

Alexa Wright

Lives and works in London, United Kingdom

Alexa Wright is London-based artist working across photography, video, and interactive installation. In the late 1990s she became known for *After Image*, an award-winning series of photographs of people with phantom limbs. Since then, much of her practice has involved building relationships with people with mental/physical differences, medical conditions and, most recently, with people in prison. As well as being beneficial for participants this way of working enables Alexa to gather personal accounts that intimately and empathetically address questions of human identity, otherness and vulnerability.

 [@alexawright_art](https://www.instagram.com/alexawright_art)

An interview by **Francis L. Quettier**
and **Dora S. Tennant**

womencinmakers.press@gmail.com

Hello Alexa and welcome to
WomenCinmakers: before starting to
elaborate about your film we would invite our
readers to visit <http://www.alexawright.com>

in order to get a wider idea about your
artistic production. For this special edition of
we have selected *Inside Stories*, an
extremely interesting video art work that can
be viewed at
<https://vimeo.com/853767493>. The two-
year span of this project suggests
considerable depth of engagement, and we're





particularly struck by how you've managed to dismantle traditional artistic hierarchies. Could you walk us through your decision-making process when balancing your creative vision with the participants' authorial voice? How did you manage the power dynamics of directing while also being directed by participants when gathering external footage?

Alexa Wright: Thank you, it's good to be here! Yes, the project took place over a two year period, but there were a lot of gaps. As I will explain below, this was mainly due to Covid, and/or prisons going into lockdown for other reasons. At one point I was joking with prisoners that it was as difficult to get into the prison as it was for them to get out. Although I did have a small grant from the Arts Council, and access was facilitated by the prison education provider, Novus, the project didn't have any institutional support in the form of a commissioning agency or gallery. Whilst the need to manage everything myself was exhausting and sometimes depressing, and it took a lot of perseverance to keep the project going, in some ways I think this lack of institutional support was beneficial. I was not there in any official capacity, I wasn't a key holder, or a member of staff, and so I could approach the participants on more equal terms.

A lot of socially engaged art is about group action, whereas my approach is different, the work is quite personal – it's more about individuals and their sense of self and self-worth. I have been doing similar projects for quite a long time, and over the years I've developed the ability to listen openly, without judgement in a range of contexts. I think that once people realise that they are not being pigeon holed because of what they look like or what have done or what has happened to them, they are more relaxed and able to talk more freely. And maybe people also find it easier to talk to me because I am not a very authoritarian figure, I'm not sure, but I am genuinely interested in people, and perhaps they can feel that.

I started the project with a plan, but it was a flexible one as I know from experience that working in this kind of environment things are going to change along the way. Most of the time I couldn't plan ahead. Whilst the overall aim didn't change, the design of each workshop emerged out of the previous one. Some of the facilitators found this strange, and I was aware that they thought I was being unprofessional because I couldn't give them a clear plan for the whole project, but for me it's important to plan responsively. Even the form of the final work was different from what I had already proposed, but I believe that this is the creative



Inside Stories at Saatchi Gallery, London, 2023

process – if you can already imagine the outcome of a project, why do it?

Enabling the participants to direct me was the fun part. When I showed someone a choice of imagery I found it so interesting that they could be absolutely clear about what qualities the images should have to represent their experience. There's a lovely example of this from Feltham YOI: one of the guys asked for imagery

of gates opening and closing to represent his relationship to freedom, so I went around London documenting lots of different types of gates. During a 1-1 meeting I showed these to him one at a time, and the answer to each was negative - too smart; too many holes; too symmetrical, or his response was indifferent, until we reached the one at the bottom of the illustration. Then he smiled. He was very clear that this one was right, so I negotiated access

and spent the afternoon with a student assistant making the gates open and close with nylon thread. The participant was very happy with the result and I really like his sequence in the video.

We really appreciate the nuanced approach you took in exploring complex themes such as *Justice, Judgement, and Power*. Could you share more about how you decided on these particular themes and how prisoners

responded to them in workshops?

Alexa Wright: When I was planning the project I was thinking about the participants' agency, and how in the criminal justice system certain terms may be used about people, or in relation to them without actually involving them. So we started with the words that came to my mind in that context: Justice, Power, Freedom and Judgement, and then

during workshops participants added Responsibility, Trust, Integrity and Forgiveness. At the start of the project I wasn't sure whether this approach would work, but using individual words like this proved to be a powerful catalyst for people to start telling their stories. Sometimes the themes overlapped, which is why some sections of the video have more than one word attached to them.

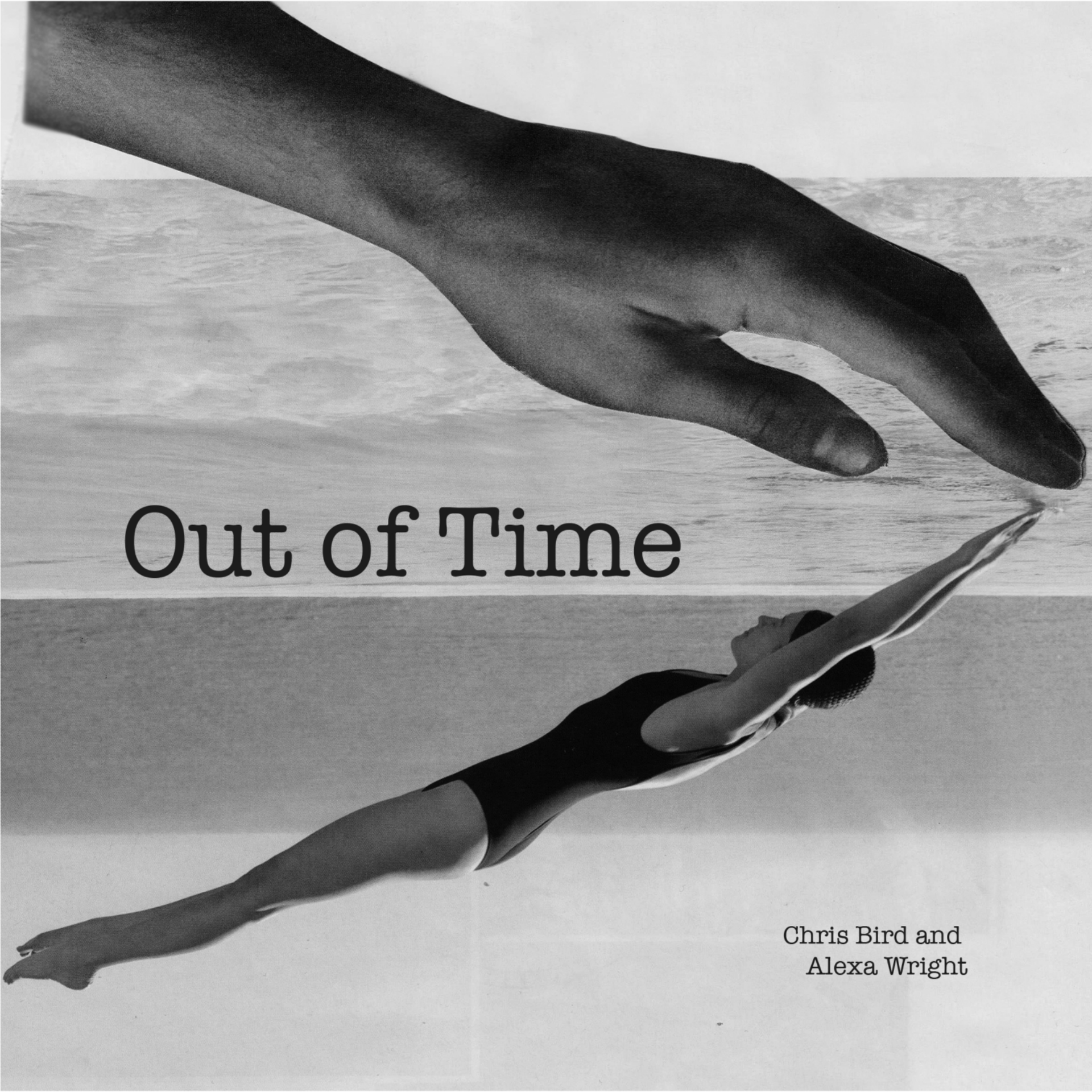
We're especially interested in your use of collage as a starting point. Could you speak about how this medium helped prisoners articulate experiences that might have been difficult to express verbally?

Alexa Wright: *Inside Stories* builds on earlier projects, especially Piecing it Together (2015), which involved working with attendees at two NHS day units for people with acute mental health problems. Before that I had always worked one to one with participants, but in this context I was told that I would have to work with people in groups. At first I was a bit thrown by this, as I had always relied on personal interaction to encourage participants to tell their stories. But then somehow, seemingly from out of the blue, the idea of using collage came to me. This proved a huge success, as you can see [here](#) some very interesting work was produced, almost all of it by

people who had never worked visually before. I have since learnt that collage is often used in socially engaged work, but at that time it was new and very exciting for me. It is such an accessible medium – people can make a collage without worrying that they don't have drawing or painting skills, and somehow the process of juxtaposing different bits of imagery lends itself to narrative.

At the end of the Piecing It Together project I worked with a smaller number of participants to create small photo text books. The texts and photos in the books are all the work of the participants, then I organized these into the square format with input from the individual participants according to their capacity. I felt this was a successful way of enabling people to have control over the contents, whilst ensuring that the books formed a coherent series. I was trying to follow a similar strategy when editing the *Inside Stories* videos, but in the end I didn't feel completely comfortable that aesthetic judgements were being made (by me) during the editing process that participants could have no part in, although they did see and approve what I had done. Ideally the collaborative process would have extended to the final edits, and this is something I had originally proposed, but that would have required a lot more prison visits, and much more





Out of Time

Chris Bird and
Alexa Wright



Inside Stories still



time with each participant, and this just wasn't possible.

When you give someone a task that involves representing their personal experiences, something they can feel and don't initially have to think too much about, and you provide some ready-made images you discover that most people are visually literate. Of course, a few of the collages are very literal, or decorative, but a lot of

them (about a hundred were created for the Piecing it Together project in total) are quite sophisticated and visually powerful. So I brought that previous experience to the Inside Stories project. When I first met the participants I would tell them a bit about myself and my work, and explain that I wanted them to tell their stories visually. I often showed another previous work, [A View From Inside](#) (2012), a series of digital portraits, to demonstrate how images can tell a

story. When you work visually there is a process of personal disclosure, but the narrative is much less fixed than it would be if it was written down. Because it's clear that viewers have to work out or guess what the combination of elements signify I think people generally feel a lot safer to tell their story visually.

I've have been talking about previous projects, and hopefully that explains how and why I used collage with the people in prison. For some of the prison participants it was difficult to start –some of them took quite a long time just looking through the magazines before they started to identify images that meant something for them. But even that process was interesting, for example at a workshop at HMP Liverpool one of the guys found



some scratch and sniff perfume in one of the magazines and that initiated a lively conversation about how much they miss different smells in prison. When they had finished their collages I asked each participant to talk through theirs and I recorded the conversations. This is when the really interesting content emerged. Some people were a bit hesitant at first and others couldn't stop talking. A couple of times different members of the group butted in with little bits of their own story, and everyone was talking over one another. Whilst that wasn't always productive in terms of a single, coherent narrative, it led in some interesting directions and gave me more of an insight into their backgrounds. Unfortunately I was not allowed to take a voice recorder in to HMP Styal and had to rely on note-taking, which was a shame as a lot of interesting content was lost. Things often happened very quickly and it was difficult to stay present and take notes at the same time.

***Inside Stories* integrates visual elements created by the participants themselves. Could you expand on the collage-making process and how these collages influenced the subsequent video footage you gathered? How did you facilitate this co-direction, especially given the restrictions within a prison environment?**

Alexa Wright: As I already mentioned, the collages were a means of getting people to think visually, then after they got used to that process, and had talked through the imagery they had chosen, I asked each person what else would represent their experiences. Some immediately thought quite literally about specific places – like the crown court in Liverpool, others

suggested more symbolic images like the railway or the boiling pot and demolition site. Sometimes I had to encourage people to come up with imagery, and at other times they were immediately clear about what they wanted.

I had to get permission to bring my laptop into each facility, but once permission was granted there was not too much scrutiny of what I was showing people, and we were able to look through rough footage together without any problem. I was, obviously, mindful to show only appropriate content. Sometimes this was in the form of still images, or found footage – whatever I thought best represented what they had asked for. Then, when participants had looked at this and given me a more precise idea of the imagery they liked I went out to shoot the final footage. This was not a quick or easy process, sometimes access took a lot of negotiation, I often had to reshoot, and occasionally I had to compromise, but for the most part participants and I were pleased with the results.

We're rather taken with how you've balanced individual expression with collective storytelling. How did you approach the editorial process to maintain both personal authenticity and broader social resonance?

Alexa Wright: Each narrative is the result of a long



Participant collage, *Piecing it Together*, 2015



Inside Stories still

process. I started by transcribing the conversations from HMP Liverpool and Feltham YOI, and organizing the notes from HMP Styal. I always do the transcribing myself as I find it an important way of listening closely to what is being said. After that I spent a lot of time reading and physically cutting up printed transcripts and then listening again to the tapes. Each transcript went through multiple edits in order to distil the

important parts of what was said into one narrative. I had to cut a lot out as some of them were very long. Most of what made it to the final edit is verbatim what was said, although some of the narratives contain fragments from multiple conversations that took place on different days. Before the final edit I took each transcript back to the person concerned for their approval. It's difficult to remember now, I think a couple of

them made suggestions for changes, but most were happy with my edits. There were, however, a number of institutional restrictions that impacted on what I could do. I knew that I couldn't include any personal details which would identify the individual, but the transcripts had to be approved by prison education managers, who insisted that I redacted and changed some of the anonymized texts. This was disappointing, as it meant that

some of the most interesting content had to be cut out, but it was something I had to work around. It was also a shame that in the end I wasn't allowed to use participants' own voices in the final work. Again, something was lost here. The finished sequences also had to be approved by Prison Governors and the Ministry of Justice, but luckily they didn't impose any further restrictions.



Inside Stories still

You mention broader social resonance, I think in a way this takes care of itself. The participants' stories are all very human and in some cases quite emotive, so I don't think it's too difficult to empathize with them.

Having said that, this work, like a lot of my previous works, is as much about the person watching the video as it is about the participants. I will elaborate on that later...

We're particularly fascinated by your decision to include participants' own photographs from within the prison. How did this self-documentation aspect influence the overall narrative structure?

Alexa Wright: Yes, one sequence contains participants' own photos. I spent quite a long time trying to find ways to integrate more of their photos

throughout the piece, but that never really worked. Some of the photos from Liverpool were particularly interesting, despite all the restrictions about what they could photograph.

The women at HMP Styal also took some great photos, but these had to stay in the camera until they were approved by prison staff, and sadly when I took them for approval after one particularly productive day, I noticed that one of

the participants had deleted all the images except her own (which were not the most interesting!). The guys in Feltham YOI were not so interested in taking their own photos.

The workshops at HMP Liverpool and HMP Styal coincided with the Covid epidemic. This caused a lot of complications as the prisons were frequently locked down, with no access for any



Inside Stories still

visitors, and prisoners confined to their cells at all times. Lockdowns often happened at short notice and, between late 2021 to early 2022, there was no access for weeks at a time. To try to keep the project going during this period I negotiated with staff to create packages of images and texts that people who had participated in the workshops could work on in their cells. There were all sorts of restrictions around this, but with the help of one

very dedicated member of staff at HMP Liverpool we were able to complete the process with four or five participants. I was hoping to be able to speak to them over the phone to gather their explanations, but this was not allowed, and in the end I had only their written notes and some photos of storyboards they had made. This is where the handwriting in the Freedom and Power sequence (at around 28min 50sec) came from. I tried very

hard to integrate the overlaid texts and still photos in a way that would reflect the individual prisoner's work and also fit with the rest of the piece, but I'm still not quite sure they do.

***Inside Stories* subtly challenges viewers to consider their own perceptions of themes like Responsibility and Freedom. Was there a**

particular reaction or reflection you hoped to elicit from the audience?

Alexa Wright: When I thought of working with the keywords I was focusing on the participants and how they would feel and respond, I wasn't thinking about the audience of the final piece. But as the work evolved I was hoping that it would inspire some self-reflection and empathy on the part of the

viewer, perhaps encouraging them to feel how I had felt when working with the participants – that they are just people like the rest of us and for the most part they are where they are because of life circumstances. Around ten years ago I published a book, [Human Monstrosity](#), which aims to demonstrate how monstrosity and the monster are social and cultural constructs, a form of societal self-defence allowing us to keep perceived monstrosity at a distance. I guess all of my projects involving communities are about dispelling the perception of those people as monstrous.

Your use of a *split-screen format* suggests an interplay of perspective, where each side may reveal something the other lacks. Did you find this structure helpful in conveying contrasting emotions or perspectives between the world inside and outside the prison walls?

Alexa Wright: That's a good question. I had planned a very different form for the work originally – it was going to be a four or five screen installation, with one screen for each keyword, each containing fragments of narrative and visual ideas from different participants. But when I came to edit the footage the process became overwhelmingly complicated I couldn't find a way of managing the content. As with all my projects, I was trying to fulfill all the roles of writer, director, producer, and I



Inside Stories participant photo



Inside Stories still

just couldn't work out how to meaningfully put the work together as I had proposed. The solution I found was to make a series of individual narratives, creating one short video diptych for each participant. Within the very limited time we had to work together, this enabled each person involved to have more control over their own sections, and it gave me more clarity. I can't quite remember how the diptych idea came about, I think it was a

strategy for reflecting their experience more broadly, but it's not as simple as inside on one side and outside on the other – I think one of them (Responsibility at around 20') could be read like that, but for the most part the interwoven narratives are more nuanced than that.

The theme of 'otherness' runs through much of your work. From your experience across different vulnerable communities, what

common threads have you observed in how individuals navigate their *sense of identity* within institutional settings?

Alexa Wright: That really varies depending on the person and the setting. Some people are very accepting of, and even grateful for the frame of the institution, whilst others kick back against it. Several of the people I worked with on the [A View From Inside](#), and [Piecing it Together](#) projects, all of whom

have lived through episodes of psychosis, reported very negative experiences of their treatment by authorities and within institutions. I find psychosis particularly fascinating because when someone is having an episode not only can their external behavior be completely outside the norm, but their whole internal sense of the world is altered. This means that the disconnection between the person's experience and outward appearance is huge, so in



Inside Stories still

that moment empathy is almost impossible and people are left feeling misunderstood. Whilst working in the prisons I discovered that some people deliberately get themselves jailed for Christmas just to be inside and fed and with people because they are isolated in the outside world. In jail there is plenty of time for reflection, but people deal with this in very different ways. In one of the prisons I worked in I observed how

people use drugs to escape the reality of the situation. I found this non-life very disturbing because it suggests that they have just given up on any positive sense of themselves. But on a more optimistic note, some people engage in education with a constructive outlook on their future.

Feltham YOI was the institution where I had the most access. I was allowed onto the Wings to

recruit and then talk to the young men one to one, which was interesting and fruitful, although time was always short because prison routine is very regimented. At the time I visited the guys there were all very young (18-21 – the age limit has since been extended up to 30). Because of their age, and exacerbated by Covid, when they were confined to their wings, there was a strong gang culture in the prison. The education unit, where the Inside Stories

workshops took place, was the only time that people from different wings mixed. Many of the guys I spoke to on the wings were afraid to go to education because there were fights there practically every day and, curiously, they were more afraid of what they themselves would do than of what others would do to them. So I would say that they were quite self-aware, but trapped in a way of being typical of gang culture in the outside world that was amplified by



Symposium accompanying exhibition of Inside Stories at Saatchi Gallery, London.



their confinement and close proximity to one another.

Throughout your practice, one notices an unwavering dedication to fostering mutual relationships with individuals whom society tends to marginalize - be they persons living with physical or mental differences, those facing health challenges, or indeed, those serving time in prison. How has this sustained engagement shaped your perspective on identity and social exclusion?

Alexa Wright: Yes, that's true, I am always interested in working with people who are marginalized for some reason. I suppose that originally comes from my own lifelong feeling of being marginal, or a misfit. The other main driver for this work is curiosity, I'm fascinated by subjectivity, and the enigmatic fact that we can never really feel another person's experience, or see it in their outward appearance. Our perceptions of one another are always relative, and depend as much on the person doing the perceiving as the person perceived. I think that's something I understood a long time ago, but working with people with physical differences, and physical and mental health issues as well as

people in prison has really cemented that knowledge.

The sustained engagement you mentioned started with an early project, [After Image](#), a series of digital portrait photos of people with phantom limbs made in 1997, which sought to represent people's bodies as they experience them rather than as other people see them. This project started out as a collaboration with neuroscientists, but I quickly realised that the people experiencing the phantoms were much more interesting, and that a combination of personal narrative and visual image could offer a powerful means of communicating what we don't normally see.

Additionally, what reflections or transformations have you observed in participants as they share their stories, and how does this reciprocal process influence your own understanding and portrayal of human vulnerability?

Alexa Wright: During the project there were some great moments when I could observe participants making realizations, or beginning to think differently. For example, when it was time for one of the men at HMP Liverpool to speak about his collage he started with an apology that it wasn't

well done and wasn't interesting because he and his life were not interesting. But actually his story and his ideas for how this could be visualized were really powerful (his was one of the narratives that was strictly redacted by the authorities). Over the short time we had for the project it was great to see him open up and gain confidence. The same was true for several of the young men in Feltham, although in a group situation they could be difficult, disruptive and defiant. But when I was able to sit down with them individually I could see transformations happening, particularly as they realized that they could express themselves visually, even when they had not shot the footage.

Every stage of the project was badly affected by Covid. The main effect was that I had less time with people than I originally planned for, but it also affected prisoners' sense of identity and their ability to mix. In each prison lockdowns meant that people were confined to their cells for long periods, and when they were allowed out they couldn't leave the wing. This led to widespread depression and apathy, but in the case of Feltham YOI it fostered gang culture and there was a lot of violence at the time I was working there, just after Covid, so the young men were often distracted by that and were unwilling to mix in the education department.

When I mention reciprocity what I mean is that the project is not like art therapy, where a qualified person is offering the prisoner something "for their good". This can obviously be very beneficial, but I see what I do as very different to that. During a previous project with people who experience psychosis I was questioning myself, wondering whether my process was overly selfish because I was not just providing for participants, I was asking them to do something for me. But then I realized this is not a bad thing. Asking people to contribute their story and their ideas to a larger work changes the power balance. Obviously participants can always choose whether to engage, some prospective Inside Stories participants came to a workshop once or twice and then dropped out, whilst others were really dedicated and never missed a session.

We really appreciate your insights and the time you've generously given us, Alexa. As we wrap up, we're especially keen to hear about your artistic trajectory. Could you share with our readers some tantalising details about your upcoming projects? We're particularly interested in how you envision your work evolving in the future. Are there new themes you're eager to explore, or perhaps





Work in Progress, 2024



innovative techniques you're looking to incorporate?

Alexa Wright: Thank you – you have asked some very interesting and relevant questions, I hope I've managed to answer them adequately! Regarding the future – I have been writing applications to work with communities in different contexts, and I'm waiting on the outcome of an application to do some further work in a prison, this time looking at participants' hopes and dreams for the future. But at the same time I'm also thinking about how I might expand the notion of community to include some non-human participants. Earlier this year I was on a residency in rural Italy for three weeks, where I was experimenting with creating works with and for the local wildlife. I made some small paintings on rice paper and put them out in the landscape, then gathered them up a day or two later when they had been edited by insects. This process was slightly sabotaged by the weather – it kept raining and the rain melted the paper – but there were a few nice results. Then I started to decorate stones with baroque patterns made of royal icing and put those out for wildlife to interact with. I also made the short video, [On The Verge](#). These are just the beginnings of some thoughts about how I might make works that invite empathy and

identification with non-human 'others'. The intention of this new work is to encourage people to consider the massive impact of humans on the natural world, and to think about how we are not just caretakers of 'nature', but an integral part of it. This strand of my work is going slowly at the moment because it involves a major rethink, but I'm quite keen to go back to using materials. Not entirely moving off-screen, but incorporating objects in my work again. I'm interested in unusual conjunctions of materials, like the icing (culture, luxury, indulgence...), and stone (natural, enduring, basic material...). If I had the chance I would love to ice some much bigger rocks, and I've just started embroidering patterns on leaves – possibly to make a big tapestry.

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womencinemakers.press@gmail.com