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RIGHTS, VISIBILITY AND DISABILITY IN CULTURAL SPACES

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Ali Eisa

I stood in Parliament Square on the 6th June 2020, amongst thousands of people demanding justice and visibility for black lives. Protest chants spread through the crowds; voices were echoed and amplified; claps and cheers rippled through self and other. Dissent became contagious, harking back to the origins of the word – “con” meaning *together* and “tangere” *to touch*. I stood in Parliament Square, amidst the charged atmosphere of bodies urgently congregating, and one placard in particular touched me: “Up to 50% of all people killed by U.S. police are disabled. To be black and disabled is a direct target. All Power to the people. Black Disabled Lives Matter.” (1)

Seeing this sign made me reflect on the politics and practice of my recent work at **Autograph** – a visual arts charity based in London. Calling attention to the intersections of black and disabled experiences at the hands of state violence, the sign resonated with our concerns over the last 3 years as part of **EXPLORERS** – a major programme of collaboration between disabled people, artists, social care providers and cultural organisations initiated by **Project Art Works**, an artist led organisation working with people with complex support needs. Building on Autograph’s extensive work in the politics of race and representation, the partnership introduced a new focus on disability. Challenging the increased hardship and intolerance towards disabled people, the project pushed us to address the marginalisation of disabled people from cultural spaces and the urgent need to develop new approaches to art and participation that focused on the promotion of rights.

Autograph’s work promoting marginalised photographic practices has always been concerned with unpacking complex layers and intersections that constitute ‘black’ identities. This concern could not be more clear than in the ground-breaking work of artist (and Autograph’s first chairman) Rotimi Fani Kayode (1955-1989), whose striking portraiture calls attention to the politics of race, queer black desire, cultural identity, class and difference. In *Different* (2001) the collaborative book between Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, Hall writes “Black is considered to be a political and cultural, not a genetic or biological, category. It is a contested idea whose ultimate destination remains unsettled. And ‘identity’ is understood as always, in part, an invention; about ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’; and subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.” Consequently, we can see the focus on disability in Autograph’s recent work as both a continuation and expansion in the practice of representing black identities and voices, as well as part of the wider project of human rights and justice work through the arts.

A recent United Nations **report** concluded that a decade of austerity policies introduced by the UK government had led to systematic violations of the rights of people with disabilities. Research has shown how disabled people in poverty (4% of the population) bore 13% of austerity cuts and how disabled people more broadly have been exposed to the wider impact of the decreasing funding of health care and social services, leading to increased personal debt, mental health and family breakdown (2). EXPLORERS set out to challenge this by bringing people with complex needs into the heart of social and cultural life, through an international programme of collaborative workshops, happenings, productions, commissions and conferences (3).

and participation. Becoming aware of the experiences and conditions of marginalisation for disabled people. Actively challenging neurotypical attitudes, practices and assumptions that lead to exclusion from social and cultural spaces. Building collaborative relationships between artists, care workers, advocates and participants. Rethinking participatory and creative activity from a highly personalised and non-hierarchical perspective. To examine this further I will discuss some specific aspects of practice developed in the project, reflecting on the challenges and learning that arose from them.

EXPLORERS began with a series of 'encounters' workshops, in which disabled people, social care workers, artists and every Autograph staff member from director to gallery attendants worked on collaborative paintings, drawings, photography and sensory play. The gallery was transformed from a conventional white cube into an immersive, tactile space with cardboard and canvas walls that filled the room with an invitation to make marks. Supported by artist facilitators from Project Art Works, we began to see and *sense* how creative, collaborative acts can foster connection across difference, build care and empathy, and challenge prevailing hierarchies between able / disabled, participant / professional, vulnerable / privileged.

What evolved from this point was a period of building relationships where we, as arts practitioners, made visits to social care centres, held workshops, events, discussions and conversations there and at the gallery. We were exposed to the complexity and diversity of experiences often reduced by the label of 'disability'. Young people with autism, brain injury survivors, individuals and artists with profound and multiple learning disabilities, families with children with special educational needs. We saw in detail the barriers that have rendered disabled people often invisible in cultural and social spaces. The impossibility of navigating travel in a city built for able bodied people; fears over the perception and rejection of different 'abnormal' behaviours in public; the lack of environments, programmes and resources that would make cultural experience inclusive for people with complex needs. In reflecting on this Kate Adams (Director, Project Art Works) introduced us to the following quote from philosopher Michael Sandel, which became instructive – *"From the fact that people are very different it follows that, if we treat them equally, the result must be inequality in their actual position, and that the only way to place them in an equal position would be to treat them differently"* (4).

Addressing these barriers and foregrounding the rights of disabled people at the centre of cultural space, highlighted the need for our approach to be personalised to each individual we collaborated with. An example of this can be seen in a programme Autograph developed for families with children with learning disabilities and autism. Initiated in response to the lack of such provision in the city, we wanted to create a space and community that cared for and celebrated a particularly vulnerable constituency. Working with artist **Katriona Beales**, we developed sensory and playful explorations with materials that responded directly to individual interests, curiosities and ways of processing the world – a Super Mario drawing studio, a paddling pool filled with jelly, green screen film sets, bubble machines and more. Over time very intimate relationships between artists, carers and children began to emerge, creating an important outlet and space of personal development in their family lives. They also created a lot of mess, a particular challenge for the infrastructure of cultural spaces, where education rooms simultaneously function as hire spaces that should be wiped clean after each use.

Developing relationships between cultural organisations and the social care sector was another key aspect of fostering the inclusion of disabled people. One example of this was an extensive collaboration between Autograph and **Headway East London**, a charity supporting people affected by brain injury. Through Headway's art studio, we developed an ongoing dialogue about identity and difference, where members use artistic practice as a site of making and re-making identity after injury and in the experience of disability. Sharing these artists' practices and their work made visible complex life stories and forced us to think differently about issues of vulnerability and care, ability and value systems, the possibilities and barriers for free expression. As a collaboration it began to expand on the radical possibilities for how art and social care can be interwoven.

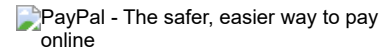
The mission of EXPLORERS to reposition people who have complex needs at the forefront of mainstream culture concluded with a major exhibition at Autograph by **Sharif Persaud**. Through paintings, prints and film Sharif explores contemporary life and autism, placing his body at the centre and detailing the pleasurable, traumatic and mundane facets of his relationship to family, popular culture and the social care structures he is embedded within. Sneezing, gangrene, hospital programmes, cities, flats and benefits are all part of his investigation. By presenting the work within the context of leading contemporary practice exploring identity and representation rather than as a charitable act of inclusion, the exhibition produces a visual politics beyond the boundaries of therapeutic practice or so called 'outsider' art. With the current closure of Autograph's gallery due to the coronavirus pandemic, Sharif's work resonates with an urgency and poignancy that significantly advances our understanding of contemporary conditions of contagion and isolation.

The current crisis – which vulnerable people have been experiencing and resisting their entire lives – has sharply focused our need to develop radical approaches to art, participation and collaboration. EXPLORERS is an exemplary project in this regard. Building new relationships and alliances with the social care sector fostered new ways of seeing art and health as a holistic practice of care. Placing the rights and experiences of people with disabilities and complex support needs at the centre has transformed practices and attitudes at Autograph. The hope moving forward would be for this to become a 'new normal' across cultural spaces – whereby all



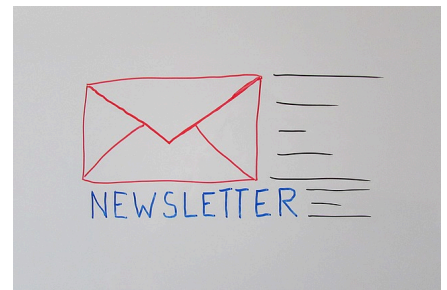
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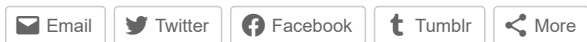
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Notes:

- (1). This placard features a reproduction from a Black Lives Matter campaign by **Creative Growth**, a non-profit based in Oakland, California that serves artists with developmental, intellectual, and physical disabilities.
- (2). Statistics are drawn from **Counting the Cuts**, Dr Simon Duffy, 2014, The Centre for Welfare Reform.
- (3). Participating organisations where EXPLORERS project activities took place include Project Art Works, Autograph, Tate Liverpool, De La Warr Pavilion, Fabrica Gallery, MK Gallery, Photoworks, UNSW Australia.
- (4). Quoted in the introduction to **Anthology**, Project Art Works, 1997-2012, (eds) Kate Adams and Phyllida Shaw, 2015.

Ali Eisa is an artist and educator. He manages the Learning & Participation programme at Autograph and is a Lecturer in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London. Ali is one half of **Lloyd Corporation**, a collaborative project with artist Sebastian Lloyd Rees, exhibiting nationally and internationally working in sculpture, installation, performance and text. **Autograph** is a visual arts charity based in London (UK). Autograph shares the work of artists who use photography and film to highlight issues of identity, representation, human rights and social justice.

Image Credit: Black Lives Matter Protest, Parliament Square, Saturday 6th June 2020, Ali Eisa.



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