirmative, nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 2013a) of *632700* (2022) contrasts *Ghost* (2022). Placing these works nearer to each other could have created an interesting conversation, drawing on the specific contribution of *632700* (2022). Fox and Macpherson suggest that inclusion of work by learning disabled artists can risk becoming a "tokenistic diversity strategy" without curatorial care (Fox and Macpherson, 2015:39; cf. Darke, 2003). I would have liked to have been a few steps further from such an association in this exhibition.

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[45] Available at: https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/cassini-raw-images/

Fig. 4.11: Hondartza Fraga, *Ghost*, 2022, installed in Leeds Art Gallery. Author's own photograph.
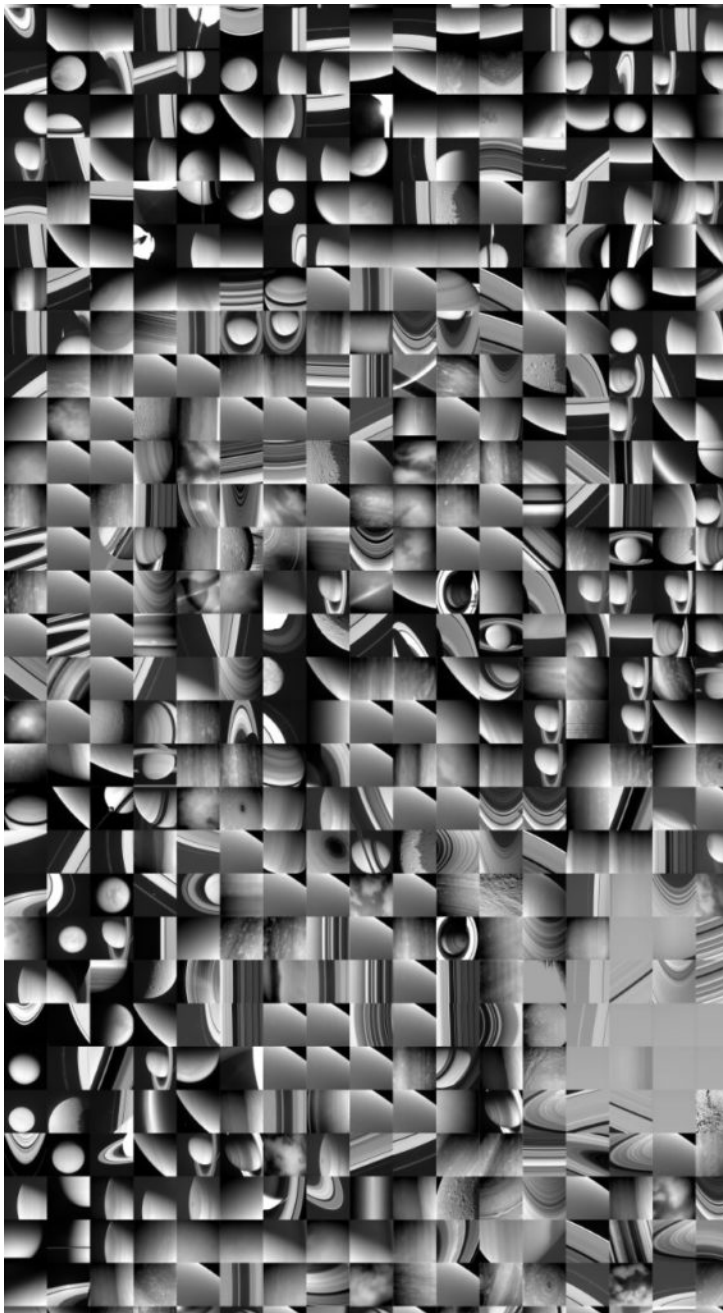
Fig. 4.12: Hondartza Fraga, *Ghost*, 2022, close-up of animation still. Available from: https://www.hondartzafraga.com/2022/10/02/ghost/

Leeds Art Gallery circulated an anonymous feedback form to the exhibiting artists, but to share my reflections, I had to give my anonymity, as no other works were exhibited in the HTML. This felt intimidating, knowing that complaint can close doors and go nowhere, despite being felt everywhere (Ahmed, 2021). I felt a responsibility to the 81 learning disabled people and supporters represented in *632700* (2022) to express my concerns. I attempted to be solution-focused and offered to be part of future conversations around

curating participatory works and those by learning disabled artists, but this has not yet been taken up. Grange has been a positive part of my network, and I hope to work with her again in the future. I know from discussions with her during her previous role at the Musgrave Kinley Outsider Art Collection that she is attuned to issues surrounding the representation of learning disabled artists. The above critique is based on my observations and recognises that institutional error may result from a confluence of factors and no one individual. Through this experience, I learned a valuable lesson to curatorially guard my work in future exhibitions, and it highlights that working with institutions can result in different experiences for artists and not all of these validate artist identity, linking back to the conflict between personal and external expectations highlighted in Chapter 2.

A counterpoint to this experience was in the fourth exhibition of *632700* (2022) as part of *Visitant Queens* at Project Space Plus, University of Lincoln (March 2023). MA Fine Art students, as part of the *Artist as Curator* module led by Dr. Assunta Ruocco, selected ten artworks out of 70 submitted to an open call, drawing out a curatorial thread that "[blended] themes of techno-gothic, dark fantasy and the 'new weird' with memory, identity, and idealism" (University of Lincoln, 2023: online). This was a smaller venue, with fewer artists and a group of curators, a context that allowed for extended lead-in conversations. Student and artist Ellie Duffield took responsibility for *632700* (2022), conversing with me and liaising with technicians to realise a muti-screen installation. In a small but well-presented gallery space, *632700* (2022) was placed on a wall with reduced lighting, opposite *Photoreceptor II* (2023) by Samuel Harriman which consists of three neon triangles in blue, green, and red that increase in scale. Adjacent, a series of black and white mixed-media self-portraits by Diana Ramute (no date) used concealment of the face, graphic marks, and writing to explore the complex construction of identity. Through affording equal space and care, and proximity between works, *632700* (2022) was given equal value and able to come into dialogue with these other works.

Fig. 4.13: Anne-Marie Atkinson, *632700,* 2022, installed at Project Space Plus, Lincoln, March 2023.
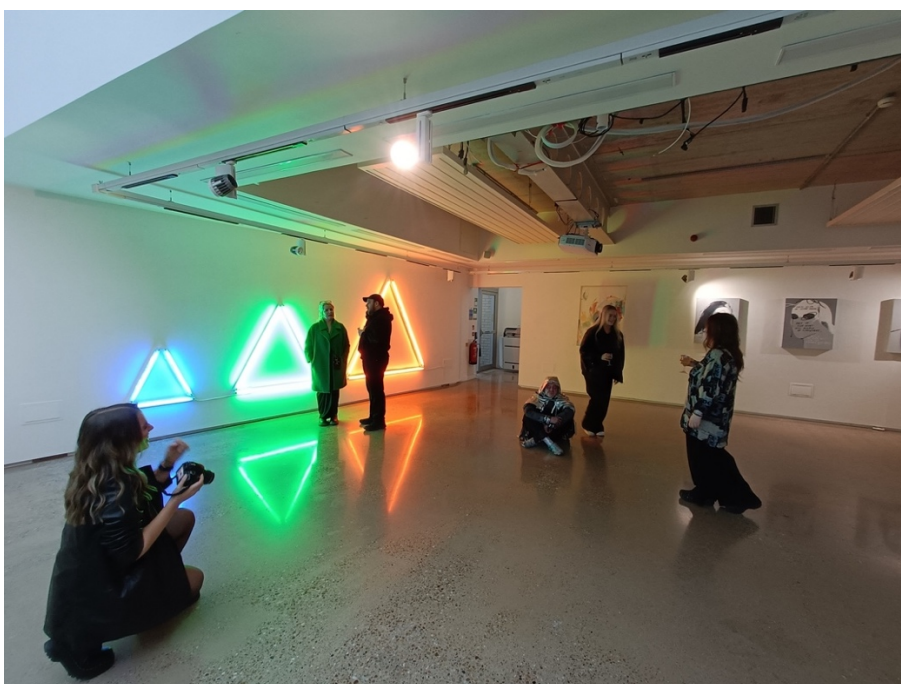

Fig. 4.14: The works opposite and adjacent to *632700* (2022), installed in Project Space Plus, Lincoln, March 2023.

632700 (2022) warranted its own chapter because it bridges between my role supporting learning disabled artists and my own art practice in a way that supports each of our contributions. The shifts I experienced in making this piece affirmed my artist identity in a way that previous experiences in socially engaged and collaborative practices did not. It does not deny difference but creates a space where different perspectives are platformed together in harmony, dissonance, and abundance, and exemplifies my approach of 'expanded collage'. My contribution to the piece was the structure of the evolving collage that reflects nomadic and relational becomings, drawing on learnings from Braidotti (1994, 2013) and the research process that underpinned it. The contributors' artworks populate the alternative and new worlds that *632700* (2022) proposes with their own ideas. The reflections on exhibition experiences also highlight some of the othering that learning disabled artists experience in the world of contemporary art.

To summarise, the following key strategies were deemed central to the successful project design of *632700* (2022), where all works submitted were brought into conversation with each other:

- A clearly defined yet open thematic prompt allowed an accessible entry point for contributors;
- Each contributor was able to engage using their preferred medium, process, site of production, and timescale;
- No exclusions were made, with every submitted work incorporated and affirmed as a valid artwork worthy of inclusion;
- A unified presentation brought diverse contributors together, avoiding categorisation by disability or professional status;
- Equal visibility was provided with each contribution being both individually platforms and given an equal share of the frame, without hierarchy based on perceived skill or status;
- A randomising algorithm mitigated unconscious bias in curation and maintained perpetual motion, highlighting a generative and nomadic approach that foregrounds the continued complexities of co-production and makes space for harmony, dissonance, nuance, and reflexivity;

- Compositional elements were intentionally applied to support greater aesthetic coherence while resisting hierarchical authorship;
- The resulting artwork is hosted on a directly accessible webapp platform that can be viewed on any internet-enabled device.

The principles generated from the project design of *632700* (2022) enable artists from all backgrounds to have a sense of artist identity and show how inclusive practice can be both socially engaged and aesthetically rich. The resulting work centres artists as artists, regardless of their support needs, and by bringing contributions onto a shared plane under the same conditions, demonstrates how inclusive approaches can reshape what art can look and feel like.

Conclusion

This thesis contributes new knowledge by offering sustained attention to the artist identities of the learning disabled artist-participants and by articulating the impact of relational engagement on the artist-researcher in terms of both practice development and artist identity. It demonstrates that recognising and affirming learning disabled individuals as artists, on their own terms and outside of specialist contexts, requires not only structural support but also a rethinking of how facilitators, collaborators, and peer-artists position themselves. Through practice research inquiry, this research reveals how inclusive strategies and peer relationships that centre artist identity can operate as mutual, rather than one-directional, processes. Scaffolding may be required to appropriately support learning disabled artists, but this needs to go beyond facilitation and should include consideration and awareness of what it means to be an artist for all involved.

The two key findings of this research are:

1. The identification of learning disabled individuals as artists can and should be taken seriously because the artist-participants in this study demonstrated that they have their own motivations and connections to their practices; they make decisions and develop their practice through the process of making; and they apply critical reasoning to the development of their work (Chapter 2). The artist-participants went beyond being facilitated people or participants in a supported studio environment because they evidenced an independent practice that was actively sought and continually developed, even during the Covid-19 lockdowns when access to their usual support systems and practice environment (Venture Arts) was significantly altered. Some of the artist-participants self-identified as artists strongly, but even those who did not had a compelling and self-motivated relationship to practice. This key finding calls on the art world to position learning disabled artists as validated artists, and raises ethical questions about any differential treatment they experience that positions them as anything other than artists.

2. Through the case study of my own practice, the research demonstrates that the artist identities and practices of non-learning disabled artists can be reshaped

through encounters with learning disabled artists, especially when those encounters are approached through a lens of nomadic subjectivity and identity affirmation (Chapters 3 and 4). This research highlights the reciprocal nature of such encounters, showing that artists in relative positions of power (such as those contained by the label of 'facilitator' or 'researcher') are not outside the process but can also be shaped by it, revealing their own need for inclusion and recognition as artists. The key markers for artist identity derived from the research engagement with the learning disabled artist-participants are significant for the recognition and support of all artists. By incorporating these markers into my own practice development, the research challenges models of facilitation and inclusion that rely on notions of hierarchies, differential labels, and other "lethal binaries" (Braidotti, 2013a:37). It demonstrates that all artists can be transformed through peer relationships and the affirmation of artist identity.

The remainder of this Conclusion is structured into sub-sections that mirror the order of the preceding chapters. The sub-sections are: Research journey and response to the COVID-19 pandemic; Key markers for artist identity; Artist identity, practice, and affirmative nomadic subjectivity; *A Compositional Framework for Inclusive Practice*; Opportunities and recommendations for supported studios and the art world; and Final thoughts.

Research journey and response to the COVID-19 pandemic
This research set out to explore the intersection of learning disabled artists and contemporary art, with a focus on the UK and especially Greater Manchester, where Venture Arts operates. Learning disabled artists were becoming increasingly visible at the outset of the research due to the work being undertaken by supported studios, including Venture Arts, who act as a bridge between practitioners and the conventional structures of the art world, alongside the ethos of broader initiatives such as Arts Council England's *Creative Case for Diversity* (2011) and the Museums Association's *Valuing Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Museums* (2016). This presented new opportunities for learning disabled artists, as well as new challenges around how to support them, represent their voices publicly, and conceptualise their practice within the frameworks of contemporary art

discourses, such as Disability Art, Outsider Art, and art and health. The initial intention of this research was to examine the situation of learning disabled artists working in supported studios that operate within contemporary art spheres to understand their inclusions and exclusions, and how their practices shift established discourses.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus shifted from close attention to Venture Arts, the supported studio model, and contemporary art contexts, to the artist-participants themselves, affording greater attention to their self-understandings as artists and their individual practice interests and approaches. The lockdowns led to major and unexpected transformations in contemporary art environments, including the shutdown of supported studios, galleries, and museums, as well as changes in the priorities of workers in the sector. This effectively disrupted the link between the research and its site, and created significant uncertainty about when or how operations would resume and in what form. This reoriented the research away from an emphasis on the contemporary art sector and its discourses – although they continued to provide framing touchstones – and towards the individual conditions for developing and sustaining an artist identity, something internally held and resilient, even in the face of circumstances such as disability barriers and stigma, or a global pandemic. The conditions for developing and sustaining an artist identity and how it manifests itself across a range of people were drawn from the learning disabled artist-participants' testimonies and sharing of their practices, and were further tested through a successive period of studio-based practice research undertaken by myself as an individual artist-researcher. The combined key markers of artist identity provide a route to understand how artists both with and without learning disabilities can be supported and affirmed.

While the context of COVID-19 had a significant impact on the research design, it also enabled the research to happen in a particular way that informed the findings and enabled this Conclusion. Making adaptations for the lockdowns allowed me to enter into peer-to-peer relationships with the artist-participants that affected my own practice development and sense of artist identity. Working one-to-one from our homes broke some of the barriers that would have been present in the original research design, such as working in the context of a supported studio and me being more closely aligned with the facilitator position. This

research also shows that the artist-participants make work outside of Venture Arts, and that it is possible for them to continue their practices without facilitator support. In the original research design, this aspect of the artist-participants' experience, which contributes to their artist identities, would not have been explored. However, it is essential to acknowledge that I was able to work with the artist-participants because of Venture Arts, so their gatekeeper role was significant in creating the initial possibility of engagement. This research is timely both because of increased interest in diversity and inclusion, and the significant work that Venture Arts and other supported studios undertake to locate their work and the artists they support within contemporary art, and because it used the circumstances of lockdown to explore alternative frames of engagement that can inform models of future working.

Aspects of the research method that supported meaningful, inclusive working that can be adopted by other researchers, practitioners, and organisations include:

- Spending significant time with the artist-participants to build trust and familiarity, allowing their ideas to be shared and developed over time;
- Creating opportunities for the artist-participants to share their own voice and shape the work's direction;
- Using the artist-participants' existing art practices, materials, and themes from their own lives as a starting point for dialogue and reflection;
- Working in environments familiar to the artist-participants, rather than in formal or institutional settings;
- Using the research setting to support the artist-participants to produce new works or new aspects of their work, and sharing these publicly to foster a sense of development, ownership, pride, and external validation;
- Making alongside one another to foster shared vulnerability and dismantle researcher/subject hierarchies;
- The artist-researcher adopting a nomadic subjectivity and ethics (Braidotti, 1994, 2013a) through a reflexive engagement with the artist-participants and their practices, which remained open to the potential of transformation in the personal and practice registers.

Key markers for artist identity

The research develops a position of recognising learning disabled artists as artists on their own terms by examining their personal, practice, and relational insights into their artist identities. Each artist-participant included in Chapter 2 undertook between 24 and 37 research sessions, totalling between 11.75 and 32.5 total hours of engagement. This thesis platforms the artist-participants as individual artists and demonstrates their sustained and independent practices, which affirm their artist identity. Treating learning disabled artists as individuals offers a different kind of inclusivity that avoids the habit of categorising and labelling people.

The key markers that contributed to the artist-participants' artist identities included:

- Using art practice for self-exploration, expression of individuality, and to investigate or process things that mattered to them, such as personal transitions;
- Being able to be vulnerable and connect with others through that vulnerability;
- Having opportunities to engage with other artists as a peer, such as through giving and receiving critical feedback, to access different perspectives;
- Having opportunities to experiment with a range of materials, develop craftmanship with high-quality tools and processes, and innovate within one's practice, evaluating outcomes and the work of others to incorporate learnings into future work;
- Having sufficient time and private space to immerse oneself in practice, test out ideas, and develop skills incrementally;
- Accessing supportive environments and aspiring towards professional pathways and opportunities for external validation, including gallery exhibitions, commissions, and sales, that bring works into contact with audiences;
- Having a symbolic and embodied connection to materials, retaining a connection to that when working in participatory or collaborative mode, and having strategies to overcome creative blocks;
- Using art practice as political advocacy and/or to connect to cultural heritage, and to envision new or alternative worlds.

This research shows that the continual habits and rhythms of practice establish an artist identity. The impact of networks, supporters, and relational encounters was shown to be significant, and these can be affirming or problematic. All of the artist-participants commented on their positive experiences at Venture Arts. Yet they also show that artist identity can be challenged when practice is interrupted by not having access to materials or processes, during periods of creative block, or when external expectations conflict with personal expectations.

The artist-participants considered opportunities for external validation to be important to sustaining an artist identity. While learning disabled artists may face additional challenges in the cultural workforce, such as stigma and communication and information barriers, many of the desires and challenges they articulated are comparable to artists more generally. The artist-participants' testimonies demonstrate that they share many ideas about being and becoming an artist as non-learning disabled artists in the UK. This research shows that learning disabled artists are just like other artists, trying to make work in a world in which only a small percentage of artists can gain long-term financial independence through their art.

The outcomes of this research included the development of a new body of work for four of the five artist-participants. Louise Hewitt created a children's book that tells the story of her Garden Monsters. Hewitt wrote the story and painted backgrounds for each monster character, and I supported her in laying out the book and getting it professionally printed. Hewitt delivered two online readings of the book in partnership with The Portico Library, Manchester, in April 2021 to an audience of children and families. The book is now for sale in the Venture Arts online shop.[46] Roxy Maguire's series of fashion drawings were included alongside works by Josh Brown and Rory White in an Online Open Studio event I presented from my home in March 2021. The three featured artists shared short videos about their practice and contributed live to the event. Amy Ellison's depiction of The Lowry, Manchester, was selected by Michael Simpson, Head of Galleries at The Lowry, for inclusion

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[46] Available here: https://venturearts.org/product/garden-monster-illustration-book/

in an online exhibition titled *Days Like These,* which ran from July to September 2020. Additionally, four of Ellison's gallery drawings were acquired by the Government Art Collection in March 2022. A selection of Emlyn Scott's *Political Posters* were exhibited at the People's History Museum, Salford, in an exhibition titled *Until It Looks Like This*, from July to October 2022. Through the creation of new works and the external validation they received, this research supported the artist-participants to both show and grow their practices, networks, and artist identities.

Artist identity, practice, and affirmative nomadic subjectivity

Throughout this thesis, I have referred to the notion of artistic practice, but it is important to note that this term was used in different ways by the artist-participants. Hirst, Hewitt, and Scott did refer to their work in terms of practice as their research engagement progressed, which suggests this is something they may have adopted from my way of speaking with them. My voice inevitably became one that informed and affirmed the artist-participants, and has assimilated my language into them. This highlights that 'practice' is a specialist term that is familiar to contemporary art but may not be used by learning disabled artists. 'Practise' was most often used as a verb, referring to repeated action for skills development, or sometimes as a substitute for experimentation, for example, undertaking a 'practise version' of a process. 'Practice', understood as the confluence of interests, influences, and continually developed processes, is part of a language that may not be recognised by learning disabled artists and could be a barrier to their validation in the contemporary art field. Nonetheless, the analysis of the artist-participants' self-understandings shows that they engage in all of the activities that make an artistic practice, so their relationship to practice is analogous to non-learning disabled artists.

A theme that emerged among four of the five artist-participants was the perception of skill or ability in relation to practice, particularly concerning representative realism, such as in drawing. The artist-participants who raised this theme were at various points of addressing it within their practice, with some consistently stating they 'can't draw' or that they require more practise, while others had moved towards a more expansive understanding of quality in their art practice as a result of engagement with affirming environments and

relationships, including at Venture Arts. This mirrors the different grammars of art education, with realism having a high approval rating in the UK school curriculum and a low approval rating in higher education art schools and the contemporary art field. The push-and-pull between these positions was clearly salient to the artist-participants, but became less of a concern the more they positioned themselves within contemporary art contexts and networks.

A frequent anxiety identified across this research was the drive towards categorisation and labelling. For example, the distinction between Outsider Art and contemporary art was problematised in Section 1.2.3. Similarly, the focus of the social model of disability on external barriers and material conditions is shown to be deficient in accounting for the embodied and psychoemotional experience of disability, which has led to the exclusion of learning disabled people in its development. Lewis Hyde summarises this problem: "The models we devise to account for the world and the shapes we create to make ourselves at home in it are all too often inadequate to the complexity of things and end up deadened by their own exclusions" (1998:179). I found the use of labels and categories troubling, especially when noting the ways I have been changed through the process of the research engagement. I sought to avoid the use of deadened/dead-end categories through the application of Braidotti's (1994, 2013a) nomadic subjectivity and nomadic ethics, and, while the boundary-work appeared inescapable for the purposes of writing this thesis, the experience of the research engagement and my making in response to that experience highlights where the edges become more fluid. However, it is also important not to lose sight of the structural inequalities that differently affect learning disabled people and non-learning disabled people. I re-state the critique of this thesis being in academic language that may not be accessible to learning disabled people, even while the practice presented has different permutations and generates different outcomes in a less fixed and less linear way than the writing. In future research, I will endeavour to translate this thesis into easy read and other accessible formats, drawing on the practice approaches developed and co-authoring with the artist-participants, to enact the findings as well as present them and improve accessibility for broader audiences.

My individual art practice became a site through which to uncover the impact of the eleven-month research engagement with the artist-participants on my artist identity. By necessity, this type of research will always include an analysis of the artist-researcher and the personal, institutional, and artistic resources they bring to the project. Initially approaching the research from my background as an artist-facilitator, the research prompted me to deconstruct the inherited frameworks that had shaped my understanding of what it means to be an artist and the hierarchies embedded in the facilitator/facilitated model in order to become cognisant of and engage with the artist-participants as artists in their own right. Adopting the mode of nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti 1994, 2013a) allowed me to conceptualise my artist identity as relational and shifting, open to reconstitution through engagement with people from different life experiences and positionalities. The research engagement afforded a "sustainable shift" (Braidotti, 2005/2006:unpag.) that was a departure from the mode of 'facilitator' to having a personally situated artist identity. Positioning both myself and the artist-participants as artists first and foremost levelled us as peers, where learning and transformation are multidirectional processes. Recognising my own need for inclusion, not only as a facilitator or enabler, but also as an artist in my own right, led to practice outcomes that reflect and embed the complexities of the research journey, such as difficulties around language and the drive to categorisation. This highlights the power of mutual peer support in reimagining the ethics and politics of making art in shared and solo spaces, regardless of whether the artists involved are learning-disabled or not. By reflecting on this personal narrative, the research offers insights that may be transferable to others working in similar contexts, suggesting that when certain relational and reflective conditions are in place, similar shifts in perception and practice may emerge.

Approaching practice as both a method and mode of knowledge generation, I refocused my making practices around the key markers of artist identity identified by the artist-participants. Most significantly, this involved entering a new practice setting (a studio) and recentring material engagement, experimentation, and personal themes and vulnerability, all of which have become core values in my practice. Key making strategies included layering within and across works, cross-media conversations, and engaging in dual processes of deconstruction and reconstruction that often remained unfixed and unresolved. I

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conceptualised this as 'expanded collage', which opens multiple new pathways for making and permits continual accumulation and movement, mirroring and actualising the process of shifting identity and the proliferation of new potentialities. The works created during the period of solo, studio-based research represent a significant development in my practice.

While my solo studio work was more introspective and cathartic, drawing on my mental health experience and anxieties around the research hierarchies, *632700* (2022) reintroduced social art aspects and added a positive, community and future-oriented lens to the practice research. Both approaches to practice affirmed my artist identity in different ways, and greater correspondence between the social and material aspects of my practice was realised in *632700* (2022). The conflict of authorship in participatory art is an important issue, especially when it involves people who may have others making decisions for them. My awareness of these issues in earlier periods of my career led to confusion in my artist identity and reduced possibilities for vulnerability in my practice. *632700* (2022) was my first experience of addressing this by holding onto both my own practice interests, identified during the studio-based research, and creating a space for others to contribute what was important to them. This avoided affording only a nominal or choreographed level of participation (Helguera, 2011), while also assuring my position in the work did not recede to a facilitator role. Through this work, a practice-informed approach to co-production was developed that foregrounds inclusion by affirming artist identity across a range of contributors.

Exploring the effect of the research engagement through my practice development and utilising Braidotti's (1994, 2013a) nomadic subjectivity and nomadic ethics as a grounding principle and research tool points to different ways of working and relating. The key research finding of shifting subject positions can be taken up by artists working in facilitation contexts by:

- Moving from a facilitator to a peer-artist position, working *alongside* learning disabled artists to think, make, and reflect.
- Letting go of an authoritative position to step into vulnerability and shared processual learning.

- Reframing 'access' as something one delivers, to 'inclusion' that involves everyone in the space.

- Enabling artist identity as a component of participation.

- Moving from fixed roles to fluid subjectivities that are co-constituted.

To support artist-facilitators in exploring these shifts, the following page offers *A Compositional Framework for Inclusive Practice,* in the form of a workshop handout, that draws from the composition of *632700* (2022). By considering the framing elements of inclusion and exclusion within an art project, a more reflexive approach to inclusion can emerge.

A Compositional Framework for Inclusive Practice

Abstract background: What are the theoretical frameworks that inform your thinking? What are the underlying assumptions? What subjective becomings and ways of relating to others do these frameworks allow or inhibit? How do these frameworks shape who is considered a 'knower', 'expert', or 'artist'? What alternatives exist or could be centred in your practice?

White band: What is 'inside' and what is 'outside' the frame of reference? Where does that binary fall down? What connects all of the different elements? How can disparate parts be brought into conversation? How do you ensure each voice or contribution retains its integrity within the collective whole? Where does authorship sit, and how might it be held in common, or diffused? What new worlds can be made together?

Landscape: What are the institutional and environmental contexts that are shaping the possibility of subjective becomings? What permissions or limitations are embedded in these contexts? How do they shape what can be seen, said, made, and valued? What alternatives exist? What informal or overlooked systems of support are present? What counts as 'quality' or 'success', and who defines this? How can these contexts be worked with creatively, pushed against, or altogether shed?

Perpetual motion: How can you allow people, materials, and artworks to remain unfixed, unresolved, or in motion? What new possibilities emerge from this? How do you make room for change over time, in the artwork, the people involved, and yourself? What repetitions, rhythms, and variations can you utilise to shift relationalities? How might the work evolve outside of your control, and how do you feel about letting it? What practices support long-term or cyclical peer-affirmation, rather than a single moment of participation?

Person: Who is in the room? Who is missing? What are the situated identities of yourself and others, and what roles are you adopting? Where do you and others align, and where do you diverge? What parts of yours and others' identities are foregrounded in this work, and which are backgrounded? Where can you remain open to subjective shifts? What do you need, creatively, professionally, or emotionally, to feel included as an artist? What is the quality of your interpersonal relationships, and what foundation is this built on? What changes when you focus on affirming artist identity, as well as enabling participation? Where is vulnerability made possible, and where is it avoided? How are interdependencies navigated, named, or masked? What could peer-affirmation look like as a method of engagement?

Object: What materials are in the space? How do you work with them? How are they informing your way of acting and being? What narratives and metaphors do they carry? Where are they differently coded, for example, as requiring skill, or not? Where do they support relational engagement, and where do they complicate it? What does the process and outcome of making illuminate?

Opportunities and recommendations for supported studios and the art world

The findings evidence that Venture Arts and other supported studios are a vital bridge between learning disabled artists and the art world. Before their development, learning disabled artists either practiced in isolation or in psychiatric units and were conceptualised in relation to Outsider Arts. Venture Arts and supported studios break the idea of the 'outsider' by challenging the structural and material exclusions of contemporary art and creating points of correspondence.

Opportunities for supported studios to continue and expand this work are centred around further handing over control to learning disabled artists and ensuring that all aspects of artists' careers are made available to the artists they support. Particularly identified in this research is the need to (1) create opportunities for learning disabled artists to participate in artist-led activities beyond supported studios and (2) support learning disabled artists to prepare their own work for exhibitions.

Because the significance of peer-relationships has been identified, having greater opportunities for mixing between learning disabled artists and non-learning disabled artists is significant. Programmes from Venture Arts, including *The Conversation Series*[47] and *CoLab,*[48] which recruit non-learning disabled artists into shared studio space and informal collaborations with learning disabled artists, offer this within the period of the programme delivery. To expand on this further, supported studios should consider interventions such as renting studio space in external artist studios and supporting learning disabled artists to work there, supporting learning disabled artists to access and attend artist-led activities such as crit groups and making clubs hosted by non-learning disabled artists or artist studios, supporting learning disabled artists to develop their own artist-led initiatives such as programming group exhibitions, or creating shared peer-to-peer spaces that are not time bound. Part of the work of supported studios in delivering this should include offering consultation or training to artist-led spaces regarding how to become more accessible.

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[47] The Conversation Series has run twice, in 2016-17, and 2018-19 (Venture Arts, no date-b).
[48] CoLab is a current project (Venture Arts, no date-c).

Supported studios should ensure that learning disabled artists are involved in their own exhibitions by building in enough lead-in time to support artists to make choices about how their work is presented, for example, by taking them to commercial print shops and framers to view samples and make choices about how their work is finished for presentation. Learning disabled artists should also be included in conversations with curators and gallerists whenever their work is being discussed and supported to input into curatorial decisions, with a view to developing and sustaining their own curation strategies and professional networks. Supported studios should advise organisations that make art funding and commissions available on how to make their application process accessible, and support learning disabled artists to plan projects and make their own applications. Additionally, learning disabled artists should be supported to create their own portfolios, websites, artist statements, and exhibition interpretation, to have greater control over the way their work meets audiences. This research shows that learning disabled artists have strong and clear ideas about their own practice, and contextualising their practice with their voices publicly could shift what is deemed acceptable language around contemporary art. By supporting learning disabled artists to access and build skills around the full gamut of activities that make up an artist career, they will become more able to continue their practice in the event that they can no longer access a supported studio, for example, if they have to relocate to a different geographic area or have a change in income. These recommendations do not preclude the possibility that learning disabled artists will need continued access support in all of these areas, but suggest that support should be extended beyond the supported studio environment and into other areas that comprise an artist career in the UK. Curators and other art professionals will need to be willing to reassess their practices to allow for learning disabled artists to engage with or without support, and the increased interest in diversity and inclusion in the UK art sector suggests a level of goodwill that learning disabled artists and supported studios should capitalise on to improve accessibility in the field holistically.

Conversely, reading supported studios through the affirmation model (Swain and French, 2000; 2008) also suggests a model of practice that would benefit non-learning disabled artists. The artist-participants benefited from Venture Arts taking on most of the

administration, such as producing funding applications, networking and studio maintenance, inherent parts of most artists' career trajectory, as it allowed them to focus on their practice. All artists would benefit from such support. Artist-led spaces and mainstream arts organisations that seek to support early-career artists, those not represented by a gallery, those without independent wealth or access to influential networks to maintain a career without taking on other employment, or those not in a privileged or successful enough position to employ assistants, should learn from the supported studio model to develop approaches that would enable artists to give greater focus to their practice over the ancillary tasks of self-employment. Rather than contradicting the previous point about opening access to these areas, I suggest that support for all artists should centre on their practice. However, learning-disabled artists should not be excluded from the additional tasks that make up an artist's career in the UK to support their ongoing practice development and resilience.

Another area for future research pertains to the critical quality of feedback offered by facilitators in supported studios. The artist-participants noted that the affirming environment and positive relationships at Venture Arts supported their artist identity and practice development. Hewitt and Hirst gained additional benefits from sharing their practice with non-learning disabled artists outside of the supported studio, which included new insights on their practice and challenges to their existing understandings, which grew their practices and further embedded their artist identities. Further research could explore the balance in feedback between being supportive and encouraging and being critical enough to challenge and enable new perspectives.

Whilst this research has looked at a very small group of artists, a multi-disciplinary research team that gathers and analyses quantitative data (historical and recent) would be able to ascertain the impactful institutional funding initiatives or changes, such as those initiated by the Arts Council England's *Creative Case for Diversity* (2011). Considerations might include:

- The impact of inclusion policies on learning disabled artists;
- The representation of artworks by learning disabled artists in major UK
- collections and exhibitions;

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- The conditions attached to collection and display policies, and how these might open up or restrict access for learning disabled artists;
- The representation of learning disabled artists in commercial galleries and private collections of contemporary art;
- The policies or practices that art galleries and museums have for working directly with learning disabled artists beyond the supported studio model;
- How art education in schools, Further Education and Higher Education could more
- inclusive for learning disabled artists in aspects such as the admission process, information formats, teaching styles, and recognition of different support needs.

These opportunities and suggested research areas identified in this section could catalyse change in the art sector and offer a continuous chain of development and support for learning disabled artists that shifts their practices from community/learning spaces into artist-led and mainstream contemporary art spaces.

Final thoughts

This research affirms that peer-to-peer artist learning can exist beyond the boundaries of dis/ability and serves as a form of validation of learning disabled artists. Everyone presented as a case study in this thesis considers themselves to be an artist making art, and that's the common ground between us. This research suggests "alliances for change" by identifying points of common interest between disabled and non-disabled people (Tregaskis, 2004:91). However, in seeking common ground, it is again important to recognise the position of power I hold as a non-learning disabled artist and researcher. I have been able to access traditional routes of validation, such as an art school education, and do not experience stigma on the grounds of learning disability, nor am I impacted by barriers relating to communication or information in the contemporary art field. In making the case for learning disabled artist to be understood as artists, I advocate for the removal of attitudinal and material barriers that can negatively impact learning disabled artists' subjective artistic becomings. Learning disabled artists have been shown not only to have validity as artists artists with a deep connection to their practices, but also as valuable peer-artists whose inclusion can have a significant impact on others.

This thesis is part of a broader conversation within the contemporary art sector regarding learning disabled artists. While finalising this conclusion, Nnena Kalu, a learning disabled artist working at supported studio Action Space in London, was nominated for the 2025 Turner Prize. This highlights that learning disabled artists can produce work at the highest level, are progressively being recognised for that work, and dedicated supporters are consistently taking steps to advance this trend in UK culture. At the same time, the funding landscape for arts and culture in the UK is becoming increasingly difficult, and some supported studios will be at risk. These conversations are unfinished and ongoing, and their implications for learning disabled artists and supported studios are yet to be fully realised. The work of this thesis is to demonstrate and affirm the artist identity of learning disabled artists, as well as the relational effects that can come from a shared learning disabled/non-learning disabled arts ecology. Emlyn Scott shared this recent feedback: "i think honestly think your thesis shoud be given the top score (i dont know what that is in uni talk lol) youve brought serious light to a very misunderstood and ignored area of art." And I can't ask for a better review than that!

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Appendix 1 – participant information sheet (easy read)
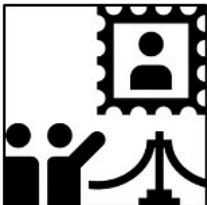
Participant Information Sheet
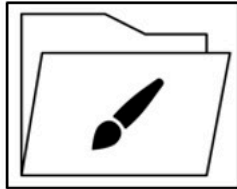
Challenging Outsider Art: How are learning disabled artists informing contemporary art?

1. Invitation to research

My name is **Anne-Marie Atkinson**. I am an **artist**. That's a photo of me →	
I am also a **PhD student** at Manchester Metropolitan University.	
I am doing a **research project** to find out how learning disabled artists are informing contemporary art. **Informing** means introducing new ideas. **Contemporary art** broadly means art made since the 1960s up to the current day, often seen in art galleries.	

I also want to find out how learning disabled artists could be **better supported** to become professional artists.	
If you think you might be interested in this research project, I would like to invite you to **consider taking part**.	WELCOME

2. Why have I been invited?
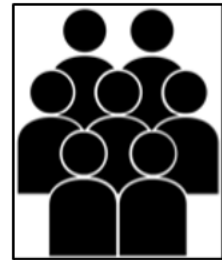
I am seeking people with learning disabilities who: • Have a strong interest in art • Want to explore ways to become a professional contemporary artist • Are interested in being part of a research project	
Everyone will be age 18+. No-one will be selected or turned away on grounds of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, old age, or disability.	18+
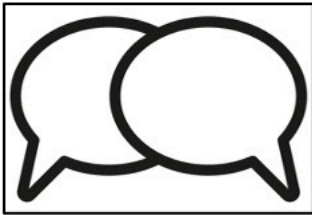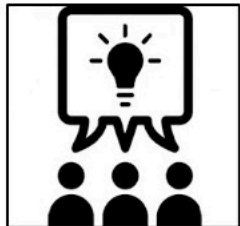
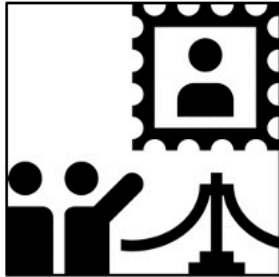**3. Do I have to take part?**
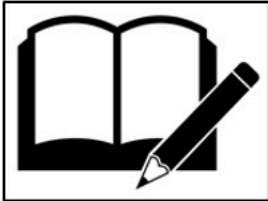
It is **up to you** to decide.	
I will describe the research and go through this information sheet, which you can then take home.	
You can have someone with you while we go through the sheet, if you like. This could be a support worker, family member/guardian, or someone from Venture Arts.	
If you have any questions, please ask. **Questions are good!** If you think of a question after our meeting, let Venture Arts know using the contact details on the back page and I will send an answer back to you through them.	

You don't need to decide straight away. You can take up to **30 days** to think it through before making a decision.	
If you decide to take part, I will ask you to **sign a consent form** to show you agreed to take part.	
You are **free to withdraw** at any time, without giving a reason.	
This will **not affect anything else** you do at Venture Arts.	

Appendix 10: Stage 2 (Fieldwork)

Participant Information Sheet (easy read)

4. What will I be asked to do?

What does taking part involve?	Coming to a weekly session, starting in September 2019, and continuing for 12 months.	
Where?	At the Venture Arts studio. Some days we might go on trips to different places.	
What day and time?	Thursday, late afternoon to early evening. This is so we can visit 'Thursday Lates' events, if we want to.	
Who else would be there?	There will 5 - 8 people taking part. The group will be made up of people both with and without learning disabilities. There may also be support workers and someone from Venture Arts to help out.	

What will happen in sessions?	I will share information that will help the group get started. I will also facilitate arts workshops using things like photography, drawing, and clay. The group will share ideas, have discussions, and work together. The sessions will be very creative. People may work alone on artworks, or in pairs, small groups, or as a whole group.	
What will we talk about?	We will talk about what it is like for artists with learning disabilities: what is good, what is not good, and what you would like to change. We will also discuss the artworks made during sessions.	
Who is in charge?	I am the researcher, but the group will be my co-researchers. This means that they can lead parts of the research to explore their interests. Decisions will be made together.	

Throughout the research...	Everyone will keep a record of their thoughts and ideas using a research journal. I will also be recording research data in a journal, and will take photographs, video and audio. These will be used to help answer my research questions.	
Near the end...	There will be opportunities to share artworks made by group members in public exhibitions. Everyone who wants to can contribute to this. I will also produce a publication to share the research, and group members can contribute to making this too.	

5. Are there any risks if I participate?

There is a risk of a **data breech** to confidential information. Steps are taken to guard against this (see Section 8). Printed copies of confidential data will be stored in a secure locked cupboard that only my PhD supervisors have the key to.	

Digital copies of confidential data (including photographs) will be stored on the **secure MMU H: drive**. I will never store digital confidential data on personal or portable devices.	**H:** drive
5 years after the study has ended all copies of **data will be destroyed**.	**5** years
There is a risk of discomfort due to discussing **difficult issues** such as exclusion and discrimination. I will ensure all discussions are relevant to the research. If anyone feels upset they will be supported to take a break from the conversation. Any concerns will be used to improve how thing are done next time.	
Some of the materials used in the workshops may carry risk, such as using **sharp tools** or hot glue. I will ensure that **safe working** practices are followed at all times.	
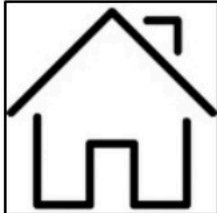
As with all projects, there is a small risk of unforeseen issues. I have completed a **risk assessment** to share with everyone who takes part. We will follow health and safety protocols at all times.	

6. Are there any advantages if I participate?

The research provides an opportunity for artists to **grow and develop** their practice, extend their network, and present their work in a public exhibition(s) and in a publication distributed widely to cultural institutions.	
The research may contribute to **new ideas** about art, artists, and social justice. We may try new ways of doing things, which may be very **inspiring**.	

I will provide:	
All art materials	
Studio space to work in	
Snacks and drinks	
Reasonable travel expresses	

7. What will happen to the artworks that I make?

Artworks will be **stored at Venture A**rt for the duration of the research.	
The creator of any artworks will always be the owner(s) of it. If I want to use an artwork in an exhibition I will ask the owner, and provide a **borrowing agreement** that must be signed by both parties.	
After the fieldwork and exhibitions have ended, the owners can **take their artworks home**.	

| If I want to publically share an image or video/sound clip of a group member or their artwork, I will ask for consent and provide an image release form that must be signed by both parties. | |

8. What will happen with the data I provide?

When you agree to participate in this research, I will collect **personally-identifiable information** from you (such as name and contact details).	
Participants can use their real name, or chose an artist pseudonym. In that case, their personally-identifiable data will kept **confidential**. (See Section 5). Only myself and my supervisors will have access to the key to link the research data and personally-identifiable data together.	

I will **share your personal data with Venture Arts** (the community partner on this research) in order to fulfil the research purposes. We will **only retain your personal data for as long as is necessary** to achieve the research purpose.

The following information is provided by MMU:

Manchester Metropolitan University ('the University') is the Data Controller in respect of this research and any personal data that you provide as a research participant.

The University is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), and manages personal data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University's Data Protection Policy.

As a public authority acting in the public interest we rely upon the 'public task' lawful basis. When we collect special category data (such as medical information or ethnicity) we rely upon the research and archiving purposes in the public interest lawful basis.

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained.

*If your data is shared this will be under the terms of a Research Collaboration Agreement which defines use, and agrees confidentiality and information security provisions. It is the University's policy to only publish anonymised data unless you have given your explicit written consent to be identified in the research. **The University never sells personal data to third parties.***

We will only retain your personal data for as long as is necessary to achieve the research purpose.

For further information about use of your personal data and your data protection rights please see the University's Data Protection Pages.

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9. What will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the data to **answer my research questions and write my PhD thesis**. Some of the artworks and/or may go into exhibitions and/or publications, as detailed in Sections 4 and 7 of this Participant Information Sheet.	

10. Who has reviewed this research project?

My PhD supervisors from MMU and Venture Arts have reviewed this research project:

Professor Amanda Ravetz

Dr. Clive Parkinson.

Amanda Sutton.

The MMU Ethics committee has reviewed and approved this research project.

11. Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?

For general questions about the research project, contact me (the researcher):

Anne-Marie Atkinson

Anne-marie.atkinson@stu.mmu.ac.uk

07890064998

Based at: Post Graduate Arts and Humanities Centre, Righton Building, Manchester

Metropolitan University, Cavendish St, Manchester M15 6BG

To contact my PhD supervisor:

Professor Amanda Ravetz

A.ravetz@mmu.ac.uk

0161 247 4606

Based at: Room 108, Righton Building, Manchester Metropolitan University, Cavendish St,

Manchester M15 6BG

To contact the Faculty Research Degrees Committee:

Katherine Walthall, Research Group Officer

k.walthall@mmu.ac.uk

0161 247 6673

Based at: Room 123, Geoffrey Manton Building, Manchester Metropolitan University,

Rosamond St W, Manchester, M15 6EB

If you have any concerns regarding the personal data collected from you, our Data

Protection Officer can be contacted using the legal@mmu.ac.uk e-mail address, by calling

0161 247 3331 or in writing to: Data Protection Officer, Legal Services, All Saints Building,

Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, M15 6BH. You also have a right to lodge a

complaint in respect of the processing of your personal data with the Information

Commissioner's Office as the supervisory authority. Please see:

https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us/

THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT

Appendix 2 – consent form

Consent Form (Fieldwork)

Research title: *'Challenging Outsider Art: How are learning disabled artists informing contemporary art?'*

Researcher: Anne-Marie Atkinson

Please refer to the participant information sheet/video for the full project information. If you decide that you would like to take part in the research project, the next step is to let Venture Arts know and complete this consent form. Consent means deciding whether or not you agree with something, and answering yes or no. If you wish, you can have support to complete this form from myself, a support worker, a family member/legal guardian, or someone from Venture Arts.

Your name: ....

In the research, how would you like to be identified? (Highlight one)

Your name (as written above)

An artist pseudonym (please write) ....

Manchester Metropolitan University

Venture Arts

Please initial or tick box

	Yes	No
I agree to take part in the research, which is to explore how learning disabled artists are informing contemporary art.		

	Yes	No
The researcher has explained using the Participant Information Sheet and/or Video what the study is about, what will happen, and how I will be kept safe. I understood everything that was said and am satisfied with the information.		

	Yes	No
I understand that I will attend a weekly session to engage in arts activities and discussions with the researcher, and possibly with a group of other participants. Weekly sessions will continue for up to 9 months.		

	Yes	No
I understand that the researcher will write notes, and document the research with photographs, video & audio.		

	Yes	No
I understand how the researcher's notes, photos and video will be used and stored, and that they will be shared at times with the researcher's supervisors from MMU and Venture Arts.		

	Yes	No
I understand that the researcher will use the research data to answer the research question and write their thesis.		
I understand that the researcher may use direct quotes in any publications, attributed to my name or the pseudonym I have given on this consent form.		
I understand that I can change how I am referred to in the research (by name or pseudonym) up until the point of publication. After publication, I will no longer be able to change my mind, because my data will be in the public domain.		
I understand that the thesis will be stored in the British Library after it is accepted at the end of the research, and the researcher may publish shorter journal articles using the research data at earlier times.		
I understand how my personal information will be protected by the researcher and the data controller, Manchester Metropolitan University.		
I understand that I am free to stop taking part in the research at any time without giving a reason, and it will not affect anything else I do at Venture Arts.		

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I understand that if I do stop taking part in the research, my data up until that point may still be used by the researcher, attributed to my name or an pseudonym.

Yes	No

If the researcher wants to share an image of me or my artwork, I understand I can decide whether or not to give specific consent on an image release form.

Yes	No

If the researcher wants to share an artwork made by me in an exhibition, I understand I can decide whether or not to on a borrowing form.

Yes	No

I agree to the use of video conferencing software (e.g. Skype or Zoom) to conduct the research during the Covid-19 lockdown. I am aware that I enter into a separate agreement with the software company when I agree to their privacy policy and terms and conditions, independent of Manchester Met.

Yes	No

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Name (please print) ....

Signed (participant)... Date ....

Anne-Marie Atkinson

Signed (researcher) ....Date ....

Witness name (please print) ....

Witness (signature) .... Date ....

Contact details

You can contact me with the following details:

anne-marie.atkinson@stu.mmu.ac.uk

07890064998

To contact me via Venture Arts:

Venture Arts – ask for Amanda Sutton

https://venturearts.org/

info@venturearts.org

0161 232 1223

My supervisor at the Manchester Metropolitan University is Amanda Ravetz:

a.ravetz@mmu.ac.uk

0161 247 4606

Appendix 3 – list of completed artworks submitted with the thesis

Title, year, medium, dimensions	Fig.	Pg
Theses - Print, 2019, photocopier ink on paper, 21x29.7cm.	3.1 & 3.2	109 & 110
Theses - Bound 1, 2019, printed A4 paper, white tissue paper, black card, coloured celphane, bookbinding studs and thread, three pieces each approx. 10.5x29.7x9cm.	3.3	111
Theses - Bound 2, 2019, printed acetate, bookbinding rings, 21x29.7x4cm	3.4	112
Theses - Film 1, 2019, looped film, dimensions variable.	3.5	112
Theses - Film 2, 2019, looped film, dimensions variable.	3.6	113
Tectonic Fieldnotes, 2020. (Atkinson, 2020), digital image, dimensions variable.	3.7	115
Research Voice (after Ellison), 2021. (Atkinson, 2020), digital image, dimensions variable.	3.8	115
Manifesto-No, 2020, digital print, 91.44x450.71cm.	3.9 & 3.10	117 & 118
I no longer recognise any authority that limits my power, 2023, LED neon, 200x80cm.	3.11	119
The revolution will not be made in the first draft, 2023, digital print, 91.44x218.22cm.	3.12 & 3.13	120 & 121
Research Questions 2, 2024, GIF, dimensions variable.	3.14	122
Research Questions 3, 2024, GIF, dimensions variable.	3.15	123
Six line drawings configurations 1-6, 2021, graphite powder on textured card, dimensions variable.	3.16-3.21	125 & 126
Even Dust Is Sacred, 2021, pencil on tracing paper, floor paint, wood, 45x105x45cm.	3.22 & 3.23	128 & 129
Floor Prints, 2022, ink, paper, digital print, six pieces each 29.7x42cm.	3.24 & 3.25	131

Dog Hair and Dust - Bowls, 2022-23, white ceramic, black slip, four pieces each 24cm diameter.	3.27 & 3.28	134 & 135
Moving Ghouls, 2022-23, mixed media on Perspex, bespoke shelves, spotlight, 42x59.4x15cm.	3.35 & 3.36	138
Immersion (I dream of drowning), 2023, ink on paper, collage, 56.5x73.5cm (unframed).	3.41 & 3.42	144 & 145
Folly (complications you could do without), 2023, black clay, white glaze, dimensions variable.	3.47 & 3.48	149 & 150
Four rods for my own back, 2023, glass neon, dimensions variable.	3.47 & 3.48	149 & 150
The Source, 2023, mixed media on glass, bespoke frame, 125x244cm.	3.53 & 3.54	155 & 156
Drawn Through, 2023, curated exhibition.	3.50-3.56	154-157
632700, 2022, co-produced digital collage containing mixed media works, bespoke algorithm.	4.1-4.3	161 & 162

Bibliography of published writing (during the research period)

Atkinson, A-M. (2019) 'Relational ethics, relational aesthetics: How does Critical Disability Studies meet socially engaged, participatory and collaborative art practices in the work of artists with learning disabilities?' [Conference paper/online] https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ihuman/our-work/marginalised-humans/new-directions-critical-disability-studies/relational-ethics-relational-aesthetics

Atkinson, A-M. (2020) 'Being Alongside and Becoming Researcher: Art Practice, Accountability and Convergence in the Studio.' *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 39(4) pp.855-69.

Atkinson, A-M. (2021) 'Exploring the place of learning disabled artists in contemporary art.' [Online] https://venturearts.org/news/blog-exploring-the-place-of-learning-disabled-artists-in-contemporary-art/

Atkinson, A-M. (2021) 'Exploring the place of learning disabled artists in contemporary art: part 2' [Online] https://venturearts.org/news/blog-exploring-the-place-of-learning-disabled-artists-in-contemporary-art-part-2/

Atkinson, A-M. (2021) 'Artist Open Studio with Anne-Marie Atkinson' [Online] https://venturearts.org/news/event-artist-open-studio-with-anne-marie-atkinson/

Atkinson, A-M. (2021) 'Artist Spotlight: Louise Hewitt' [Online] https://venturearts.org/news/blog-artist-spotlight-louise-hewitt/