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Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:

French, J (2019) Auto agents: Inclusive curatorship and its political potential. In: Janes, RR and Sandell, R, (eds.) Museum Activism. Museum Meanings. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, UK, pp. 152-163. ISBN: 978-0-815-36996-7.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351251044>

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Auto Agents. Inclusive Curatorship and its Political Potential

Jade French

In Museum Activism, edited by Robert Janes and Richard Sandell

Central to bringing about social change is our capacity for dialogue, therefore making space for new voices in museums has the potential to operate as a force for activism. The project described in this chapter explores the inclusion of new voices and perspectives into the museum via inclusive curatorship, a facilitated approach enabling a wide demographic of people to be curators. Curating is often considered an exclusive job for the privileged few. But by supporting people not typically viewed as potential curators to express themselves through exhibition-making, not only is dialogue facilitated and mediated out into the public realm, but museums can also advance their oft-stated goals of promoting diversity and equality.

This chapter explores an example of inclusive curatorship with learning disabled people. Whilst there has been a proliferation of work over the past 15 years by learning disabled artists in the performing and visual arts (Fox and MacPherson, 2015), crucially, curation has only rarely been explored by this group, and then principally in museums dealing with history rather than in the context of art galleries (Open University, 2008; Museum of Liverpool, 2014; Access All Areas, 2017). This gap in the practice led me to develop *Art as Advocacy*, a research project at the University of Leeds. Using an action-research approach, the project explored curatorial practice by learning disabled artists and furthermore, examined how curating could be an effective form of self-advocacy and collective political expression for this group. As learning disabled people remain a group whom have few public platforms from which to share their experiences, this chapter explores curating as a means of activism for this group though its ability to effectively communicate their opinions, desires and concerns to new audiences.

Importantly, *Art as Advocacy* is underpinned by collaborating with two organisations: *Halton Speak Out* and *Bluecoat*. *Halton Speak Out* is a learning disability self-advocacy group formed in 2001. The group's slogan 'the right to have a life' reflects how the organisation continues to address inequalities faced by learning disabled people through a range of projects including person-centred life plans, peer advocacy and consultation with local authority. The second organisation *Bluecoat* is a contemporary arts centre in Liverpool which houses four art galleries, a community of artists, and a large participation programme. Since 2008 this

programme has included *Blue Room*, a weekly inclusive arts project specifically for learning disabled artists. From these organisation's memberships I recruited five learning disabled people who applied to take on the role of a curator; Hannah Bellass and Leah Jones from *Halton Speak Out*, and Tony Carroll, Diana Disley and Eddie Rauer from *Bluecoat's Blue Room*. By strategically recruiting the curators from both organisations, I brought together knowledge and skills in self-advocacy into dialogue with knowledge and skills in artistic expression. Once the research team was in place, myself plus two support workers met the curators weekly at *Bluecoat* over the course of a year to curate an exhibition.

The result was *Auto Agents*, a visual arts exhibition which opened at *Bluecoat* on 26th November 2016 to 15th January 2017, and went on to be displayed at *The Brindley* in Halton between 4th March and 15th April 2017. The exhibition featured two new commissions by Liverpool-based artists James Harper and Mark Simmonds made in close collaboration with the curators, alongside existing work by London-based artist Alaena Turner. Significantly, both the participatory process of curating and the exhibition theme came together to address an issue that is at the heart of advancing the rights of learning disabled people; autonomy. The theme of autonomy, or, in the words of the curators, "what it means to be independent by making your own decisions," emerged from the curator's collective observations and experiences gained through research around the continued lack of autonomy faced by many learning disabled people. In addition to developing the exhibition's theme, selecting and commissioning the artwork, the curators also planned the install, designed accessible interpretation for audiences and a programmed a series of engagement events.

When embarking on this project I was interested to know what the action of curating could tell me about the action of self-advocacy, and if by bringing the two into dialogue there are practices and discourses which could cross over and move in between. What emerged through the curation of *Auto Agents* were mutual questions of autonomy, and furthermore, the individual versus collective, author versus observer, 'real life' versus art. But rather than advocating for one over another, we wanted to explore how these polarities can sit in relationship to each other, sometimes in tension together. In this chapter I trace the exhibitions central theme of autonomy in relation to the two seemingly disparate sites of self-advocacy and curatorship. I explore autonomy as a contested idea and then demonstrate how this complexity became lived and visible during the curation of *Auto Agents*.

To illuminate these complexities, this chapter is anchored by two ‘scenes.’ These scenes are real exchanges that took place during the project and their inclusion offers a rich descriptive account of how I elicited meaning from particular interactions with my collaborators. By including the artists’ and curators’ literal voices in the scenes, I also intend to reveal the relational ways of working that underpin inclusive curatorship (Roets, Goodley and Van Hove, 2007).

Scene 1: But We Chose Him?

In the following scene, the commissioned artist James Harper and the curators are gathered around a table at *Bluecoat*. It is the second workshop with James and the curators are discussing the plans for his arts commission. This brief interchange between the artist and curators cuts to the heart of the key concept within this project; autonomy.

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

DIANA: Yeah, lights!

TONY [continued]: ...like a disco

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

EDDIE: That does sounds good

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

EDDIE: Oh right

[The room goes quiet and everyone looks at James]

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

DIANA: Awww he doesn’t know, never mind

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

EDDIE: Lights would get people’s attention

JAMES:yeah... um

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

DIANA [To Jade]: But we like lights and we chose him?

The room was tense, and at that moment I had no response. Whilst Diana was the only one to explicitly voice her confusion surrounding the authorial boundaries, that is, who was in control of the commission, she certainly wasn't alone. After all, the curators had worked hard for five months to develop an exhibition theme, secure funding and network with artists. In their daily lives the curators have many elements of autonomy restricted and controlled by others. In light of these experiences, they identified the right to autonomy as the exhibition's key theme. However, when in a position to grant or restrict the autonomy of the artist James, there was a disconnect between their experiences of autonomy and that of others. Not only was the concept of autonomy explored in the exhibition's theme, but also through curatorial processes themselves.

A History of Silence

To understand the importance of autonomy for the curators, we must first understand the histories of learning disabled people. For many years learning disabled people lived in the shadow of others. They were abused, mistreated, virtually ignored, and were separated from their families and communities into institutions (Digby and Wright, 1996). Whilst learning disabled people long spoke up for themselves and developed means to resist measures and routines prescribed to them during this period of institutionalisation, the more formalised self-advocacy movement developed in the late 20th century and is intimately related to de-institutionalisation and the conceptualisation of new viewpoints¹ which redefined learning disabled people as citizens with rights, rather than victims (Williams and Schoulz, 1982). Self-advocacy can be most simply understood as speaking or acting for yourself, including the “skills an individual uses to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights” (Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker et al, 2002, p.1). In the UK, self-advocacy proliferated following the publication of *Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century* in 2001, the first government report responding specifically to learning disabled people in 30 years. *Valuing People* highlighted the importance of personalisation in achieving better lives for people with disabilities (Department of Health, 2001), and described it as everyone who receives support, whether provided by

¹ A crucial new viewpoint was the *social model of disability* which says that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment or difference.

statutory services or funded by themselves, would be “empowered to shape their own life though increased choice and control over the shape of that support” (SCIE, 2008, p.4).

There is no doubt that the personalisation agenda made strides in promoting autonomy, enabling learning disabled people to adopt a lifestyle of their choosing (Barnes, 2004, p.7). This was widely discussed by the curators when developing their exhibition theme of autonomy and independence. The right to autonomy was felt by the curators to be a central concern they shared as learning disabled people, and one they wanted to engage the public with via their exhibition. During one workshop we decided to make some artwork in response to the idea of autonomy as a way to further study it as a concept. A key part in facilitating learning disabled people to curate was devising a range of hands-on activities like this to support the curators in their exploration of complex conceptual ideas. For learning disabled people, “making sense has a lot to do with making” (Streeck, 1996, p. 383) and as a researcher and a facilitator it was vital to recognise the importance of rooting exploration in ‘doing.’

During this activity most of the curators created artworks celebrating examples of their autonomy. However, one of the curators, Eddie, took a different approach. His artwork instead depicted a time in his life where he felt he had no choice or control. In his younger days, Eddie spent many years in day services and he created an image which portrayed himself “trapped” in this system. In the centre of a black box, is a simple white line drawing of himself which seems to peer out of the darkness. Surrounding this is a black frame labelled ‘day service’, which perhaps represents a building. Around the edges of the image are handwritten words in different colours which read; “claustrophobic”, “frustration”, “a box”, “unsociable”, “sad”, “not individual”, “confine”, “trapped”, “bored”, “the same” and the list goes on.

Eddie believes his life was transformed through personalisation, which opened up new opportunities such as accessing programmes at *Bluecoat*. Personalisation enabled many learning disabled people like Eddie to live more autonomously, but the critical concepts underpinning it along with the broader self-advocacy movement; *autonomy*, *independence*, *self-determination* and *personhood*, are problematic (Burton and Kagan, 2006; Graham, 2010). Some argue that these are unattainable concepts, both practically and philosophically (Shakespeare, 2000; Leshota, 2015), and practitioners and scholars alike have instead drawn attention to the interdependency of all people, claiming “interconnectedness, kinship and relationality” are the “defining features of what it means to be human” (Leshota, 2015, p.4).

Work within disability studies that problematises autonomy has also acknowledged the importance of interdependence in resisting binary definitions (McRuer, 2006). Here, there are no 'dependent' or 'independent' persons but a diverse range of body and minds that exist as a series of complex relations (Memmi, 1984).

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

No Curator Is An Island

Debates surrounding autonomy can also be traced through a completely different set of sites, literatures and networks in relation to curatorship. Many decades ago the role of curator conjured up images of a singular figure in a museum's basement; tending, caring, and cataloguing collections and artefacts attentively. This is reflected in the etymology of the word 'curator', which has its origins in the Latin: 'cura', meaning 'care', and in the Late Middle English: 'curate' as one who has 'a cure or charge'. Whilst this mode of curation still exists, the role has greatly expanded from this behind-the-scenes 'caring' figure whom "tended ground", to one which actively secured, organised and "landscaped it" (Hickey, 2014, p.40), becoming the visible culturally central figure we know today.

These changes in the curators role began during the mid-19th century. As the group art exhibition format flourished, the curator became a figure of knowledge who could draw together artists via master narratives. The curator became a gatekeeper and responsible for "upholding divisions between art and artefact, "high" and "low", practitioner and spectator" (Ault, 2007, p.38). Various scholars have argued that this traditional mode of curatorship became a standardised, homogenized, institutionalised and object-dominated methodology; the

dynamics and activities of which paralleled the art market (Vidoke, 2010). This type of curatorial practice “worked within” the institution and therefore has been accused of creating a distance between the audience and actions of the curator by upholding ideologies, certain systems or value or hierarchies, which are not made apparent to audiences (DeLara, 2014, p.4). In the 1960’s the curator’s prominent role was cemented. Conceptual art, where the ideas involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic, technical, and material concerns, paved the way for bolder custodial scenarios described as “curatorial expression” (Ventizislavov, 2014, p.87). This is exemplified in the work of curators Harald Szeemann and Lucy Lippard who undertook ground-breaking curatorial projects which were similar to the work of some conceptual artists at the time. As the themed exhibition format boomed, the curator’s autonomy grew, and subsequently they 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” (Vidoke, 2010). Implicit here is the idea of autonomy as a zero-sum game; an economic theory that states one person's gain must be equivalent to another's loss. In other words, as curators gained autonomy the artists’ autonomy was diminished.

But the increase of new biennials and other large international exhibitions in the 1990s provided new sites where curatorial and artistic practices converged, blurring the distinction between artist and curator (O’Neil, 2012). Curating became an expanded methodology; emancipating the role of the curator from previous notions of “divine power” (Robbins, 2005, p. 150) and authorship 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, inviting dialogue across and between “without any need for any singular author” (De Lara, 2015, p.5). Crucially, here autonomy is not seen as a zero-sum game but as distributed and shared. This shift away from a singular authorial voice in curating was most likely aided by the 1990s and 2000s occupation with audience orientated art such as participatory and relational art practices (Bourriaud, 2002). This reimagining of curatorship is famously advocated by ‘super-curator’ Hans Ulrich Obrist. Obrist claims that to curate in this sense is; “to refuse static arrangements and permanent alignments and instead to enable conversations and relations.” (2014, p.25).

Auto Agent Bob To The Rescue

As demonstrated by the literature, autonomy remains a key concern for learning disabled people who have historically been denied control over their lives. However, the concept of autonomy is being increasingly questioned and reconceptualised by disability studies scholars; with new models of interdependency now emerging. Equally, we have seen how exhibitions are often not the work of a lone individual ‘genius’ curator but are in fact configured and negotiated through a matrix of equally complex interdependent relationships and networks. However as Scene 1 illustrates, this negotiation is complex.

It was at this point in the project that self-advocacy practices began informing the group’s curatorial practice. Since the mid-1980s in the U.K., those involved in self-advocacy have been concerned with the relationship between self-advocates and those who are ‘advising’ or ‘supporting’ them. Today, advocacy support workers (who are predominantly not learning disabled) tend to be employed by learning disabled directors or trustees, however non-learning disabled staff still remain key in the delivery of the work. A key challenge facing self-advocacy support workers is how they can support self-advocates to run successful organisations, without ‘taking over’. With their own jobs often on the line, how do self-advocacy supporters enable good decision-making without wielding their power? When does ‘support’ veer into ‘over/protection’, or even ‘control’? What does ethical self-advocacy support look like and, is it possible to articulate a model? (Chapman and Tilley, 2013, p.528).

Following the dispute over autonomy in Scene 1, in subsequent workshops I supported the curators to think more closely about the relationship between artists and curators as much was at stake. To support the curators to self-define their role I suggested we make something (or someone) we described as an ‘Auto Agent,’ who affectionately got dubbed by the curators as *Auto Agent Bob*. To create *Auto Agent Bob* I asked the curators to make a large outline of a person who was divided in half down the middle; one half to represent the artist and the other half the curators. I printed out labels for the curators which described tasks in making an exhibition such as ‘choosing artists’, ‘getting money’ and ‘making the artwork’. I then asked the curators to think of where each labels should go on *Auto Agent Bob*, the artists side or curators side? Everyone grabbed a label and in less than thirty seconds, and not to my surprise, the curator’s half of *Auto Agent Bob* was full whilst the artist side of *Auto Agent Bob* was bare. In other words, the curators clearly felt like all decisions in the exhibition were theirs to make. Slowly we went through each label and looked at the task from the perspective of artists. This time round shared tasks emerged, one of which was interpretation. Through the *Auto Agent*

Bob activity, the curators were able to see that curating was much more complex than they initially thought. Some tasks were shared and the activity supported the curators to see these connections for themselves. Once shared responsibility was identified, we worked on developing solutions for everyone to have a voice in the tasks and decisions ahead.

Uniquely, *Auto Agents* is predominantly a text free exhibition, reflecting the ways in which the curators differently read, write and communicate. Where text was used, the curators approach was clearly informed by self-advocacy traditions. The exhibitions title, for example, actually began life as *Autonomous Agents*.

Scene 2: It's Fate! It's That Funny Word Again

During a group collaging activity, support worker Donna makes an interesting find in one of the magazines we used to search for material and shares it with the group. The following scene depicts the ensuing conversation about language and autonomy.

DONNA: [Laughs] Guess what I've found

DIANA: What, what?

DONNA: That word Jade was talking about before

EDDIE: What's that?

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

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

EDDIE: Oh yeah! Look at that!

DIANA: Oh my god!

ABI: That's so cool!

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

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

HANNAH: [Claps and laughs]

LEAH: I think it's a good exhibition name. Autot-y-nomis agents, or however you say it.

DIANA: Yeah I like that one, thingy agents

I could see an unforeseen issue emerging; the curators had difficulty reading, writing and pronouncing ‘autonomous’ and some members refused to say it all together. I asked the curators, “Is it a good idea to call your exhibition something we struggle saying?” For me it was clear that they understood the meaning of the word autonomous, there were simply difficulties in pronouncing it which was causing some awkwardness. In self-advocacy contexts simplifying both spoken and written language through “plain language, the use of keywords, short words and sentences” is a prime way to promote access for learning disabled people (Godsell and Scarborough, 2006, p.64). “If you find it a mouthful, then we could just shorten it?” I suggested, “How about Auto Agents?”. This approach supported the curators to use the valuable and complex idea of autonomy in their exhibition on their own terms. The arts, however, have appeared reluctant to embrace the same approach to using accessible language and have been accused of disguising information in overly complicated, specialist art languages known as *artspeak* (Rule and Levine, 2012).

The curators of *Auto Agents* thought long and hard about the inclusion of text into their own exhibition and decided it was an opportunity to ‘do it their own way.’ Rather than traditional labels, text panels and wordy artist statements and hand-outs, *Auto Agents* instead featured a single short video filmed collaboratively between themselves and the artists. The video is just under three minutes long and begins with the curators introducing themselves and the starting point for the exhibition; their own lives and experiences. “We the curators all have something in common,” Leah’s voice-over explains on the video, “We have different kinds of independence and different levels of support. We wanted the artists to think about these things, and what’s interesting is, everyone made something which involves action” (French, 2016). Although the concept of autonomy is highly politicised for learning disabled people, through their work with the curators the artists in *Auto Agents* interpreted that concept and made it their own. The video also includes short segments made by each artist filmed throughout the curatorial process, providing a window into the relational and participatory approaches to creating the exhibition.

The methodology used to develop interpretation for *Auto Agents* illuminates the participatory and relational potential of curating. For me, it also exemplifies the potential for the process of curating to be politicised. The non-existence of text in *Auto Agents* challenges the norms of the gallery domain, which often rely on text, and activates change within the institution itself through providing new inclusive ways of working. The group chose to use their capacity as

curators to orientate audiences to their ways of understanding art, which the curators emphatically expressed is not through text. This disruption of the status quo could also be viewed in light of philosopher Jacques Rancière's (2001) writing on politics. He describes politics as what occurs when the dominant social order is disrupted, rather than simply the exercise of power by bureaucracies (which he renames 'la police'). In this context, the exclusion of text disrupts the 'dominant order' within the institution opening up new possibilities of ways to 'know' about art. But this was not easy. As curator Diana explains, "People might think we aren't using text because we can't do it, instead of saying, here's a new way and it's good". By excluding text, the curators drew attention to their limitations and status as learning disabled people, but at the same time, they foregrounded an important quality for activism: the ability to view and imagine the world differently through forging new relations.

This approach to interpretation also enabled visitors to experience a more relational engagement with the artwork as meaning was not mediated via text inaccessible to many people. For example, the curators led 'drawing tours'. Instead of leading visitors on a traditional exhibition tour, with the expectation of the curators verbally explaining their exhibition and works in it, they instead asked visitors to sketch the work and explain to the curators what it meant to them. James' large draped hessian sculpture was intended to reference the artist's personal experiences of community, but on a drawing tour self-advocates convened around the piece and discussed concepts of restriction, of concealment and even drew parallels with Joseph Merrick's burlap sack used to conceal his condition (the 'Elephant Man'). On a different tour, local councillors and disability health professional saw the draped hessian as a different type of concealment, not of the individual, but of the dampening of ideas and practices. Feelings of restriction resonated in a different sense and from a different perspective, drawing the artwork into new meaning.

Conclusion

Art as Advocacy presented an opportunity for an intervention; to investigate how approaches used in self-advocacy could be carried over into curatorship in an effort to make curatorial decision making more explicit and tangible for everyone. In self-advocacy, these approaches recognise that autonomy in life is in fact enabled through collective support and action. In this research, I found that autonomy and collectivity are equally useful for curators in making explicit the intricate linkages that enable complex collaborations at galleries and museums.

An inclusive and relational approach to curating also proposes an active experience. *Auto Agents* became a site for social interactions and exchanges catalysed by the artworks such as the curators' drawing tours. These engagements highlight possibilities of curatorial practice as an alternative realm of knowledge production through their ability to establish wide reaching connections between people, disciplines and counterpoints. This becomes politically potent for learning disabled curators as the ability to affect change in their own lives requires the engagement of diverse fields. Claire Bishop asserts that "at a certain point, art has to hand [responsibility] over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved: it is not enough to keep producing activist art." (2011, 55 mins). *Auto Agents* brought together learning disabled people and their support networks, learning disability professionals, self-advocacy groups, local authority workers and local councillors, artists and artist studios, artwork fabricators, *Bluecoat's* programming, curation, front of house, press, marketing and engagement staff, external press, social media, the *University of Leeds*, academics, students and of course, the exhibition visitors. Through this collision of people, disciplines, institutions and viewpoints, new networks were forged, new conversations took place, and ultimately new meanings were born. Ultimately, by enabling learning disabled people to communicate their ideas and experiences to the public through curating, new sites for activism emerged. Therefore we need to recognise curating as an experimental activity overlapping with the world, able to lend support towards a political cause through making experiences and methodologies visible through artistic imagination.

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