

Inside Stories

A participatory video project at three UK prisons during and after the Covid pandemic

Alexa Wright with Morwenna Bennallick

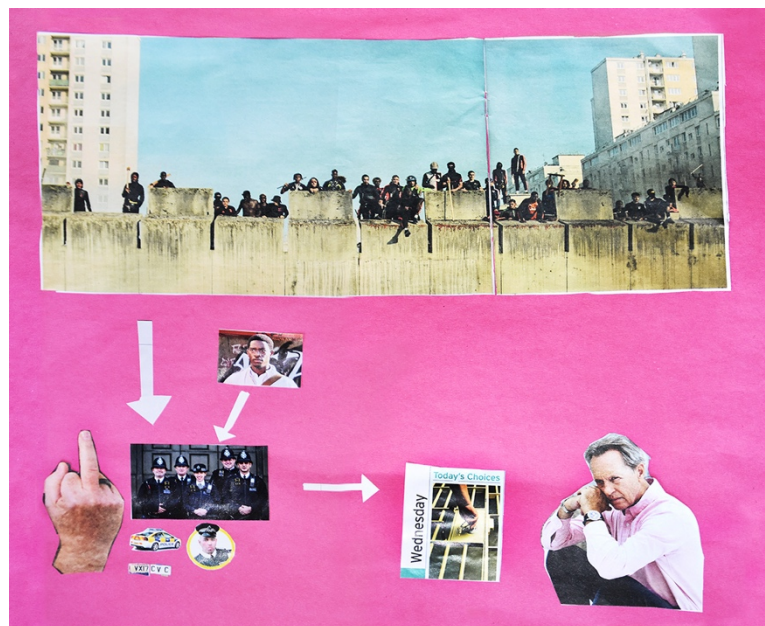


Still From Inside Stories video diptych (Available at: <https://vimeo.com/853767493>)

Introducing Inside Stories

In 2021 Artist Alexa Wright began workshops at HMP Liverpool (category B men's prison) and HMP Styal (women's prison in Wilmslow, Cheshire). This initial phase of the project was facilitated by Sarah Hartley, creative lead at the prison education provider, Novus. However, realisation of the project at these two prisons was challenging and ultimately inconclusive, mainly due to the Covid pandemic. This led Wright to seek opportunities to complete the process elsewhere and, several months later, facilitated by criminologist, Morwenna Bennallick and prison education manager, Tracie McCarthy, Inside Stories workshops re-started at Feltham Young Offenders Institute (YOI). This last phase of the project took place between December 2022 and June 2023.

During a series of group workshops at each facility, participants were introduced to collage and encouraged to visually explore their personal experiences, prompted by keywords like Justice, Judgement, Responsibility, Power and Freedom. Individuals were then asked to talk through their collages, explaining the significance of their chosen imagery. Subsequent workshops involved an element of visual education as participants were introduced to photographs made by a range of established artists, and were then supported to take their own photos in and around the classroom.



Participant collage, Feltham YOI, 2023

Embracing the permeability of the prison boundary was central to the initial concept behind the 'Inside Stories' project. With their incarcerated status, participants were, obviously, unable to leave the prison to capture their own vision to accompany their spoken narrative. So, as they began to develop confidence in their ability to think visually, workshop participants were encouraged to suggest imagery from the outside world that would further represent their experiences. This elicited a broad range of responses and, acting on one of the core aims of the project - to invert the power balance so that participants were in charge of the artist's agenda – the artist set out to capture video footage which fulfilled these (often challenging) visual remits. Not everyone took to the process straight away but, with some encouragement all participants were able to specify how their personal experience should be represented. Some of the footage requested was of specific places, and some was more symbolic, but in each case this glimpse into the outside world elicited much discussion and reminiscence within the groups.

At every stage of the project imagery and transcripts that came out of one to one and group conversations were, as far as possible, brought to participants for review. One intention of this process was to explore the inside/outside boundary - video footage used in the work was shot outside the prison walls, under direction from incarcerated participants for whom the outside was sometimes just a distant memory. Accompanied by their verbal narratives, these visuals were then assembled into the eleven short video diptychs that make up the artwork exhibited for an external, secondary audience. To complete the project, documentation of exhibitions and audience reactions would then have been brought back into the prisons for participants to review. However, the attempt to co-create an artwork in UK prisons during and after the Covid pandemic, and without external institutional support brought with it a number of challenges. As a consequence, the proposed structure of the Inside Stories project and the resulting video work were not only reshaped by interactions with participants, but also by constraints at the institutional boundary.

One of the aims of this article is to interrogate some of the seemingly irresolvable issues that arose whilst trying to realise the Inside Stories project in the very particular environment of UK prisons. We will explore questions relating to authorship, perceived value and institutional boundaries, and will identify some practical issues that constrained the creation and dissemination of the work. Firstly, though, we will situate the Inside Stories project in relation to a longstanding theoretical argument between Art Historian, Grant Kester, and Critic and Art Historian, Claire Bishop.



Inside Stories at Saatchi Gallery, 2023

Theoretical Background

In 'Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art', Kester proposes a redefinition of what constitutes a work of art predicated on an understanding of aesthetic experience as durational and interactive:

In the Enlightenment model of the aesthetic, the subject is prepared to participate in dialog through an essentially individual and somatic experience of "liking". It is only after passing through, and being worked on by, the process of aesthetic perception that one's capacity for discursive interaction is enhanced (one literally becomes more open-minded following an encounter with a work of art, and thus, a more competent participant in social discourse). In a dialogical aesthetic, on the other hand, subjectivity is formed through discourse and inter-subjective exchange itself. Discourse is not simply a tool to be used to communicate an a-priori "content" with other already formed subjects, but is itself intended to model subjectivity.¹ (Kester, 2006, pp.153-165).

In her 2006 article 'The Social Turn, Collaboration and Its Discontents', Bishop takes issue with this perspective,

Kester argues that consultative and "dialogic" art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is—away from the visual and sensory (which are individual experiences) and toward "discursive exchange and negotiation. He challenges us to treat communication as an aesthetic form, but, ultimately, he fails to defend this, and seems perfectly content to allow that a socially collaborative art project could be deemed a success if it works on the level of social intervention even though it founders on the level of art."² (Bishop, 2006, pp.179-185)

In 2012, Bishop further advocates for an aesthetic outcome, aiming to find:

ways of accounting for participatory art that focus on the meaning of what it produces, rather than attending solely to process. This result – the mediating object, concept, image or story – is the necessary link between the artist and a secondary audience (you and I, and everyone else who didn't participate); the historical fact of our ineradicable presence requires an analysis of the politics of spectatorship, even – and especially – when participatory art wishes to disavow this.³ (Bishop, 2012, p.9)

Inside Stories is just one of a plethora of socially engaged, participatory projects manifested in widely differing social contexts in the twenty years since Kester and Bishop's debate around the place of participation first began. All of these involve the dialogical practices identified by Kester, yet each project occupies a different position on the spectrum of the process versus artefact argument. Inside Stories sits somewhere in the middle of this. Although Kester might frame the aestheticized outcome of the project as superfluous or politically questionable, Inside Stories was never intended to be exclusively dialogical. In line with Bishop's argument that the aesthetic potential of a material outcome should not be overlooked, the project was designed to embrace both the 'dialogical aesthetic' privileged by Kester as a means of generating impact for participants, and a more traditional aesthetic encounter with an object for a secondary audience. Unfortunately, though, the attempt to work within the criminal justice system during and after the Covid pandemic brought with it several restrictions and prohibitions that impacted on what could be achieved.

The Context of the Prison

The opportunity to create an artwork in collaboration with people held in the restrictive prison environment was the main impetus behind Inside Stories, but this also became a kind of double bind. In each facility the project was hosted by the education provider, Novus. It was clear that education staff and most prison officers were doing their best to support the development of their 'learners', but nevertheless within our stressed and underfunded prisons creative freedom is not easily facilitated. The project was approved at each prison only once those in charge were satisfied that its goals aligned with the instrumental remit of the institution to reduce reoffending. The first phase, took place at HMP Liverpool and HMP Styal during the Covid pandemic, and this brought with it multiple additional hurdles. At this time we were subject to many more restrictions, including frequent impromptu lockdowns and a higher level of segregation. Planned workshops often had to be cancelled or rescheduled at the last minute, and at one point the prisons were entirely shut down for several months, admitting no one but essential regular staff. When they did reopen, groups from different wings were not allowed to mix for reasons of contagion, so it was necessary to repeat workshops with smaller groups and for less time than originally planned.



Participant photo, HMP Liverpool

Another constraining factor was the issue of trust. A number of institutional restrictions were imposed on the project, such as a veto on bringing an audio recorder into one of the prisons, which meant that transcripts had to be assembled exclusively from written notes. There was an overall ban, enforced at the last minute, on using participants' own voices in the video work, and the transcripts of their stories were subject to institutional vetting and redactions, often against the wishes of the individual concerned. Although the initial proposal for Inside Stories must have been deemed of value to meet institutional approval, these restrictions inevitably diminished what we were able to achieve. It is understandable that precautions must be in place, but this circumspection on the part of the prison authorities suggests a lack of faith in the artistic process.

Carceral geographer, Jennifer Turner describes the multiple benefits of creating art in prisons (Turner, 2016).⁴ She suggests that exhibition of 'prisoner art' offers a way to 'touch' the world beyond the confines of the prison wall, enabling the individual to hold some agency over the gaze to which they are subjected. To some extent this was borne out by audience responses to

public exhibitions of the Inside Stories videos. But this is, in a sense, problematic because to focus on the intended consequences of engagement with art projects supports the carceral ‘meta-goal’ of reducing reoffending and its reductionist framing of creative work. As philosopher, David Bell has pointed out, opposition to such an instrumental approach to creative arts is something that unites Kester and Bishop, who are both,

*hostile to the manner in which forms of participatory art are used to generate ‘social inclusion’: an ameliorative approach to social problems that fails to engage with their structural causes.*⁵ (Bell, 2017: p.74).

Perhaps, then, the success of a truly collaborative research project like Inside Stories lies in the fact that neither the process nor the outcome can be entirely predetermined, and so it cannot be guaranteed to fulfil institutional goals such as reducing reoffending. Inevitably, this elicits suspicion and caution on the part of the institution.

Evaluation of arts in prison is often subject to misunderstandings and distortion by the kind of objectives described by Turner yet, as Kester observes, the processes of participation and co-creation can be transformative,

*One of the core lessons of the aesthetic is that all change begins with the transformation of consciousness, the ability to fully comprehend both the constraints of current reality, and the potential of its collective transformation. The ur-form of the political unfolds in the exchanges that occur between two subjects, in the reciprocal transformation of both self and other, rather than in a manner by which one self unilaterally imposes its consciousness on another*⁶ (Hagoort, 2018, online, unpaginated).

So, if the particular human relationships that evolve during co-creation can offer such a unique opportunity for change, why is it so difficult to realise an authentic creative project in prisons with any kind of freedom? One reason is clear: consistency and time are crucial in order to achieve the kind of transformations that Kester advocates, and both are scarce within our under resourced criminal justice institutions, particularly with the additional pressures of the Covid pandemic. However, as Tracy McCarthy, education manager at Feltham YOI at the time of the Inside Stories project has observed:

*If their punishment is to be removed from society, maybe it's a bit strange that we bring [the participants] back into society through art shows and creativity. But actually, being locked away has shown us that they can do some really amazing things that they would never have done without that period of removal from society.*⁷ (McCarthy, In-person conversation, 4/12/24)

In other words, if meaningful activities are available, and individuals are afforded some agency, prison can be a place of opportunity and growth, away from the external pressures of damaged families and communities. But, in order to achieve this, it takes time to gain the trust, not only of those in authority, but also of the participants themselves. In order to achieve any kind of consistent contact with participants, prison timetables, lockdowns, and the relocation of individuals from one wing to another, or one jail to another had to be negotiated.

At Feltham YOI interactions with participants were less tightly monitored than at the adult prisons. Accompanied by Criminologist Morwenna Bennallick, the artist was able to speak to prospective participants through their cell doors, and to meet with them one to one on the wings during the course of the project. This meant that we could recruit participants more freely than at the other two prisons, where specific groups were allocated to the project.

However, at Feltham we encountered a different set of problems. At the time of the project this facility housed only young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty one and, whilst violence is an issue in most prisons, fighting and the threat of violence were particularly prevalent there because of gang culture.⁸ Imported from outside the prison, gang membership at Feltham is determined by geographic background 'on the outside', and the prisoner's location inside the jail, where each wing has its own gang. In the aftermath of the Covid pandemic fights occurred on a regular basis, especially in the education department where our workshops took place. As one of the few spaces in the prison where people from different wings mix, classrooms took on the nickname 'Feltham fight club', and many of the students protected themselves and others through non-attendance. This impacted on recruitment for the project. Our introductions were initially met with curiosity and interest, but potential participants often withdrew when they understood that they would need to mix with people from other wings. We eventually managed to attract a regular group, but managing bravado and latent hostility amongst the group could be challenging, and this also inhibited the working process.

Participation and Co-creation

Consistent with Kester's notion of dialogical aesthetics - which frames co-creation as a process that heightens the awareness of both artist and community participants, an aim of the Inside Stories project was to create a discursive space where participants could feel secure to creatively express their feelings within the highly structured, hierarchical system of the institution.

As the arts in general, and this way of working in particular, presented a new experience for most of our participants, the project began with a basic focus on the development of creative skills and visual expression through the medium of collage, which requires little existing skill. The aim of introducing this basic form of visual storytelling was to go some way towards empowering participants by improving their ability to thoughtfully evaluate their situation.



Still from footage shot by the artist for a project participant at HMP Liverpool

The keywords Justice, Power, Freedom, Responsibility and Judgement, introduced in workshops as prompts to inspire the creation of collages and facilitate visual storytelling, were chosen precisely because they are often used in statements made about prisoners without their involvement. Discussion of these words in workshops at each of the prisons evoked strong

and heartfelt responses from participants, who also added Power, Trust and Integrity to the list. Each individual then went on to weave their personal narrative around one or more of the keywords, with very little need for further prompting.

In subsequent workshops we focused on collaboratively seeking ways of communicating each person's unique experiences through still and moving imagery. The one-to-one meetings on the wings at Feltham were significant in that they provided a secure space for people to further explore ways of visually representing their experiences without fear of judgement by their peers. But the commitment made by participants at each facility to keep attending group workshops also reflected a curiosity about, and an emerging interest in, visual communication.

It is perhaps useful to turn now to a comment by artist and writer, Dave Beech who, drawing on Kester's arguments, makes a distinction between the two,

*It is the shortfall between participation and collaboration that leads to perennial questions about the degree of choice, control and agency of the participant. Is participation always voluntary? Are all participants equal and are they equal with the artist? How can participation involve co-authorship rather than some attenuated and localised content?... Collaborators, however, are distinct from participants insofar as they share authorial rights over the artwork that permit them, among other things, to make fundamental decisions about the key structural features of the work. That is, collaborators have rights that are withheld from participants*⁹ (Beech, 2008, p.3).

With Beech's comments in mind, the early stages of the Inside Stories project, where attendees were being directed to develop a basic understanding of visual language, can be characterised as both educational and participatory. Whereas in the collaborative process of creating the final video work participants became co-creators, with the shape of the work changing in response to interactions that took place during the course of the project.

Sometimes to the frustration of facilitators, who wanted a schedule for the entire project in advance, the Inside Stories workshops themselves were planned responsively. Whilst the overall aims didn't change, the programme for each workshop was determined by participants' contributions and reactions to the previous week's content. So, whilst they did not consciously play an active part in the design of the project, participants directly influenced its course, and this was slightly different in each prison. For example, simple SLR cameras were taken in to the prisons for participants' use. At HMP Liverpool and HMP Styal this was a popular activity and despite the understandably rigid restrictions on what could be photographed, some interesting images were made. Several of these were included in the final video work. At Feltham, however, there was very little interest in photography, so this activity was quickly dropped and workshops took a different shape at that institution.



Still From Inside Stories video diptych

In the context of socially engaged work, the process of co-creation is a form of practice based artistic research. The original plans and expectations for a project are modified by participants' contributions, with the form as well as the content of the outcome open to revision. For example, at the proposal stage the material outcome of Inside Stories was envisaged as a suite of single screen videos, shown simultaneously, each focussing on a different keyword, with contributions from different people. However, as the work took shape around the participants' personal stories, it emerged as a series of individual portraits. The artist's understanding that this form would offer each person a more direct influence over their own discrete section of the overall work came about only during the practical process of working together with participants. The idea to configure the videos as diptychs also emerged during the course of the project, as a means of bringing together various elements of each individual's story in a way that facilitates poetic rather than illustrative associations between image and text.

Guided by their requests, Wright worked to capture the specific imagery requested by each person to make up their section of the video work. Acting on participants' memories and visions of the now inaccessible outside world, the artist became their proxy. But, as the footage gathered was inevitably subject to interpretation, she returned, sometimes repeatedly, to each individual involved for editorial feedback, and for final sign off on their section of the video. These collective aesthetic and editorial decisions made across the carceral boundary brought about a shared and ongoing dialogue between artist and participants. An illustration of this 'creation by proxy' is Wright's exchange with a participant at Feltham, who suggested that his experience of incarceration would be well represented by an image of gates repeatedly opening and closing. On his instruction, Wright went out to make sample photographs of many different types of gates around London. Reviewing the images brought back into the prison, the participant was able to decisively identify the very particular style of gate and setting that he felt was suitable to communicate his recent experiences.

This and other interactions that took place during the course of the project demonstrate how new shared understandings between artist and participants can develop productively as part of the creative process. But, in response to the Kester/Bishop argument, this project has demonstrated that socially engaged, collaborative work can be more powerful if it embraces *not only* a 'dialogical aesthetic', generating impact for participants through the course of the project, *but also* a more traditional aesthetic encounter with an object (in this case a video diptych) for a secondary audience. Education manager at Feltham, Tracy McCarthy points to the multiple benefits of an exhibitable end product:

For me, showing the work to various publics is important because people have this stereotypical image of who it is that's in prison, and what they're like, and it's two-dimensional. This work shows us something different and this impacts on the participants as well as the public.¹⁰ (McCarthy, In- person conversation, 4/12/24).

During the course of the project it became clear that for several of the participants the knowledge that their story and chosen imagery would form part of a 'mediating object' that might enable a re-evaluation of what it means to be incarcerated offered a rare sense of agency in an otherwise disempowering context. The potential for external visibility was particularly valuable for maintaining participants' commitment to the project when we were faced with institutional challenges such as disruptions to the structure of meetings, unpredictable timetables and reduced access to space for workshops. For the individuals involved, the knowledge that their creative efforts would form part of a larger artwork to be publicly exhibited in a professional context provided an additional, and perhaps intriguing, incentive to continue to participate.



Selection of Gates shown to participant

However, the process of collaboration or co-creation was never straightforward in this context. The original intention was for the creation of the video work to be truly collaborative, with authorship firmly in the hands of the participants, but there were a number of practical constraints that prevented full realization of this goal. For example, although feedback on the work-in-progress was sought from participants at every stage, this did not compensate for the fact that, due to lack of time and resources for them to learn the relevant skills, most of the editing was carried out in the artist's studio. Ideally, editorial decisions would have been more central to this relational process, and co-creators would have been offered the opportunity to learn the skills to edit the video footage themselves. Bringing their 'inside stories' to outside audiences via a combination of verbal account and their chosen imagery was clearly significant for those 'on the inside', but managing restrictions whilst remaining sensitive and respectful to participants through the process of incorporating their contributions presented significant challenges. The Inside Stories project was subject to rigorous ethical scrutiny at all stages which, with the attendant institutional restrictions imposed on both the process and the outcome, paradoxically rendered it more difficult to ensure that the project was in no way exploitative.

The Working Process



Still From Inside Stories video diptych

Individual participants' verbal narratives, derived from audio recordings and notes made during workshops and one to one meetings, were central to the formulation of the final video work. Before the recorder was turned on, everyone was made aware that, with permission, their story would go out into the public domain, and that they would have control over how it was told. Wright edited transcripts of each person's testimonies and comments, and then took the script back to its owner for revision and/or approval at every stage. This process was highly interactive - individuals were repeatedly invited to request changes, as well as to query any changes the artist had made. Despite this, the voice of the participants was compromised in a number of ways. Because institutional restrictions prohibited the use of a voice recorder at one of the prisons, transcripts in that particular institution were derived entirely from notes and were, therefore, not always verbatim. This meant that some interesting content was lost because in workshops things often happened very quickly and it was difficult to stay present and take notes at the same time.

Later in the process, a comprehensive ban on the use of participants' own voices was imposed, so the edited transcripts were given to actors, and then each recorded vocal track was made available for the participant's approval. At every stage the project also had to undergo a complex and rigorous approval process within the institution, and then at the Ministry of Justice. In some cases, these institutional demands meant that redactions had to be made which significantly altered the meaning that the participants and the artist wished to convey. Whilst everyone eventually approved the final edits and the actors' reproduction of their stories, several participants were disappointed that the more personal aspects of their stories were lost. Some would have preferred to voice their own stories, but with institutional insistence on complete anonymity this was not possible. It is understandable that redactions to the recorded narratives had to be made on the grounds of safety, but in some cases this sanitised the narrative to the extent that the work became less successful in allowing secondary audience members to understand the predicament of the participants.

Some participants also wanted to appear on camera but, perhaps understandably, we were obliged to remove all hints of their visual identity from any material that was taken out of the prison. This particular constraint was in line with the intentions of the project, as it reduced the risk of the work becoming voyeuristic or objectifying, and helped to cement the participants' position as co-creators rather than merely passive subjects.

The transit of imagery across the carceral boundary in both directions was an original aim of the project, but this required a lengthy administrative process, and accessing suitable sites to create the imagery requested by participants sometimes posed significant challenges. Nevertheless, fidelity to these requests was a responsibility that had to be taken seriously in order to set up a relational process that upset the conventional power balance between ‘insider’ and outsider’, artist and participants. Whilst all participants appreciated the gesture, some were initially bemused by this unfamiliar reversal of power.

*How... should an artist deal with the material they generate through the social aspects of the work's making? How is authorship shared and acknowledged? How can this social engagement be transformed from being integral to the process to being integral to the outcome too?*¹¹

Even though the Inside Stories workshops were designed to lead to an exhibitable outcome, much of the potential for rendering visible any shared sense of authorship and ownership that emerged from interactions with participants was denied by the institutional requirement for complete anonymity. This raises broader, and perhaps irresolvable questions about authorship and ownership within such a highly controlled institutional context. Bishop has pointed out that ‘accusations of mastery and egocentrism are levelled at artists who work with participants to realize a project instead of allowing it to emerge through consensual collaboration’.¹² With institutional constraints obstructing the process, the challenge of balancing the artist’s aesthetic judgement with the democratic spirit of co-creation remains an uncomfortable issue in relation to this particular project. And a number of other questions persist: if work created with such limited contact time and in such constrained conditions is going to stand up in the professional context of a gallery, to what extent can the artist entirely relinquish authorship, and how would that affect the way the work is read by an outside audience? Would this enhance or diminish the potential for condescension or lack of respect for participants on the part of secondary audiences?

Exhibiting ‘on the outside’

As with much of Wright’s previous work, the aim of exhibiting a ‘material outcome’ from the workshops is threefold: to enhance the participants’ sense of self-worth; to raise awareness of their situation for a secondary audience, and to enhance the self-awareness of the audience members. Whilst we can never really feel another person’s experience, or see it in their outward appearance, an original aim of shaping the video work around first person narratives was to encourage audiences to consider how our perceptions of one another are always relative, and depend as much on the observer as on the subject of their observations. The split-screen (diptych) format aims to suggest an interplay of perspective, where each side may reveal a different aspect of a person’s story, and both build on, rather than illustrate, the spoken narrative. One of the sections, (Responsibility at around 20’) could be read as an interplay between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, but for the most part the interwoven visual narratives are more nuanced than that, aiming to subtly challenge viewers to consider their own relationship to themes like Responsibility, Justice and Freedom. To this end, it is important that the imagery and verbal narratives work together to evoke a sense of personal presence, despite the enforced anonymity.



Inside Stories Work in Progress at OpenEye Gallery, Liverpool, May, 2022

In 2022, a selection of the Inside Stories diptychs were first shown as a work in progress at OpenEye, a community oriented photography gallery in Liverpool.¹³ A video compilation of works created by men at HMP Liverpool in their cells during Covid lockdown in response to materials sent in by the artist was also shown in the public-facing gallery window. During this exhibition, a half day symposium, attended by artists, arts professionals, members of the public and people with experience of the criminal justice system was held to open up the process of production and enable us to collect audience feedback that could be communicated to participants, as well as influencing the development of the work.



Inside Stories cell work, Digital Window, OpenEye Gallery, Liverpool

The completed Inside Stories video diptych, made up of eleven individual sections, and lasting just under 40 minutes in total, was first exhibited at Saatchi Gallery, a high-profile space

occupying the former Duke of York's Headquarters in Chelsea, London for the month of July 2023.¹⁴

The exhibition of Inside Stories at Saatchi, a context so far removed, both architecturally and socially, from the world of the people whose stories are represented in the videos, inevitably brought with it a problematic juxtaposition of worlds where insider/outsider boundaries exist on many different levels. In an attempt to negotiate some of these, a half-day symposium with presentations by Alexa Wright and Anita Dockley, Research Director at the Howard League for Penal Reform was held in the education space at the gallery during the course of the exhibition. This was attended by an invited audience of around fifty people, most of whom were artists, arts professionals, prison education staff, students or people with experience of the criminal justice system. A recently released participant from the Inside Stories project and family members of another participant were invited to the event but, even though they had initially expressed enthusiasm for attending, it was perhaps unsurprising that none of them were present in such an environment. There were a small number of other attendees with experience of the criminal justice system, but they remained silent in what must have seemed a very foreign environment. There was, however, lively dialogue amongst most attendees, with comments such as: 'this project opened our eyes to the importance of finding opportunities for creativity in the small moments of everyday life to help people communicate and understand themselves and others', (Ellie Price and Gail Howick, Novus prison education tutors) testifying to the ability of the work to resonate with audience members on an emotional level.



Symposium, Saatchi Gallery, 10/07/2023

Inside Stories has subsequently been shown in diverse international spaces, both physical and virtual, and in 2024 it was selected for MK Calling, an open submission exhibition curated by five different community groups. The venue, Milton Keynes Gallery, is a regional gallery that, as well as being well-respected within the art world, has a strong community focus, attracting a broad audience, including those who would not normally visit art galleries.

In order to enhance its broader social resonance, we intended to present the completed video diptych within prison visitor centres – in the liminal space between inside and outside. This

would have allowed participants and their families to physically take part in the presentation of their own stories, giving them the opportunity to directly interact with, and react to, the videos. Unfortunately, though, this proved impossible due to limited funds, as well as lack of time and institutional support. For these reasons there was also no opportunity for ongoing dialogue with participants following the conclusion of the project, and therefore little possibility of evaluating any significant impact for them.



Inside Stories at Saatchi Gallery, 2023

The ability of the work to touch a secondary audience is illustrated by exhibition feedback, which includes comments such as: ‘thought provoking and reflective...’, (Roz Mortimer, filmmaker); ‘a moving insight into lives and minds both inside and outside’, (Judith Cowan, artist), and ‘a most insightful view of an otherwise difficult to understand world’ (Rhonwen Sayer, translator). Whenever possible, discursive events accompany gallery exhibitions of the video work. In this context the process can be foregrounded and, with the knowledge that the people whose narratives they have listened to played an active role in creating the work, external audience members might be able to overcome some of the conceptual barriers between self and other.

Because of the drawn out timescale of the project due to Covid and other factors, it was not possible to bring documentation of the exhibitions or audience comments back to participants. This was regretful as it would have completed the circle and enabled participants to feel more involved in the dissemination of the project outcome as well as its process of production.

There are many different kinds of arts projects in prisons that would be worth mentioning here, but we will finish by drawing attention to a particular project that is exemplary in its ability to transcend that boundary. The Free Verse project led by Kaile Shilling has taken the form of monthly workshops in two Vancouver jails for a little over a year and remains ongoing at the time of writing. This extended duration has allowed Shilling to become a familiar figure ‘on the inside’, building a higher level of trust with participants and gaining significant institutional support. In addition to her own contributions, Shilling has been able to bring locally renowned poets into the prisons to work one-to-one with participants. The ‘outside poets’ have supported

imprisoned writers to share their work within the group, and to make informed choices about the form and mode of presentation of their work beyond the prison walls. Video documentation of the 'external poets' reading participants' work in the wider community was then brought back inside, thus breaching the boundary in both directions. Shilling sees the Free Verse project as primarily process-oriented, yet she expresses pride in the outcomes, 'although we didn't set out with this as our initial goal, we were also able to get the work into an established and well-respected literary magazine.'¹⁵ The Free Verse project is somewhat similar to Inside Stories in that both foreground the inside-outside dynamic, and the benefit of this for participants, but the support received by Shilling enabled her to focus on arts as an individual healing practice over a longer period. This support has resulted not only in greater and more lasting benefit for participants, but also greater clarity around issues of authorship.

Concluding Comments

In this article we have identified the successes and failures of the Inside Stories project in order to demonstrate that, to fulfil its potential, participatory art in prisons needs to be supported by sustained access, institutional flexibility, and a recognition that co-authorship can be a complex and fluid process. To illustrate this, we have interrogated the way in which the Inside Stories project was defined not only by its ambitions - to create meaningful, co-authored work that crossed the prison boundary, but also by its limitations. These include: restricted contact time, institutional censorship, issues of authorship and the associated tension between artistic quality and participant autonomy.

The role of the artist in any form of mediation between the participant and the final artifact is contested in debates around the nature of participation in socially engaged art practice. For Kester, the 'dialogical aesthetic' shifts the focus away from a physical object and instead prioritises the 'condition and character of dialogic exchange itself'.^[17] From this perspective, the editorial discussions that took place during the Inside Stories workshops were not merely a by-product, but an important feature and organising structure of the artwork. According to Kester, the responsibility of the artist in the participatory framework is 'defined in terms of openness, of listening and a willingness to accept dependence and intersubjective vulnerability', foregrounding the collaborative process.^[18] However, for Bishop there exists an inherent 'tension between quality and equality, artistic and social goals' in which 'authorial intentionality' (or a humble lack thereof) is privileged over a discussion of the work's conceptual significance as a social and aesthetic form, and this shapes the intersection between the aesthetic concerns and participatory ideals.^[19]

We have outlined the development of Inside Stories with the aim of demonstrating that an open and site-responsive approach to the design of a project is crucial to negotiating the relationship between dialogic process and aesthetic outcome. We have argued that such co-authored artworks can exist meaningfully at the intersection of process and artefact, situated between Kester's dialogical aesthetics and Bishop's insistence on an enduring aesthetic outcome. Whilst the creative process privileged by Kester is certainly a significant element in projects such as Inside Stories, there is also a value – albeit ethically charged in the face of institutional restrictions – in the exhibition of an aesthetic outcome, most potently when this can be communicated back to participants.

The outcomes of the project were described with the aim of showing that public dissemination of the video diptych has successfully enabled participants' intimate stories to reach across the

prison boundary and ‘touch’ a range of audiences, bringing the perspectives of incarcerated individuals into cultural spaces where they are typically absent. This has prompted public reflection and, in many cases, a form of empathy on the part of a remote, secondary audience. The social aims of the project were, however, curtailed by institutional redactions, the insistence on anonymity and the lack of opportunity to maintain communication with participants beyond the end of the workshop period.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the aim of creating work that traverses the carceral boundary in both directions was only partially achieved during the course of the project, given that the remit of the prison is to remove convicted offenders from society, rendering them invisible for the duration of their sentence. Nevertheless, as the Free Verse project described above demonstrates, the affordance of time, trust, and continuity can enable participatory and co-created artworks to have a powerful effect within the prison environment. With the right kind of support, iterative, relational methods such as those integral to the Inside Stories project can challenge traditional roles, and further destabilise the boundaries between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. Yet problematic questions around authorship remain. Further research is required to work out how to build a suitable framework that enables the aesthetic outcome of a work co-created in prison to fully embrace and attribute participants’ contributions in the face of institutional restrictions, without appearing amateur and thus reinforcing existing hierarchies.

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- ¹³ ‘Open Eye Gallery works with people to explore photography’s unique ability to connect, to tell stories, to inquire, to reflect on humanity’s past and present, and to celebrate its diversity and creativity’: <https://openeye.org.uk/about/>
- ¹⁴ ‘Saatchi Gallery is a recognised authority in contemporary art globally. The Gallery acquired a strong reputation for introducing artists who would later gain worldwide recognition’: <https://www.saatchigallery.com/about>
- ¹⁵ From an in-person conversation between Kaile Shilling and Alexa Wright, 15/3/25
- ¹⁷ Kester, Conversation Pieces, p.4
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p.5
- ¹⁹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p.63.