

Collection Development, Cultural Heritage,
and Digital Humanities



INCLUSIVE CURATING IN CONTEMPORARY ART A PRACTICAL GUIDE

by
JADE FRENCH

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PREFACE

MY JOURNEY TO writing this book began in 2010 in the unlikely surroundings of the offices of Mencap, a British charity that supports intellectually-disabled people. I had been working with Mencap as part of my job at a small community theatre in London, and during that time I met Barbara, a woman with intellectual disabilities who was also a keen visual artist. After meeting one day by chance Barbara asked if she could show me some of her artwork to which I happily agreed.

Barbara carefully unwrapped her artworks and leant them against the office's lavender painted walls. She pointed towards an azure blue mono-print of a bird and explained; "I had one just like this shown at the Outsider Art Fair." "Wow" I replied, "That's an amazing achievement." The Outsider Art Fair is considered the premier event for self-taught artists, taking place in plush venues across Paris and New York annually; it's a big deal. She did not, however, seem as pleased. I learnt that Barbara, along with many intellectually-disabled artists I have since encountered, had not been included in the decision to exhibit her work or had a say in how her work was presented, interpreted, and mediated to the public. She had not been supported to attend the exhibition where her work was displayed or had even seen pictures. How could this happen? I was unnerved and perplexed.

For me, this experience marks a pivotal point in my practice. It ignited an interest in devising ways to support intellectually-disabled artists to have autonomy in how their work was made *and exhibited*. Soon after in 2011 I enrolled on a postgraduate degree at the University of Brighton. Here I began to research curating with intellectually-disabled people resulting in the pop-up arts festival *The Dugout* (2013) in London's Hoxton Arches. Later in 2014, I was awarded a Collaborative Doctoral Award from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to undertake PhD research at the University of Leeds with self-advocacy group Halton Speak Out and Bluecoat's inclusive arts project Blue Room resulting in the exhibition *Auto Agents*: further developing this research.

Much of what lies within these pages has seeds within these initial projects. But although my interests in inclusive curating began with the aim of increasing artistic autonomy for intellectually-disabled artists, it quickly became apparent that this work could be applied more broadly and be useful to others working in the museum sector. I have therefore written this book with the hope of providing greater utility and application of this original work. By doing this, I hope to contribute not just an inclusive curatorial process but also broaden the ways in which curating (and crucially the curator) is defined.

INTRODUCTION

“SO, WHAT IS A CURATOR ANYWAY?”

A monumental question asked so casually, and at that particular moment, I had no answer. This fleeting exchange with inclusive curator Eddie during our first curatorial meeting remains a memorable one.¹ It cuts to the heart of a key question concerning the practice of inclusive curating: what does a curator actually *do*?

A century ago the role of a curator conjured an image of a singular figure in a museum’s basement: tending, caring, and cataloguing collections and artefacts. Yet over recent decades curating has moved beyond any singular definition and now occupies a much broader scope of activities, practices, and professions. The modern-day curator is not only a carer and preserver of cultural heritage, they are influential selectors, interpreters, commissioners, activists, artists, and tastemakers. The curator, once a behind-the-scenes caring figure who “tended” ground, has evolved to one who actively secures, organizes, and landscapes it; becoming the culturally central figure we know today.²

But despite significant transformation, curating has an enduring reputation as an exclusive job for a privileged few. The curator’s status as a powerful “expert” and “gatekeeper” persists, with art critic David Sylvester claiming that the most important people in the cultural world are not artists but in fact curators, “the true brokers of the art world.”³ Curators have risen to such prominence particularly within contemporary art, with some gaining almost celebrity-like status, because of their increased importance in mediating between institutions, artists, the academy, market forces, and crucially, publics.⁴

Alongside this evolution of the curator, recent decades have also witnessed a radical re-examination of the museum’s role, purpose, and responsibility in society. Traditional concepts of what a museum is and how it should operate have been met with new intellectual, social, and political concerns regarding the legitimacy of specialized knowledge, bias in collecting and display, and the museum’s civic purpose.⁵ Museums have therefore become increasingly aware of reflecting in both exhibitions and collections the voices of communities in more respectful and equitable ways,⁶ moving towards more collaborative and participatory approaches to exhibition making.⁷

For many museum practitioners, including communities in curating has become an accepted, if not necessary, way of creating exhibitions. Numerous labels have emerged

1 French, “Art as Advocacy,” 52.

2 Balzer, *Curationism*, 40.

3 Millard, *The Tastemakers*, 108.

4 Sheikh, “The Trouble with Institutions.”

5 Pearce, “General Preface to Series,” 1.

6 Sandell et al., ed., *Re-Presenting Disability*.

7 Golding, *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*.

to describe a range of approaches: “community curation,”⁸ “coproduction,”⁹ “constituent curator,”¹⁰ “team approach,”¹¹ “external party,”¹² “collaborative curation,”¹³ and “public curation”¹⁴ to name but a few. In her book *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon also identifies categories that aim to articulate the varying approaches to how museums enable communities to participate:¹⁵ which are differentiated according to where the power to define projects and the capacity to make decisions resides.¹⁶ Her category “co-creation” happens when communities and the museum work together from “the beginning to define the project’s goals, and generate the programme or exhibition based on the community’s interests,”¹⁷ crucially, it is about the community’s agendas. This may seem like a fairly straightforward definition, yet co-creation remains an area of museum work that is fraught with a myriad of practical and ethical difficulties.¹⁸ Academic and museum professional Bernadette Lynch, for example, has drawn attention to how such participatory models in museums often position communities, sometimes unknowingly, not as equal partners but as beneficiaries of the museum’s “generosity.”¹⁹

What is clear is that more robust models of inclusive and participatory approaches to curating which are able to support a greater emphasis on shared curatorial authority are required. Although discussion concerning community involvement in curating is present in museum literature, as well as amongst museum practitioners and communities themselves, gaps exist in understanding process and facilitation. This is where this book contributes. If “co-creation” has been acknowledged as a category by which to *define* a particular type of community participation in museums, then inclusive curating is a *process* by which to “do it”; recognizing the intimate relationship between not only *what* but *how* work is done.²⁰

What is Inclusive Curating? Who is an Inclusive Curator?

The process of inclusive curating shared in this book emerged by bringing together my artistic practice and experience of working with intellectually-disabled people through self-advocacy work and person-centred planning. Drawing on my experience as an

8 Schwartz and Adair, “Community as Curator.”

9 Graham, “The ‘co’ in Co-Production.”

10 Byrne et al., *The Constituent Museum*.

11 Doering, *The Making of Exhibitions*.

12 Davies, “The Co-Production of Temporary Museum Exhibitions.”

13 Golding, *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*.

14 Satwicz and Morrissey, “Public Curation.”

15 Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 180.

16 Govier, “Leaders in co-creation?,” 3.

17 Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 187.

18 Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*.

19 Lynch, “Collaboration, Contestation, and Creative Conflict.”

20 Janes, *Museums and the Paradox of Change*, 353.

inclusive artist, the prefix of “inclusive” also helpfully intersects with definitions of “inclusive arts practice”²¹ in that a key marker of this work is facilitation and collaboration.²²

With this in mind, inclusive curating is an applied process that works to demystify curating by breaking down curatorial tasks and decisions to enable more people to express their exhibition ideas as critical inclusive curators. Rather than a traditional curatorial model whereby a “professional” curator produces an exhibition, alternatively, inclusive curating is a process that empowers community groups to curate exhibitions with the guidance of a facilitator. From this perspective, inclusive curating relates to three basic questions: first, what are the curatorial tasks, second: how do the individuals involved work together, third: how are decisions made?

While museums have a history of including communities in the curation of exhibitions across art,²³ science,²⁴ anthropology,²⁵ history, and heritage,²⁶ the quality of such collaborations vary. Museums often approach communities with an exhibition subject already in place,²⁷ revealing a presumption on the part of the museum that they are the expert.²⁸ Equally, many collaborations between communities and museums are typically short-term and project-driven, meaning that they are designed to achieve a “particular objective normally within a very short period of time.”²⁹ Such fragmented approaches do little to challenge systemic inequalities within museums; rather, they reproduce hierarchies and maintain a status quo allowing inequalities to remain overlooked.³⁰ In contrast, inclusive curating is “slow curating,”³¹ with inclusive curatorial projects taking several years on average to complete. Quality collaborations require time and only through sustained partnership and embeddedness can institutional legacy be created. This is a sizeable commitment for all parties. However, for communities to authentically define the agenda of the exhibition, its curatorial approach, and work through a process of sharing authority and expertise, time is an essential ingredient.

But first, what do we even mean by a museum’s “community”? Who is this mysterious and desirable group with whom museums wish to connect, and potentially, empower as curators? At its worst, the term “community” is used as a blanket label

21 A field of artistic practice describing the creative collaborations between intellectually-disabled and non-intellectually-disabled artists.

22 Fox and Macpherson, *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research*.

23 Byrne et al., *The Constituent Museum*.

24 Bunning et al., “Embedding Plurality.”

25 Peers and Brown, *Museums and Source Communities*.

26 Golding, *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*.

27 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*.

28 Maranda, “The Voice of the Other,” 63.

29 Mutibwa, Hess, and Jackson, “Strokes of Serendipity,” 2.

30 Rooke, *Cultural Value: Curating Community?*, 4.

31 Johnston, “Slow Curating,” 25.

that obfuscates a number of minority groups³² and is seen to express a coded language.³³ Nonreflexive notions of “community” can also unhelpfully work to construct, fix, and divide people into seemingly homogenous groups, reinforcing what Waterton and Smith describe as “presumed differences between white, middle classes and ‘the rest,’ as well as between museum experts and ‘everybody else.’”³⁴ In this book, the term community is used to describe any group of like-minded people united by a common cause who are not typically a part of the museum’s permanent staff. It is a frame of reference that coalesces more broadly around shared interests or collective experiences, recognizing what many sociologists have claimed: communities are an incomplete process through which people continually construct, reconstruct, and create identities, whether geographically, virtually or imaginatively.³⁵ Communities are more often *social* creations that are continuously in motion, rather than fixed entities or descriptions.

It is through breaking down these ideas of communities, expertise, and collaboration that important questions emerge. Can curating ever be inclusive, when it is a practice largely based on selection and decision making? How do we make decisions collectively without diminishing accountability? What is the capacity of inclusive curatorial teams to influence museum practice and policy in a meaningful way? How might we address the perceived credibility of including “non-curators” in museums? Addressing these questions tends to generate new theories of what museums are and will involve major changes for the both the museum and discipline of curating: from inward to outward looking, from individual to collective, from reactive to proactive, from a singular voice to platforming multiple perspectives.

Why Curate Inclusively?

It is important to remember that curatorial practice in contemporary art has always sought to “extend boundaries,”³⁶ to innovate, and to test limits. Curatorial practice is less about orthodoxy and more a place for invention and experimentation.³⁷ It is essential to continue to expand our definitions of curating, and more importantly who we think of as potential curators.

Curating plays a key role in how our shared culture is constructed, portrayed, and legitimized. There is no neutral position and exhibition-makers continue to face choices concerning the ways in which they develop narratives.³⁸ This view spearheaded the famed 2017 #MuseumsAreNotNeutral campaign created by museum professionals Mike Murawski and LaTanya Autry which set out to refute the myth of neutrality that many

32 Ahmed and Fortier, “Re-Imagining Communities.”

33 Kinsley et al., “(Re)Frame,” 58.

34 Waterton and Smith, “The Recognition and Misrecognition of Community Heritage,” 5.

35 Neal and Walters, “Rural Be/Longing and Rural Social Organisations,” 237.

36 George, *The Curator’s Handbook*, 27.

37 Ibid., 37.

38 Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 195.

museum professionals and others put forward.³⁹ Yet, despite this increasing recognition of the museum as both non-neutral and active in shaping the way we perceive, think, and act, studies reveal that significant underrepresentation of people from diverse backgrounds remains⁴⁰ in curatorial roles across disability, ethnicity, class, gender, health, race, religion, socioeconomic status, and sexuality.⁴¹ Greater levels of public participation in curating is just one response to the evolving roles of museums in a postmodern, multicultural society. Inclusive curating, and the process shared within this book, is therefore intended to offer applied solutions in enabling a wider range of people to express themselves through curating. As a result, museums and museum professionals can advance their oft-stated goals of promoting representation and diversity.⁴²

Inclusive curating also has potential to enable museums to more fully embrace the opportunity to be allies with communities. “Ally practice,” writes exhibition designer Xander Karkruff, is a “framework that museum professionals can use to transform inclusive ideals into concrete actions.”⁴³ Echoing ambitions of what museum scholar Richard Sandell describes as “activist museum practices” whereby museums actively work to address social injustices, crises, and inequalities.⁴⁴ Museums have progressively experimented with curatorial practices that aim to critique and disrupt previously unquestioned exhibition and collection narratives and disciplinary knowledges. This territory is loaded with ethical pitfalls which a number of researchers⁴⁵ and curators⁴⁶ have sought to examine and, in the book *Museum Activism*,⁴⁷ I further examine inclusive curating as a potential activist practice. Yet what is clear is that museums must continue to examine and debate the language of “community,” “inclusion,” and “activism,” in light of real and valid questions of ethics, power, and control. Museums cannot continue, as Lynch describes, “to play the role of gatekeeper allowing access” and instead must enter into genuine creative partnerships between people in and out of the museum, to mutual benefit.⁴⁸

The richness of culture comes not just from its consumption. Richness comes from a broad range of people actively making and remaking culture;⁴⁹ this is in the same sense that academic Carol Rose describes culture as something that enriches rather than depletes the more people participate in or “use” it.⁵⁰ Too, as the role of curator continues to shift away from that of exclusively being a “gatekeeper,” communities can begin to have

39 Autry, “Changing the Things I Cannot Accept,” unpag.

40 Museums Association, *Power and Privilege in the 21st Century Museum*, 3.

41 BOP Consulting, “Character Matters,” 12.

42 Brook et al., “Panic!”

43 Karkruff, “Queer Matters,” 46.

44 Sandell et al., ed., *Re-Presenting Disability*, 3.

45 Sandell and Nightingale, *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*.

46 Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*.

47 French, “Auto Agents.”

48 Lynch, “If the Museum is the Gateway, Who is the Gatekeeper?,” 10.

49 Lessig, “Re-crafting a Public Domain,” 181.

50 Rose, “The Comedy of the Commons.”

a more prominent voice within museums, creating opportunities to unlock enriching exhibitions, projects, collections, and campaigns. Partnerships and community collaboration remains a useful source of new energy, new ideas, and new museum meanings.⁵¹ By bringing together diverse communities with different knowledge, experience, and “personal contexts”⁵² to curate, inclusive curating aims to generate a plurality of perspectives within the museum presenting a wider scope for rich interpretive opportunities.

That is not to say inclusive curating is a utopian solution for museums, but merely one tool by which we might address questions of inclusion, representation, and democracy. On the contrary, inclusive curating is messy. Tension between the inclusive curators, artists, and the museum will inevitably arise and those who wish to practise inclusive curating must be willing to embrace “passion and partisanship” which political theorist Chantal Mouffe emphasizes is essential in democratic social exchanges.⁵³ Also, Associate Professor of Museum Ethics Janet Marstine contends: “contemporary museum ethics is not a canon of ideas based on consensus” but rather “marked by differences in opinion from diverse contributors.”⁵⁴ By acknowledging the contested nature of art and the myth of museum neutrality, conflict can in fact be a constructive process that presents avenues to develop equitable and sustainable partnerships.⁵⁵ The challenge is neither to eliminate nor gloss over contention or “messiness” brought to light through inclusive curating, it is to mobilize it for democratic ends by practising a process of non-consensus. Admittedly, this is easier said than done, but the approach set out in this book makes space for conflicting views and such moments of tension are shared and discussed throughout the cases studies.

The Structure of this Book

This book is structured via six chapters. Following this introduction, the next five chapters describe the five-step process of inclusive curating: Facilitating Research; Finding the “Big Idea”; Acquiring Artwork; Developing Interpretation; Installation and Exhibition. Each of these chapters contains an outline of the process and key ideas alongside case studies taken from the inclusively curated exhibition *Auto Agents* to illuminate the process in action. Additionally, each chapter includes practical resources. The tools and activities have been designed to tackle inclusive curatorial tasks; group discussion, decision making, recruitment, planning, or reflection, as discussed throughout the book. That said, tools and templates are “blunt instruments”⁵⁶ and are best used when adapted to specifically fit both the project and participants; I happily invite readers to adapt these accordingly.

⁵¹ Jenkinson, “Museum Futures,” 53.

⁵² Klobe, *Exhibitions*, 69.

⁵³ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 2.

⁵⁴ Marstine, *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics*, 6.

⁵⁵ Fouseki, “Community Voices, Curatorial Choices,” 189.

⁵⁶ Belfiore and Bennett, “Beyond the ‘Toolkit Approach,’” 122.

This introductory chapter presents an overview of the curator's changing role and remit to provide context around inclusive curating and its emergence. This includes a historic review of the curator's role from its origins in the fifteenth century and the "Wunderkammer," to the rise of group exhibitions in the nineteenth century, to the curator as artist in the late twentieth century. Throughout key concerns are highlighted: namely the curator's reputation for being a powerful "gatekeeper" and "expert" and curating in relation to autonomy and authorship. This chapter also introduces the facilitator: the role central to enabling inclusive curating and concludes by introducing this book's case study, the exhibition *Auto Agents* (2016) at Bluecoat, Liverpool's centre for contemporary arts. This exhibition was curated by five intellectually-disabled artists and explored complex issues of independence and autonomy, resulting in new arts commissions, a non-textual approach to interpretation, and a programme of public events.

Chapter one "Facilitating Research" is the first step in facilitating inclusive curating. This chapter discusses ways to support inclusive curators to undertake effective research in museums to inform their own exhibition and curatorial strategies. This includes supporting them to identify and discuss any access barriers when visiting art museums in their own terms, as well as observing diverse curatorial styles across different museums. How is a solo exhibition curated differently from a group exhibition? How does an artist-led space curate differently to a large institution? With the help of the activities provided in the toolkit, and by drawing on a case study of a research visit to Tate Liverpool, this chapter shows ways to support this type of critical thinking and observation.

Chapter two "Finding the Big Idea" explores how to support inclusive curators to devise a curatorial framework for their exhibition. What will their exhibition be about? What concepts or issues will it address? These questions are answered by groups identifying shared experiences and looking towards their own lives and identities, which crucially, may differ from or challenge the dominant narrative of the museum. This chapter presents PATH and zine making as an effective methodology by which to enable group planning, discussion, and reflection on these topics. Case studies are also shared from *Auto Agents* demonstrating how zine making and arts-based enquiry enabled intellectually-disabled curators to develop the title of their exhibition.

Chapter three is "Acquiring Artworks." During this step, inclusive curators require facilitation to select artists and artworks for their exhibition. This chapter shares ways to support them in the development of their own artistic networks: cultivating relationships with artists, collections, or artworks. Furthermore, this chapter explores the possibilities of supporting inclusive curators to commission contemporary artworks. Commissioning artwork is a unique role of contemporary art curators. This chapter discusses how to develop artist briefs, interview artists, and participate in the development the commissioned works, all under the umbrella of inclusivity. In this chapter, issues and challenges of authorship are also discussed with the help of case studies and activities.

Chapter four is "Developing Interpretation." At this stage in the curatorial process inclusive curators would have researched museums and exhibitions, developed a theme for their own exhibition, acquired artworks for their programme, and may be commissioning new works for display. They are now tasked with developing interpretation.

Interpretation, broadly speaking, is anything that helps visitors make sense of an exhibition. This typically includes artist statements, captions, wall texts, catalogues, tours, and increasingly digital tools and devices. This chapter introduces the key debates and challenges of interpretation in art museums, including questioning the “authoritative voice” of the institution and reliance on inaccessible language or “Artspeak.”⁵⁷ This chapter draws upon a case study exploring a non-textual approach to interpretation, reflecting the ways the inclusive curators of *Auto Agents* differently read, write, and communicate as well as “Drawing Tours.”

Chapter five is “Installation and Exhibition.” During this final step, inclusive curators are supported to finalize where the artworks will be located inside the gallery space, as well as planning the installation of the exhibition. Given that the placement of artwork is an exercise in both practical and aesthetic reflection, this section discusses the balancing of these thought processes. It also provides practical activities in supporting inclusive curators to think critically about these decisions. During this final step, they are also supported to think about marketing strategies, the exhibition opening, and evaluation.

Finally, a brief word on terminology and tone. Throughout this book “museum” is used as a catch-all term to describe museums, galleries, and other sites such as heritage spaces where art is exhibited. Equally, we will consider several different groups of curators: curators as professionals, specific curators employed at museums, as well as the curators engaged in inclusive curating discussed in the case studies. For clarity, the curators engaged in inclusive curating are described throughout as “inclusive curators”. However, this is not a label used in practice and they are described simply as curators. In terms of tone, at times this book adopts a more personal tone rather than maintaining “academic distance.” This choice is reflective of my practice in that storytelling and narrative feature as both research method and facilitation tool. Narrative approaches are a growing trend and regarded as an important means of access to knowledge in human and cultural sciences.⁵⁸ By including and drawing upon personal descriptions and narratives it is intended to offer rich descriptive accounts showing the ways in which facilitating inclusive curating is filtered through my own perspective, and how meaning is elicited from particular interactions with my collaborators. The integration of the artists, inclusive curators, and my own recorded voices and actions is a method by which to capture a more robust picture, and crucially, to explore and illuminate relational dynamics.

Who Is This Book For?

Often the problems of “real world” do not present themselves as well formed structures, but what philosopher Donald Schön describes as “swampy zones,”⁵⁹ that is to say, muddy, indeterminate conditions that are difficult to navigate. Curating is a swampy zone. Like many creative processes, it is not readily amenable to being divided into a series of clearly defined tasks or decisions, and previous efforts to map this complex

⁵⁷ Levine and Rule, “International Art English,” unpag.

⁵⁸ Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*.

⁵⁹ Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, 3.

process, such as Bienkowski's use of "soft systems,"⁶⁰ have served to illustrate the messy and interrelating nature of this practice.

With this in mind, I have endeavoured to develop a practical guide which is grounded by an academic case study for readers relatively new to inclusive and participatory approaches to curating with communities. This book has been written with groups of people in mind: arts and museum studies students, artists and facilitators, community organisers and museum practitioners perhaps already working with community groups but would like to incorporate curatorial projects. Without experience to draw upon, it can be difficult to know where to start with this type of work; for instance, finding examples of activities to engage people, how to problem-solve, or anticipate issues ahead of time. The question posed by Eddie at the beginning of this introduction—what does a curator actually *do*?—inspired this book to show the "shape" of curating. To make it tangible through breaking it down into actionable parts with the intention of making it more useable for more people. The process outlined is therefore underpinned by a case study, example tools, and activity templates to best support readers to put this work into action. Alongside these practical elements this book is also supported by an overview of the key museological questions such as: Who benefits from inclusive curating? How can we ensure this work is undertaken in respectful and ethical ways? How do we make decisions collectively? How can we practise non-consensus? These questions are explored throughout this guide with the support of case studies, reflecting the fact that these endeavours have both theoretical and practical significance and are intertwined.

There are many ways to approach the work of a curator.⁶¹ The methodology presented in this book is just one possible framework from which readers may base their own ways of working, and hopefully they will expand with use. Though my own experience of inclusive curating has been carried out within the context of contemporary art, I believe elements of this guide could be transferred to other cultural contexts such as historical collections and heritage sites. I welcome such application and look forward to learning how practitioners reconfigure and adapt this process to be used in their own specific areas of practice.

The Curator's Changing Role

When first facilitating inclusive curating, I had never formally studied curation. Much of my curatorial knowledge was gained through arts practice; being curated and curating my own work. As my practice developed into practice-led research, I examined the historic evolution of the curator and the museum more closely which proved invaluable in contextualizing my work and thinking critically about my approach. In this section, let me review the curator's changing role over time, paying particular attention to curator as gatekeeper, authority, and artist, as well as curating in relation to ideas of autonomy and authorship. In my further research, it became clear that these were key concepts to unravel (and resist) for the practice of inclusive curating.

⁶⁰ Bienkowski, "Soft Systems in Museums."

⁶¹ Hoare, ed., *The New Curator*.

The word “curator” has its origins in the Latin word *cura*, meaning “care,” and in the Late Middle English *curate* as one who has “a care or charge.” However, the term “curator” has moved beyond any singular definition and now occupies a much broader scope of activities, practices, and professions. Historically, curators designed and executed exhibitions alone and this practice was closed to “non-curators.”⁶² In the mid-fifteenth century, Italian nobles began to arrange privately collected artworks, primarily from ancient Greece and Rome, with the specific intention of displaying them to invited guests holding valued social positions. A well-known example of such displays is the Wunderkammer or “cabinets of curiosities.” Ferrante Imperato’s *Dell’Historia Naturale* in Naples is one of the earliest cabinet of curiosities represented in a wood cutting and painting of the same name dating to 1599.⁶³ The wood cutting depicts a densely packed embellished room of objects, featuring books, shells, and marine creatures, and a large stuffed crocodile. Accumulation, definition, and classification was the threefold aim of cabinets of curiosities. Display panels, bespoke cabinets, drawers, and cases were not only a response to a desire to preserve and classify items, but also to “slot each item into its place in a vast network of meanings.”⁶⁴ Such groupings of objects began the notion of storytelling and the arrangement of narratives within displays and the “construction of a temporally organised order of things and peoples.”⁶⁵ The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford is considered a surviving example of such a collection and display practices. Founded in 1884, The Pitt Rivers’ anthropology collection remains densely displayed in thematic groupings and classifications such as “Pottery,” “Lamps,” “Religious Figures,” and famous case of “Shrunken Heads”⁶⁶; it is a museum of a museum.

As time passed, cabinets of curiosities evolved and grew in importance and the small private cabinets were absorbed into larger ones. In turn these larger cabinets were bought by gentlemen, noblemen, and royalty for their amusement and edification. These merged into cabinets so large that they took over entire rooms. Over time, these noble and royal collections were institutionalized and turned into public museums. The best-known example is of the *Ark*, the cabinet of curiosity of John Tradescant Senior (1570–1638) and John Tradescant Junior (1608–1662), which was acquired by Elias Ashmole which later became the Ashmolean Museum’s collection. The Ashmolean in Oxford is now considered the oldest public museum and the first purpose-built museum in the world.⁶⁷

With the emergence of the public museum, in the mid-nineteenth century, the group art exhibition format flourished, and the curator became an influential figure of knowledge who could draw together artists via master narratives. The curators’ reputation as gatekeeper and expert developed further; they became responsible for “upholding

62 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*.

63 Mauriés, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, 12.

64 Ibid., 25.

65 Ferguson et al., *Thinking about Exhibitions*, 101.

66 O’Hanlon, *The Pitt Rivers Museum*.

67 Ashmolean, “The Story of the World’s First Public Museum,” unpag.

divisions between art and artefact, 'high' and 'low,' practitioner and spectator."⁶⁸ As sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu describes, curators evolved into "specialized agents who shaped the economy of cultural goods [...] capable of imposing a specific measure of the value of the artist and his products."⁶⁹ This shaping of "cultural goods" as Bourdieu describes involves processes whereby art is "filtered and legitimized."⁷⁰ This is described by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre as the "subscription process."⁷¹ "Subscription" recognizes that a series of gatekeepers and stakeholders, namely curators, who by interacting with the artist and their artwork add to its critical value, importance, and provenance. It has been argued that this traditional mode of curatorship became a standardized, homogenized, institutionalized, and object-dominated practice, the dynamics and activities of which paralleled the art market.⁷² This type of curatorial practice "worked within"⁷³ the institution, and has since been accused of creating a distance between the audience and actions of the curator by upholding ideologies, certain systems of value or hierarchies, which are not made apparent to the public.⁷⁴

But it was in the 1960s and 1970s the curator's prominent role was cemented. The wake of conceptualism paved the way for bolder custodial scenarios described as "curatorial expression."⁷⁵ This is exemplified in the work of curators Harald Szeemann and Lucy Lippard who undertook "ground-breaking"⁷⁶ curatorial projects which had similarities with the work of some conceptual artists at the time, for whom ideas took precedence over traditional aesthetic, technical, and material concerns. In other words, the avant-garde movement amongst artists was met by an avant-garde movement in curating.

For instance, *Documenta 5* (1972) is today considered a major highlight in the history of contemporary art curating and the "first major exhibition project in which a curator can be seen as creative 'author.'"⁷⁷ *Documenta* is a major international contemporary art presentation that continues to take place every five years in Kassel, central Germany. *Documenta 5* is considered pioneering due to its radically different presentation, conceived as a one-hundred-day themed event comprising performances and "happenings," as opposed to static displays. "Super-curator" Hans Ulrich Obrist articulates how exhibitions shifted from a historical approach of order and stability via static displays, to a place of flux and instability, the unpredictable.⁷⁸

68 Ault, "Three Snapshots from the Eighties," 38.

69 Bourdieu, "The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic," 204.

70 McIntyre, *Taste Buds*, 4.

71 Ibid.

72 Vidokle, "Art Without Artists?," unpag.

73 De Lara, "Curating or the Curatorial?," 4.

74 Ramirez, "Brokering Identities,"

75 Ventizislavov, "Idle Arts," 87.

76 Fotiadi, "The Canon of the Author," 29.

77 Ibid., 27.

78 Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*.

The blurring of lines between artist and curator during this period characterizes the conceptualist moment, but this was not always an amicable development. In the case of *Documenta 5*, artists were “hostile to the powerful Harald Szeemann on more than one occasion”⁷⁹ and later a manifesto was signed by artists such as Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt which accused “Szeemann and his co-curators presenting work in themed sections without the artist’s consent.”⁸⁰ As themed exhibition formats like this boomed, the curator’s power grew. Curators began to be criticized for superseding the work of artists through the reinforcement of their own authorial claims “that render artists and artworks merely actors and props for illustrating curatorial concepts.”⁸¹ Implicit here is the idea of autonomy as a zero-sum game; that one person’s gain must be equivalent to another’s loss. In other words, as curators gained autonomy the artists’ capacity for autonomy was diminished. I have found this to be a useful idea to support people in articulating and reconsidering their feelings about curatorial power and control, as we will see in later chapters.

Curator and academic Paul O’Neill also explores this issue of whether contemporary curators can be recognized artists in their own right.⁸² In support of this claim, O’Neill cites theorist Hans-Dieter Huber who believes curatorship has been transformed into “something like a signature, a specific style, a specific image” and “what once characterised the work of an artist, namely his style, his signature, his name, is now true of the work of the curator.”⁸³ Developing this idea further, curator Jens Hoffmann argues an understanding of the author–curator’s work as constituting individual practice due to a “strong creative sensibility” and “apparent artistic development over time.”⁸⁴ However not everyone agrees on the curator’s claim to artistry. Robert Storr, an artist, curator, critic, and educator, wrote a series of articles for *Frieze* magazine in 2005 on the subject of curators as artists. He finds the idea of curators as artists to be seriously mistaken. He traces this “mistake” back to the various philosophical challenges to authorship, citing the discourses from Oscar Wilde’s *The Critic as Artist* and Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author.” In Barthes’ influential work he rejects the idea of authorial intent, and instead develops a reader-response critical theory, or in his words “the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination.”⁸⁵ Building on this, Storr asserts that the curator is not in the business of having aesthetic experiences but of facilitating these for end-users. He uses the analogy of a curator “being akin to that of a good literary editor, who may justly take pride in spotting ability and fostering accomplishment but who is otherwise content to function as the probing but respectful ‘first reader’ of the work.”⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Balzer, *Curationism*, 46.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸¹ Vidokle, “Art Without Artists?,” unpag.

⁸² O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸⁵ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 148.

⁸⁶ Storr, “The Exhibitionists,” unpag.

Similarly, curator and philosopher Sue Spaid wrote an engaging response to academic Rossen Ventzislavov who made the case in a widely cited thesis that “curating should be understood as fine art.”⁸⁷ While Spaid agrees that curatorial ideas offer (though only temporarily) a genuine contribution to the life of the artworks involved, she identifies a crucial distinction in that she considers curatorial ideas to “contribute cognitive value, not artistic value.”⁸⁸

However, the image of the curator as single author and artist is to some degree a construction. More often than you would expect, and even in the cases of some exhibitions which have been strongly linked to an individual curator’s name, innovations in curating have commonly resulted from collective or collaborative endeavours. The previous example of *Documenta 5* is almost never remembered as a team project but an individual curatorial achievement of Harald Szeemann. On further research I found this to be not entirely accurate. Bazon Brock, who could be categorized as co-curator on *Documenta 5* described the process of curating the renowned exhibition as: “All the participating artists were named by the different curators but chosen by collective decisions and of course Harry Szeemann was the moderator-in-chief.”⁸⁹ Brock clearly presents the exhibition as a group endeavour with shared decision-making, that is, collective and collaborative curatorship. *Individual Methodology* where the interview with Brock was published, clearly maintains that *Documenta 5* had been the most important and complicated curatorial project during the first fifteen years of Szeemann’s career. But the same publication also demonstrated through interviews with those working on the exhibition that both in terms of the conception, as well as in its delivery, it was the product of a collaboration with a number of individuals. So why is *Documenta 5* universally acknowledged as an achievement of Szeemann? Eva Fotiadi believes that it is due to the lack of systematic research on the history of curating that “allowed practitioners in the art world to create a curator’s persona as it was more convenient for the professional art world.”⁹⁰

Yet with the increase of new biennials and other large international exhibitions, the 1990s provided new sites where curatorial and artistic practices converged, explicitly blurring the distinction between artist and curator.⁹¹ Curating became an expanded methodology; emancipating the role of the curator from previous notions of “divine power” and authorship⁹² by opening the possibilities of curatorial action. This approach to curating is relational, offering new possibilities of multilateral thinking across disciplines, fields, and so on. It invites dialogue across and between “without any need for any singular author”⁹³ and crucially here, curating is not seen as the practice of indi-

⁸⁷ Ventzislavov, “Idle Arts,” 83.

⁸⁸ Spaid, “Revisiting Ventzislavov’s Thesis,” 87.

⁸⁹ Pesapane, “Interview with Co-Curators,” 135.

⁹⁰ Fotiadi, “The Canon of the Author,” 27.

⁹¹ O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*.

⁹² Robbins, “Engaging with Curating,” 150.

⁹³ De Lara, “Curating or the Curatorial?,” 5.

vidual “genius” but as distributed and shared. This is also described by journalist Robert Wright as “non-zero-sumness”: the prospect of creating new interactions that are not a zero-sum game.⁹⁴

This shift away from a singular authorial voice was most likely aided in the 1990s and 2000s by a new focus on audience-orientated art such as participatory and relational art practices.⁹⁵ This reimagining of curatorship is famously advocated by Hans Ulrich Obrist who claims that to curate in this sense is “to refuse static arrangements and permanent alignments and instead to enable conversations and relations.”⁹⁶ Similarly, in 2015 Karen Gaskill undertook research into the social practice of the curator where she observed curation as an “active and working practice,” both “holistic and responsive.” Social curation also supports the relational, intangible attributes of works in equal measure to the physical, tangible aspects.⁹⁷

Today, the word “curate” continues to evolve and is not the museum-specific term it once was. During the period of writing this book, I visited a new restaurant in my city. As I scanned the menu my eyes were drawn towards the phrase “curated by the head chef.” But this is not the first time “curate” has appeared in unexpected contexts. Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow “curates” a weekly online lifestyle publication *Goop*. In 2017, *Firefly* in Delaware became the first “fan curated music festival,”⁹⁸ and you can now download an app to help you “curate” your funeral.⁹⁹ It appears curating is now becoming a concept increasingly dislocated from the museum. The rise of the term “curate” online appears to reflect an “agentive turn to meta-authorship.”¹⁰⁰ Michael Bhaskar believes curating has become a buzzword because it answers a set of modern problems: “the problems caused by having too much.”¹⁰¹ With increased productivity, resources, communication, and data, the more “stuff” we produce as a society, the more valuable curatorial skills are becoming. “Curate” as a label with its “scholarly pedigree, is more prestigious and thus deserving of a high price” rather than “selected” or “organized.”¹⁰² Thus is it becoming synonymous with the act of “careful selection,” wryly echoed in comedian Stewart Lee’s quip, “it is reassuring to know that it has been curated, whatever it is.”¹⁰³

In the art world, an increasing number of projects are experimenting in transferring curatorial responsibility over to the general public (rather than co-curating with select community groups). A notable example of this is Per Huttner’s project *I Am a Curator*

⁹⁴ Wright, *NonZero*, 7.

⁹⁵ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

⁹⁶ Obrist, *Sharp Tongues*, 25.

⁹⁷ Gaskill, “In Search of the Social,” 125.

⁹⁸ Moore, “Delaware Festival *Firefly* to Become First Fan-Curated Music Festival in 2017,” unpag.

⁹⁹ Amirtha, “Death Apps Promise to Help People Curate their Afterlives,” unpag.

¹⁰⁰ McDougall and Potter, “Curating Media Learning,” 201.

¹⁰¹ Bhaskar, *Curation*, 6.

¹⁰² Kingston, “Everyone’s a Curator Now,” unpag.

¹⁰³ Lee, “Curating... You are the Disease, I am the Curator,” unpag.

(2003) at the Chisenhale Gallery, London. This exhibition invited the public to apply to be a curator for the day, and with over seventy artworks to select from, individuals worked with the gallery team for an afternoon in realizing an exhibition. Other models invite the audience to select works via online possibilities. *Do It with Others* (2007), a project hosted by Furtherfield. This drew reference from Fluxus's Mail Art projects in creating an e-mail art exhibition where users submitted their artworks and their own ordering and selection strategies for public consideration. Another event using online platforms is *Click!* (2008) at the Brooklyn Museum, which defined itself as a "crowd curated" exhibition, and invited the museum's visitors, online audiences, and the public to be responsible for the selection process. *Click!* asked photographers to submit their work, then the public were responsible for the final selection.

The explosion of social media has also accelerated curatorial ways of thinking. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Snapchat enable users to collect and collate images and text for an audience of friends and strangers which "has become a ubiquitous, quintessentially 21st century act."¹⁰⁴ In 2013, the Essl Museum in Klosterneuburg, Austria, hosted *Like It*, a permanent-collection exhibition based solely on Facebook likes. Even Sotheby's, one of the world's largest and "premier" brokers of fine and decorative art has advised artists how to "curate" their Instagram account suggesting: "In museums, people stroll. On Instagram, they scroll. And they scroll fast. To grab their attention, your pictures must be visually arresting."¹⁰⁵

Some in the museum sector are unhappy about the term "curate" being used in this way,¹⁰⁶ but is this approach to curating more democratic and inclusive as it allows a broader range of voices to be included in the valuing and recognition of culture? Some argue that this broadening of voices and perspectives calls into question the concept of "quality" or "scholarship."¹⁰⁷ The same critique is also applied to inclusive arts and practices of participatory arts which employ audience engagement, on which arts journalist Mark Rinaldi comments, "when audiences become a variable, the quality of art varies a great deal."¹⁰⁸

Evidently, the role of the curator is an ever-changing and shifting one, derived from various sources and expressed in different arenas. Curatorial authority was understood to be established and shaped as early as the seventeenth century but, over time, has been subject to challenge and rapid change. For me, what remains consistent is that curating is more than the capacity to select and display, it is about understanding and demonstrating how critically informed decisions fit into a wider matrix of links and publics. Curating is therefore a critically-engaged process. The methodology outlined in this book evidences that there are ways of engaging a wider spectrum of people with curating by reconfiguring the framework for critical decision making using inclusive and participa-

104 Borrelli, "Everybody's a Curator," unpag.

105 Anon., "Curating an Instagram Account for the Art World," unpag.

106 Booth, "Do you use 'Curate' when 'Organise' will do? Well you shouldn't...." unpag.

107 Fleming, "Museums, Human Rights, Contested Histories and Excluded Communities."

108 Rinaldi, "Art and the Active Audience," unpag.

tory approaches. Can anyone be a curator? Yes, I believe most people can. But to engage “anyone” with this practice, it must be underpinned by a rigorous process to ensure criticality. Crucially, it is *how* that “critical eye” is cast that I believe should not be reserved for, or decided on by gatekeepers, but open to interpretation and participation by all.

ACTIVITY

“Can Anyone be a Curator?” Continuum Line

Should the term curator be used broadly or narrowly? Can it cover professional museum curators as well as Pinterest boards?¹⁰⁹ Can anyone be a curator? This activity aims to stimulate these thought-provoking questions. During inclusive curatorial projects, this activity is facilitated with both the inclusive curators and museum staff (sometimes together) and works particularly well at the beginning and end of a project, providing a sense of people’s thoughts and feelings and to see if, and how, they change throughout the process.

Set up time: 5 minutes, Activity time: 30 mins

What to Do

- Find an empty section of wall or floor (the larger the better) and fix a piece of string in a straight line from side to the other like a horizontal timeline. Then, place the words “yes” and “no” at opposite ends of the string.
- Stick up the question you would like participants to consider where everyone can see. In this instance; “can anyone be a curator?”
- Without discussion, give participants the same colour sticker (for example “Post-It” notes) and ask them to write their name on it and position their sticker along the line in relation to the opposing terms. The closer you place your sticker towards “yes” it means you strongly agree with the statement. The closer you place your sticker towards “no” it means you strongly disagree with the statement. It can be beneficial for some groups to do a practice round with a different question, demonstrating how the process works.
- Once participants have placed their sticker, they are then invited to feed back their decisions through a “living continuum” by positioning themselves along the line by their sticker, allowing them the time to explain their decision and attempt to persuade their colleagues to move their choice along the continuum. During this process, facilitators can use questions to support participants in identifying and articulating the thinking behind their decision-making. Using this activity, can groups develop their criteria for being a curator?
- Record the continuum using photographs, film or notes.

109 Pinterest is a social media platform that enables users to collect and collate images via pinboards online.

Tip

This process works well to unpick any question or statement. If a facilitator encounters points of tension during the project, this activity can be used to as a way to air discussion and reveal nuance and difference in point of view.

The Facilitator

Facilitation, first and foremost, is about groups of people. No matter the group or circumstance, the purpose of all facilitators is to strengthen the effectiveness of a group who are there to complete a task or address an issue together. In other words, facilitation is the practice of applying structure to the complex and unruly process of collaboration. Inclusive curating is a guided process that requires a facilitator to act as a conduit between the museum, its staff, artists, and the inclusive curators, and is responsible for enabling the overall process. Facilitators are becoming increasingly commonplace in museum work; however there has been little research rigorously examining their role.¹¹⁰

Frequently, I am asked, “what makes a good facilitator”? Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist once described curating as “building temporary communities” through “connecting different people and practices and causing the conditions for triggering sparks between them.”¹¹¹ I find this to be true of great facilitators too. The skills of a facilitator should be broad-reaching. Acting as a community builder, mediator, translator, catalyst, and synergist, at the core of this practice facilitators use their “own knowledge and skills to facilitate and enable other’s creativity.”¹¹² They employ creative ways of looking at and engaging with art through a process that is active and experiential, good facilitators exert their capacity to scaffold learning. Facilitators know the process is not about them. Facilitators know how to actively listen; they smile and make eye contact, use verbal affirmations, they question and summarize what people say for clarification, they observe body language and take notice. Facilitators are also reflexive and willing to be vulnerable. Many facilitators I know are meticulous by nature, but on the flipside, they adapt quickly to change and are willing to abandon their well-made plans for the sake of the group. For facilitators, spontaneity and intuition are important, but reflecting and critical thinking are equally significant.¹¹³

At the beginning of an inclusive curatorial project I am always clear in defining my own role as a facilitator to the inclusive curators, artists, and broader networks: I am not an “artistic director,” “co-curator,” or “producer.” I describe how my role is akin to a “support worker” who is there to help everyone keep track of the exhibition, to work and communicate effectively with people, and crucially, to support them make critically-engaged decisions. The decisions and trajectory of the exhibition are ultimately the group’s to make. The position of facilitator requires a reflexive approach, ensuring

110 Thomas, “Why Make a Case for the Artist Facilitator?”

111 Obrist, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Curating but Were Afraid to Ask*, 166.

112 Pringle, “What’s with the Artist?,” 37.

113 Pringle, “The Artist-Led Pedagogic Process in the Contemporary Art Gallery,” 71.

personal opinions and preferences do not influence the group's decisions. In my view, a facilitator's opinions must not encroach on the project but instead must work to create opportunities for participants to discover, question, and share their opinion.

Some readers may be intending to facilitate inclusive curatorial projects themselves, while other readers may be planning to recruit someone for the job. If the latter applies to you, let me present a personal specification for the facilitator's role that has been crowd-sourced from a number of facilitators in the field.

FACILITATOR JOB SPECIFICATION

Experience

- Experience of leading workshops for diverse audiences
- Experience of workshop research and planning
- Experience of curating
- Experience of project co-ordination and administration
- Experience of working with a range of arts professionals

Knowledge

- Knowledgeable about access barriers within museums and contemporary art for different communities
- Knowledgeable about art, curating and interpretation
- A repertoire of creative activities
- Knowledge of safeguarding procedures

Skills

- Excellent communication skills; confidently uses a variety of methods as needed to build relationships
- Excellent observation skills
- Ability to make boring tasks dynamic and participatory
- Ability to motivate and encourage people
- Ability to respond to sensitive issues in a confidential manner and to share information appropriately

Personal Qualities

- Confident collaborating with a range of people from different backgrounds
- Remains positive and resilient under pressure
- Self-aware and reflexive
- Skilled at negotiating challenging situations

The facilitator will be vital in facilitating workshops that support inclusive curators to undertake research, work with artists, make decisions, create interpretation, and manage the exhibition's installation. As we will explore throughout this book, a key challenge of inclusive curating is navigating how facilitators, like other stakeholders, can support the curatorial work of communities without "taking over." With their own job potentially on the line, how can they enable critical decision-making without wielding their power? When does "support" veer into "over/protection," or even control? What does "ethical" facilitation look like and is it possible to articulate a model? To address these questions, I draw upon practice and research located in disability studies which explores the complexities of support work by researchers such as Ross Chapman¹¹⁴ and Jan Walmsley.¹¹⁵ Teamed with my own practical experience having worked alongside intellectually-disabled people as a support worker for ten years, my experience has been helpful in articulating an approach to facilitation for this book.

Auto Agents, An Inclusively Curated Exhibition

The main body of research underpinning this book is a three-year (2014–2017) project at the University of Leeds titled *Art as Advocacy*.¹¹⁶ Employing an action-research approach, this project investigated the ways in which curating could be reimagined as an inclusive and accessible practice alongside intellectually-disabled people, whilst also examining the potential for curating as a site for collective political expression and advocacy for this group.

Importantly, *Art as Advocacy* was underpinned by collaborating with two organizations: Halton Speak Out and Bluecoat. Founded in 2001, Halton Speak Out is a self-advocacy charity run by and for intellectually-disabled people. Halton is a district in the Liverpool City Region centred on the towns of Widnes and Runcorn, both having large chemical industry backgrounds. The group's slogan "the right to have a life" reflects how the organization continues to address inequalities faced by intellectually-disabled people in their community through a range of projects including person-centred life plans, support worker training, peer advocacy and consultation with the local authority. The second organization is Bluecoat, Liverpool's centre for contemporary art. Thought to be the United Kingdom's oldest arts centre,¹¹⁷ Bluecoat houses four gallery spaces, a creative community of artists and businesses and a large programme of participation and engagement. Since 2008 this programme has included Blue Room, a weekly inclusive arts project specifically for intellectually-disabled visual artists who play an active role in Bluecoat. From the membership of both organizations I recruited five people with intellectual disabilities who had all applied to take on the role of a curator: Hannah Bellas and Leah Jones from Halton Speak Out, and Tony Carroll, Diana Disley and Eddie

¹¹⁴ Chapman, "An Exploration of the Self-Advocacy Support Role."

¹¹⁵ Walmsley, *Inclusive Research with People with Learning Disabilities*.

¹¹⁶ French, "Art as Advocacy."

¹¹⁷ Bluecoat Museum, "Heritage," updated 2018, <http://www.thebluecoat.org.uk/content/heritage>.



Figure 1: *Auto Agents* exhibition at Bluecoat, 2017

Rauer from Bluecoat's Blue Room. By strategically recruiting the inclusive curators from both organizations the aim was to bring knowledge and skills in self-advocacy into dialogue with knowledge and skills in artistic expression. Once the research team was in place, I and two support workers met the inclusive curators weekly at Bluecoat over the course of a year to curate an exhibition.

The result was *Auto Agents*, an inclusively curated visual arts exhibition that opened at Bluecoat on November 26, 2016 and ran until January 15, 2017, and then went on to be displayed at The Brindley theatre in Runcorn between March 4 and April 15, 2017. Significantly, both the participatory process of curating and the exhibition theme itself came together to address an issue that is at the heart of advancing the rights of intellectually-disabled people: autonomy. Autonomy or, in the words of the inclusive curators "what it means to be independent by making your own decisions," is a central concern for self-advocates and emerged from the inclusive curators' personal experiences from research around the continued lack of autonomy faced by many intellectually-disabled people. With the support of an Arts Council England grant, *Auto Agents* featured two new commissions by local artists James Harper and Mark Simmonds made in close collaboration with the inclusive curators. In addition to these commissioned pieces, work by London-based artist Alaena Turner was also included. As well as undertaking curatorial research, developing an exhibition theme and commissioning and selecting the artwork, the group planned the installation and designed accessible interpretation and public programme for audiences.

Curating *Auto Agents* produced a rich account of the ways in which curatorial and self-advocacy practices intersect. This intersection, whereby tools found in self-advocacy were carried over into curatorship, provided new methodologies that enabled curating to become an inclusive practice and underpins much of the process outlined in this book. This research is archived on a website—www.artasadvocacy.co.uk—which features the written work alongside a project archive of images, film, sound, journaling, and other pieces of qualitative data from the research.