# A House for Art:

## Inclusive Representation for Artists Labelled/with IDD in Canadian Art Galleries

**Natalie Hart**

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**Cover image:** Artist 3, *Two loons*, Graphite on paper, 2025

**Disclaimer:** As per my ethics application, artworks have been cropped where necessary to protect the artists' anonymity when their names appear.

# Abstract

This research aims to increase affirming representation of artists labelled/with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in art galleries in Canada. Using inclusive research, inclusive arts and curatorial dreaming methodologies, findings are organized into themes that illuminate the reasons for the lack of inclusive representation; the role that curators play both in underrepresentation and furthering inclusive representation; whether artists labelled/with IDD want to have their works in mainstream art galleries; and how representation can be done in a respectful way. Methods include one-on-one semi-structured interviews with curators, as well as group discussion and artmaking with artists labelled/with IDD. Finally, the study presents frameworks for moving towards more meaningful representation for artists labelled/with IDD.

**Document Flesch-Kincaid reading level:** 12

**Keywords:** inclusive curating, exhibition accessibility, disability-identified artists, affirming disability representation in art museums and galleries, artists with intellectual and developmental disabilities, curators with IDD.

# Table of Contents

# List of Figures

# List of Tables

# Dedication

My heartfelt gratitude goes to the artists to whom this project is dedicated. You taught me so much about the meaning of creativity, about communication and about creating a culture of caring for one another. May you see your art displayed the way you want and in spaces that are deeply meaningful to you.

I extend a deep thank you to the studio staff who contributed to my understanding of the topic. Your time spent consulting with me ensured this project was carried out in a meaningful way.

A huge thank you to the curators who shared their insights during this project. It was a pleasure to learn about the innovative practices each of you bring. Our interviews enriched my knowledge of the ways in which you're pushing the boundaries of traditional curatorial practices.

Adele Ruhdorfer, our conversations about this topic over the past two years pushed me to think outside the bounds of my research questions, to address gaps and think about how this project could grow in the future. Each time we spoke, the creativity and knowledge you brought invited me to think about this project in new ways.

To my professors, peers, and colleagues in Inclusive Design 2025: the Outliers, thank you for your creativity, your innovation, and your friendship. I have learned so much from you about the meaning of inclusion and challenging the status quo. Thank you as well to the OCAD School of Graduate Studies for their generous funding of this project.

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To my friends, thank you for your words of encouragement, the generosity of your time spent reading drafts, co-working, and bonding over the effort required for this undertaking.

Janet and Norm, my dear parents, thank you for your love, for nourishing me, and for taking care of me as I carried out this creative project. Your encouragement to persevere at each milestone kept me going in the most difficult moments.

Finally, this project is dedicated to all disabled artists, dreamers and misfits who have the courage to make their voices heard in a world that so desperately wants them to conform.
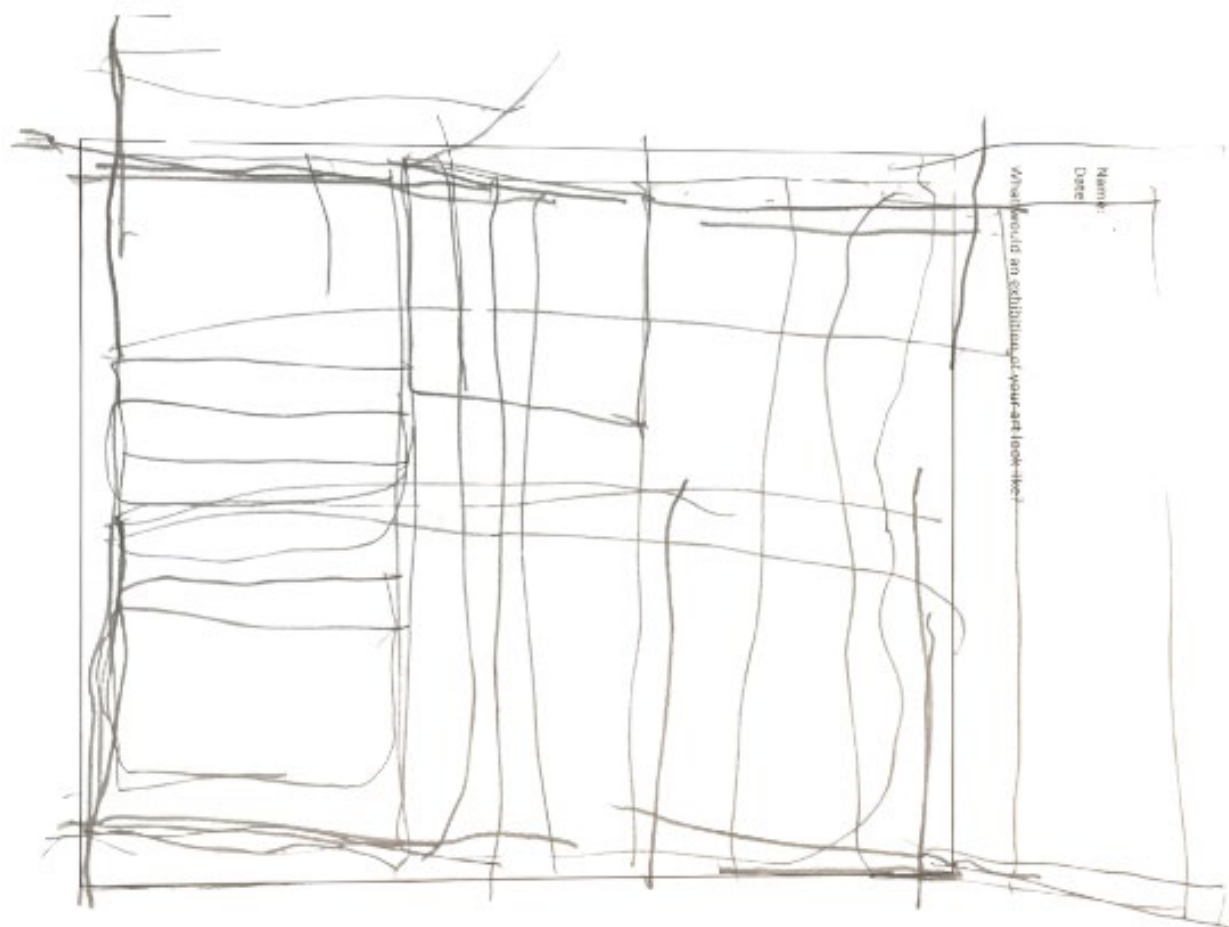
Figure 1. Artist 1, *House for art*, Graphite on paper, 2025

Me: "If you saw your artworks up in a museum or gallery, how would that make you feel?"

Artist 1: "That would make me feel good."

# Chapter One:
## Beginnings

# Introduction

Over recent decades, there has been a push for more affirming representation in museums and galleries for those who have been historically unrecognized and underrecognized in these spaces. Although many museums and galleries have accessibility plans that address some of the barriers to inclusion that people with disabilities face, there has not been a movement towards disability representation on a similarly large scale. In particular, artists labelled/with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) still face numerous barriers to their inclusion in mainstream art galleries and are underrepresented in these spaces.

Prior to pursuing this master's program, I volunteered with an organization that supports artists labelled/with IDD and kept connected to the organization through patronage and attending gallery visits with the artists. During this time, I also volunteered and worked in museums and galleries, where I not only noticed a lack of informational accessibility, but also affirming representation for this population. On gallery visits, I had the opportunity to talk to artists labelled/with IDD about this phenomenon, and they noticed it too. The dearth of representation in contrast with the incredible creative potential of artists labelled/with IDD was a topic in need of exploration.

Museums and galleries are well-placed to promote respectful, positive, and affirming representations of people labelled/with IDD. In general, the lack of disability representation in museums and galleries perpetuates an invisibility that people labelled/with IDD face in many areas of society. Museum studies scholars, Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd write that "public portrayals of disabled people have effects and consequences which – though slippery, diffuse and difficult to trace – are nevertheless ubiquitous and capable of powerfully shaping disabled people's lives in innumerable and very tangible ways" (2010, 3). Representations of disabled people in museums and galleries have influenced relationships between disabled and non-disabled people at the interpersonal and systemic levels and have led to the justification of mistreatment and abuse of disabled people. Thus, museums and galleries have a

social responsibility to not only promote accessibility for people labelled/with IDD, but also inclusive representation.

Many institutions today, including art galleries, lack the necessary structures and systems to support individuals labelled/with IDD as visitors, let alone recognize them as professional artists and curators. In the context of the United States "visitor-centered approaches are helping museums become more inclusive with their audiences, but little has been done in the majority of museums across the country to improve the experiences of visitors with developmental disabilities" (Stringer 2014, as cited in Woodruff 2023). The exclusion of people with disabilities and those labelled/with IDD often results not from intentional neglect, but from a lack of consideration for their inclusion, rendering them effectively invisible. Artist-facilitator, practice-led action researcher, and specialist in inclusive arts practice, Jade French, writes about how artists labelled/with IDD might not have the opportunity to be involved in the process of exhibition-making of their own works. French notes that artists labelled/with IDD need support to take ownership of how their works are displayed. French interrogates who can be a curator and asserts that there are meaningful ways to include artists labelled/with IDD in the curatorial process (2020, 1). Throughout the course of this research, I will delve deeper into these issues.

This research explores the lack of representation of artists labelled/with IDD in Canadian art galleries. By engaging directly with artists labelled/with IDD and curators, through group discussions, art-making activities, and interviews, this research addresses four main research questions: What are the barriers that perpetuate a lack of inclusive representation for artists labelled/with IDD in art galleries in Canada? What role do curators play in furthering inclusive representation? Do artists labelled/with IDD want to have their works exhibited in mainstream art galleries and participate in that process? Lastly, what are affirming ways in which to engage with and present the works of artists labelled/with IDD?

Using inclusive research, inclusive arts and curatorial dreaming methodologies, this project aims to include artists labelled/with IDD and to dialogue with them in meaningful ways, while challenging traditional research hierarchies. The project adds complexity to the current usage of the **social model of disability**, which is that

autonomy and independence are crucial for all disabled people to live full and productive lives. This term, coined by Mike Oliver in 1983, originated with the idea that people are not disabled by their impairments but by barriers in society (Oliver 2013). Oliver never suggested abandoning the medical/individual model or that the social model was all-encompassing.  As time went on and the social model was socialized, the nuance of Oliver's original idea was removed and positioned in opposition to the medical model. This project adds complexity and nuance to the current usage of the term, challenging the idea of total autonomy and independence, and validating the interconnectedness of communities of people labelled/with IDD as crucial to their artmaking practices.

Figure 2. Artist 3, How would you feel having an exhibition?,
Graphite on paper, 2025

# Chapter Two:

## Setting the Stage and Looking Back

# What is IDD?

Terminology can vary depending on historical, cultural and regional differences. Below, I highlight those differences with reference to the terminology used in the sources cited throughout the course of my research.

**Labelled/with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD):** I will refer to one set of collaborators as "artists labelled/with IDD." People labelled/with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are a population that is often the most talked about, rather than talked to directly. Their individuality is removed, and they are discussed in terms of a type instead of as individuals (Hendren, 2024). The term "labelled/with" aims to make space for the various ways in which a person might identify with or reject the label "intellectual and developmental disability" (Miller 2021, 8) while being mindful that this is a very individual choice.

**Intellectual disability:** The Canadian Association of Community Living uses the term "intellectual disability."

**Developmental disability:** Community Living BC and Statistics Canada use the term "developmental disability," including in the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD). Art studios such as BEING Studio, the Nina Haggerty Centre for the Arts, and the National Access Arts Centre also use the term "developmental disability," referring to the community of artists they support.

Their specificity of terminology may be due to funding, as noted by art therapist and IDD researcher Sara Miller:

> The label of IDD carries important meaning in studio spaces. The availability of some services, as well as funding for those services, depends upon the use of the IDD label. Without this label, or with a different label, access to some studios would be denied to some people. (2021, 7)

Thus, labels can be important for the sake of studios accessing funding to support underserved populations. However, in reviewing literature on this population, it is important to note that there are differences between the terminology used by organizations in Canada and the UK.

**Learning difficulties and learning disabilities:** Inclusive arts researchers from the UK, Fox and Macpherson, use the term "learning disabilities." While the term

"intellectual disabilities" exists in the UK, "learning disability" is most used in medical, policy, and psychological contexts (Fox and Macpherson 2015, 23). In addition, I will use the term "people with learning difficulties" in reference to sources, including those authored by disability studies professor and scholar in social work, Kirsten Stalker.

**Cognitive difference:** In other UK publications, the terms "cognitive difference" and "cognitive disability" are commonly used to refer to people labelled/with IDD.

To reflect a disability studies perspective, the diagnostic label of intellectual or developmental disability might be removed in future research.

Artist and museum education specialist, Anthony Woodruff uses this approach writing:

> As a way to honor the voices of the participants in this project, and to treat them equitably as team members, I refer to them most frequently as artists in an attempt to avoid using labels or imply that these individuals are lacking in some way. The wording "participant with developmental disability" or "artist with developmental disability" was unneeded for staying consistent with the goals of disability studies and the purpose of this research. (2023, 360).

Taking these sources into account, I will use the term "artists labelled/with IDD" to honour some of the ways in which a person might identify. I use the diagnostic label "intellectual and developmental disability (IDD)" throughout my paper to reflect the terminology currently used in Canada. This ensures that future researchers can easily find this work and draw on it for projects involving this population.

# Institutionalization and Museums

Historically, government-run facilities that housed people with disabilities bore ethically problematic connections to the eugenics movement. Most facilities were located far from the community, isolating residents from their loved ones and the rest of society (Truths of Institutionalization n.d). Many people labelled/with IDD were considered "mentally deficient" during the eugenics movement and spent their lives in institutions, often subjected to horrific mistreatment (Houck and Dracobly 2022, 70). This was practice motivated by the concept of custodialism (Malacrida 2018; Voronka, 2008 as cited in Chandler et al. 2023), which prevented disabled people from being in public spaces, as their presence was seen as harmful to the goals of nation building (Chandler et al. 2023, 1). In Ontario specifically, *An Act to Authorise the Erection of an Asylum within this Province for the Reception of Insane and Lunatic Persons* was passed in

1839. This act gave the government the authority to establish the first provincial asylum for people labelled/with IDD (Truths of Institutionalization n.d.). Hundreds of thousands of disabled people in Ontario were institutionalized starting in the mid-1800s. This continued until the last institution in Ontario closed in 2009 (Chandler et al. 2023, 1).

During this time, universities helped spread the idea of custodialism through their curriculum. Eugenics was taught in several southern Ontario universities, including the Macdonald Institute and Ontario Agricultural College, two of the three founding colleges that later formed the University of Guelph. These institutions furthered the idea that it was essential to segregate, culturally assimilate, and sterilize Indigenous, Black, and other racialized populations, as well as poor and disabled people (Kelly et al. 2021).

Given the connection between 19th and 20th century universities and museums, it would make sense that museums in Ontario and Canada at large were used as a tool for the exclusion of disabled people, and in particular, people labelled/with IDD. From the 1830s onwards, museums were considered helpful in civilizing the working class, teaching them morality, and improving their skills by demonstrating state-of-the-art design and craftsmanship (Mak 1996, 101). Key museum leaders in the 19th and early 20th centuries saw public collections as only beneficial to those familiar with scientific classification systems, prevailing theories of history, and academic approaches to art and art history (Bérubé 2021, 96). Thus, anyone without a particular type of education or social status was excluded from these spaces.

# Outsider Art

Out of the rise of institutionalization grew the phenomenon of "Outsider Art" which continued to further the exclusion of artists labelled/with IDD in mainstream art and culture. The term "Outsider Art" first appeared as the title of a book by art historian, Roger Cardinal in 1972 (Wojcik 2008, 179). "Outsider Art," as defined by folklore scholar, Daniel Wojcik (2008) is "generally understood to refer to people with no formal artistic training, who are isolated from dominant culture and the mainstream art world and who create art that is idiosyncratic and without precedent" (179). Wojcik goes on to analyze the issues with this label, including the notion that those labelled as "outsider artists" are insane or primitive in contrast to normative people and culture (Wojcik 2008,

179). Works by artists labelled/with IDD have long been framed as "Outsider Art," despite this label being inaccurate due to the training and exposure to local art scenes and mainstream culture that many of these artists received.

The separation of "Outsider Art" from mainstream culture was by design and maintained by curators and art institutions. Curators would enter institutions and select artworks to be displayed as "Outsider Art," and most of the time, would not credit the artists when they displayed their works in an exhibition (Chandler et al. 2023, 1). In addition, people living in institutions were assumed not to be able to make decisions or express themselves, so they were excluded from practices like attending exhibition openings, speaking about their works, and being compensated for them (Chandler et al. 2023, 1).

# The Legacy of Institutionalization

Even with deinstitutionalization beginning in the 1960s, the stigma, discrimination, and lack of resources for artists labelled/with IDD to fully be included remain today (Houck and Dracobly 2022, 70). At the same time, cultural and political assimilation is desired by mainstream institutions. The institutions of today uphold this legacy in ways that perpetuate both an invisibility and a visibility of people labelled/with IDD. Those labelled/with IDD were institutionalized for many years while mainstream educational and cultural institutions developed around them without their consideration or input. This invisibility/visibility dichotomy is a recurring theme for disabled people in the Western world, as highlighted by disability justice and culture thought leader, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. She notes that disabled people have experienced a "history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased" (2013, 56). This paradox is also explored by disability studies scholar, Benjamin Fraser, who argues that "when groups position themselves for recognition by normative institutions and practices, their disruptive potential can become weakened" (2018, 7). Fraser further explains how capitalist neoliberalism often appropriates marginalized identity politics to assimilate them into the dominant narrative. In this process, nation-building relies on dissolving and oppressing marginalized cultures and practices, which may not align with the desires of marginalized groups. Although people labelled/with IDD have ostensibly

been integrated back into society, there remains a palpable tension: the inaccessibility of institutions renders their disabilities highly visible in these spaces.

There are biases that stop artists labelled/with IDD from being accepted into both mainstream and disability art institutions. Even though many are at the level of a professional artist, how their creativity presents itself may not align with dominant ideas of what creativity looks like. Further, stereotypes of people labelled/with IDD as unproductive can cause skepticism as to whether they are able to rise to the level of a professional artist (Yoon et al. 2021, 446). Some artists labelled/with IDD may require support in their art practice, which is a valid form of collaboration. However, since the current usage of the social model of disability fails to fully account for cognitive disability, we are left with a narrow view of disabilities. This limited view does not encompass people labelled/with IDD and the collaborative model of support that they sometimes need. This is a gap in disability studies that contributes to the invisibility of cognitive disability in the humanities (Fraser 2018, 98), which is in turn perpetuated in mainstream art institutions. Thus, many artists labelled/with IDD have very few spaces where they are accepted and seen as artists. However, one of the spaces they can develop as artists is studio day programs.

# Studio Day Programs

Today, there are certain biases that contribute to studio day programs not being fully integrated in both mainstream and disability arts ecosystems. While there are varied goals from one studio day program to the next, these spaces often offer artists labelled/with IDD the opportunity to pursue art as a profession, instead of being employed in a menial labour job (Miller 2021, 10). Some studios might be focused on art making for therapeutic or recreational purposes. While these goals are valid, the perception that this is the purpose of all studio day programs limits some artists labelled/with IDD who desire a professional career in the arts (Barnes 2003, cited in Darragh et al. 2016; Wexler and Derby 2015; Richards, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole 2019, as cited in Yoon et al. 2019, 445). Indeed, there are also studios that offer a place for artists labelled/with IDD to develop their art, connect with the local arts community and receive specialized arts-based instruction and resources to become professional

artists. Many contemporary studios have systems in place that enable artists to be paid for their art and connect to local galleries. Further, some studios have the capacity to connect artists to national and international galleries. However, in some circles, there still might be the perception that art created in the context of a studio day program or by artists labelled/with IDD is somehow less professional.

There are mixed feelings as to whether disability-specific groups, like studio day programs, provide social inclusion or further segregate this community (Cummins and Lau 2003; Renwick et al., 2019, as cited in Anderson and Bigby 2021). While people with disabilities have had no choice but to create spaces separate from the mainstream arts scene, even within the community of artists with disabilities, artists labelled/with IDD may not be accepted. Some disabled artists have made the decision not to engage with day programs to distance themselves from the label of "outsider art" and the charity model of disability (Chandler et al. 2023, 2). This pushes artists labelled/with IDD further to the margins. While acknowledging there are several actors within the arts ecosystem that contribute to the inclusion and exclusion of artists labelled/with IDD, there are steps towards inclusive representation that curators can take.

# The Role of the Curator in Inclusive Representation

Curators have a role in the inclusive representation of artists labelled/with IDD in art galleries. However, there are barriers perpetuated by curators as well as institutional practices that continue to exclude disabled artists. In some museums and galleries, it manifests in staff's lack of knowledge about the stories of disabled people, and, more generally, in their collections. In 2004, researchers at the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) investigated the presence of materials related to the lives of disabled people in UK museums. They administered 224 surveys to curators to gauge their level of awareness of materials related to disability and their attitudes towards those materials. Out of the 73 surveys they received, 81% of curators said that their institutions had no objects relating to disability, or only one or two (Dodd et al. 8). When the RCMG team started to investigate individual museum's collections, they discovered a plethora of materials in collections that related to the lives

of disabled people, contradicting the supposed lack, as the survey results suggested (Dodd et al. 9). This discrepancy raised questions about the reticence of curators to display and interpret this material. In some cases, they were unsure of the relevance to wider audiences, and in others, they were unsure how to approach display and interpretation due to the sensitive nature of some of the material. These findings also suggest that capacity building and tools are required to interpret these stories in a way that is respectful and disability-affirming. A similar study that focuses on the representation of artists labelled/with IDD in Canadian art galleries is needed to fully assess the current state of representation for this group and the barriers for curators.

Some scholars argue that curators have a responsibility when displaying works by artist labelled/with IDD to include them in exhibition-making process. Disability culture activist and community performance artist, Petra Kuppers describes the context surrounding the exhibition titled *CREATE*, featuring artists from across three different disability arts organizations that support artists labelled/with IDD. This exhibition was co-curated by Lawrence Rinder and Matthew Higgs. Even though the artists went on museum visits, had access to books and magazines and met with local artists (Kuppers 2012), in speaking about the artists in the show, Rinder called them shut-ins and asserted they were not able to speak for themselves. Inability to articulate artistic intent is a barrier to some being able to enter the art world. Nevertheless, some artists labelled/with IDD, like Judith Scott, whose works are now world renowned, were able to find great success despite being unable to articulate the philosophy behind their works. Still, many funding programs require artists to be able to express the value of their project using particular vocabulary that may be inaccessible to them (Chandler et al. 2023, 2). Kuppers questions whether the principle of "nothing about us without us" was upheld in *CREATE*, as no artists spoke, presented or had any visible ownership of their work. Curators have a responsibility to at least include artists in the framing and honouring of their works, whatever form this may take.

To provide greater inclusion of disabled artists and in particular, artists labelled/with IDD, curators need to reject traditional curatorial models on some level. This might mean challenging medical and charity model framings of disability and incorporating accessibility from the beginning of processes, including as part of the

aesthetic of the artworks and exhibition design. It might also entail challenging the notion of a traditional art canon that does not include disability but rather embraces it and the infinite ways it presents itself.

Some scholars give practical advice for greater inclusion of artists with disabilities in exhibitions. Curators and disability studies scholars, Jessica Cooley and Ann Fox discuss two exhibitions they co-curated at Davidson College in 2009: *RE/FORMATIONS: Disability, Women, and Sculpture*, and *STARING*. Recognizing the ability of small liberal arts college gallery to promote underrepresented stories more easily, they also acknowledge that larger institutions may be more reticent to present an exhibition with a particular political angle or message (2014). While disability may easily be used as an exhibition theme or as a subject matter in many institutions, it may be viewed as more political for disability to be considered as an aesthetic. This idea connects with curator Amanda Cachia's work on access as aesthetic. Cachia discusses access as constantly being negotiated between artist and curator, always variable and fluid depending on the situation and people involved. Consider a video from the National accessArts Centre (NaAC) featuring artist and curator, Michelle Bennie, describing their curatorial process. Michelle is wonderfully iterative, spontaneous and takes an improvisational approach to titling their works. Karly Mortimer, a NaAC staff member notes Michelle's ideas and titles of their works, taking a 'yes and' approach, accepting Michelle's ideas, validating, and most importantly respecting them. In this space, Michelle can be fluid with the titling of her works, changing her mind from one minute to the next. Bennie is telling the story of their works and others. They are shaping their own identity and leading the narrative. Learning disability scholar, Dorothy Atkinson, writes that self-knowledge creation and people owning the stories about their own lives can be empowering and open the possibility of them viewing their lives in different, more empowering ways (2004, 691-692). Atkinson asserts that inviting people labelled/with IDD to tell their own story cultivates connections to wider social and political contexts. Thus, affirming representation of artists labelled/with IDD in art galleries could be a catalyst for greater inclusion in society at large.

# Literature Review

My study addresses a significant population gap in the research. Most studies on art and disabilities are about mentally and physically disabled people, while in contrast, there are very few studies that discuss artists labelled/IDD (Finley 2013, as cited in Yarmol 2020, 5). Of the literature about art and people labelled/with IDD, there are even fewer that address their participation in the curatorial process and inclusion in mainstream art institutions. Therefore, the inclusion criteria for this study were broad to accommodate sources that addressed parts of the research topic and questions. While my research question focuses on Canadian art galleries, literature from other countries, namely the UK was consulted. Thus, the literature review brought multiple disciplines together to address all parts of the research topic. However, not all were included in the literature review but instead were used to support the background, methodology and research collection.

To work with artists labelled/with IDD as research collaborators, sources covering how to ensure inclusive research processes in general were crucial. A foundational paper in the literature about conducting research with people labelled/with IDD is "Some Ethical and Methodological Issues in Research with People with Learning Difficulties," by Kirsten Stalker. While written in 1998, there are several principles that are still relevant today and that are echoed throughout more recent literature, such as in Walmsley and Johnson, 2003. Stalker's text discusses a study about the exercise of choice for people with learning disabilities and including them actively in the research process. One aim of Stalker's research was to find ways to involve people with learning disabilities in research, both as participants and in informing study design. Stalker cautions that researchers should be wary of acquiescence, not due to the person's disability, but due to the agency of choice not being one readily offered to people with learning difficulties (1998, 6). Other ethical challenges are raised such as ensuring that persons with learning difficulties understand the questions being asked, starting from determining if the person wants to participate in the project. Stalker highlights that it is the people participating who give consent and not service providers. While challenging the conventional research relationship between researcher and researched, Stalker

proposes involving those who are affected by the research in the research directly, arguing that this will improve both the quality and relevance of the research (6). These principles are aligned with the three dimensions of inclusive design, and in particular the principle of having inclusive processes and tools to involve those at the edges of the current design in the design process (Treviranus 2018)

Including artists labelled/with IDD in curatorial processes involves coming up with supports that are unique to them as individuals while critically examining autonomy and independence as the benchmarks for successful disability inclusion within the current usage of the social model of disability. Stalker presents a criticism of this model writing "the social model implies that all that is waiting before people with learning difficulties are able to take control of the research process is to overcome certain disabling barriers" (1998, 15). Further, as relatively little is known about the implications of this population's active participation in the research process (15), Stalker advises against accepting the participation of people labelled/with IDD in the research process uncritically and without mindful consideration of their inclusion. I interpret this as a word of caution to tread carefully, rather than not to partake in research with people labelled/with IDD.

Practical resources for including artists labelled/with IDD in research and curatorial processes might be needed for curators to move towards inclusive representation for this population. A source referenced throughout the literature about conducting arts-based research with artists labelled/with IDD is Alice Fox and Hannah Macpherson's *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research: A Critical Manifesto*. They developed concepts in collaboration with practitioners, artists and commissioners in the field of inclusive arts, and from Fox's experience working with artists from Rocket, a studio that supports artists labelled/with IDD (2015, 19). This book is about research creation on equal terms between learning disabled and non-learning-disabled artists in the performing and visual arts, which includes learning and unlearning from each other (Fox and Macpherson 2015, 19).

Another resource for curators in this area is Jade French's *Inclusive Curating in Contemporary Art: A Practical Guide* written in 2020. This is a key source as it pertains specifically to collaborating with intellectually disabled artists in the curatorial process. It

follows a case study of an inclusively curated exhibition wherein the author works with a group of artists labelled/with IDD while outlining a five-step process of inclusive curating. There are practical resources and tools throughout the book that the author invites readers to adapt to their own projects. Drawing on experience and knowledge from the spheres of social care and inclusive arts, the author broadens definitions about what curating is and who is a curator.

Barriers that perpetuate exclusion of artists labelled/with IDD in the curatorial process are addressed in the literature, such as curators feeling uncomfortable incorporating the voices of people labelled/with IDD in exhibitions. Curator, Amanda Cachia asks how the museum can incorporate the voice of the artists labelled/with developmental disabilities by rethinking the notion of normative dialogue. She describes a series of interviews with developmentally disabled artists from the video *CREATE: The Artists Are Present* (2011), in which the artists respond to an exhibition called *CREATE*. Although the exhibition featured the art of these developmentally disabled artists, their voices were absent. *CREATE*'s curator, Lawrence Rinder, when asked about this, told Cachia that it was because they could not speak (Cachia 2014, 116) which echoes the exploitative relationships between individuals labelled as "outsider artists" and curators displaying their works without their input. Cachia examines museums and galleries' role in maintaining the invisibility of disability in their spaces in displaying fictionalized examples of otherness. Citing the philosopher Jacques Rancière and his concept of *dissensus*, Cachia asserts that disabled artists are uniquely placed to challenge and disrupt binaries and polarities of aesthetics by offering new ways of seeing the body (114). Curators can participate in this disruption by exploring the varied modes of communication unique to the artists with whom they are working, instead of rejecting non-normative forms of communication and thereby removing the artist's voice (122). In alignment with Cachia's arguments, Petra Kuppers reviews the curatorial strategies used in the exhibition *CREATE* and questions whether the principle of "nothing about us without us" was upheld (2012). Kuppers advocates for a more equitable relationship between curators and artists, saying that one single voice is not enough, and that collaboration is necessary, even if it might not be through normative verbal or written dialogue (2012).

Although art galleries are part of the broader arts ecosystem, barriers beyond these institutions also contribute to the exclusion of artists labeled/with IDD. These barriers reinforce their exclusion in galleries and museums. An overview of the history and current status of artists labelled/with IDD is given in Chandler et al.'s "Insiders/outsiders of Canadian disability arts." The authors address how the legacies of institutionalization and of "Outsider Art" continue to be perpetuated in today's museums and galleries (2023). Examples of barriers are discussed, such as artists not having ownership of their work in the context of studio day programs, and not being able to articulate the value of a project in a way that meets the standards set by funding organizations. The authors call for disability arts to look to artists labelled/with IDD to add complexity to the conversation about "Outsider Art," and to consider their experiences as generative to advancing disability arts (Chandler et al. 2023).

"What does it mean to be a variable body in the world and how does this change our ideas about the normative world?"

Hendren 2023

# Chapter Three:
## How We Worked Together

# Methodology

To gather diverse perspectives on the research questions, this study used qualitative methods with two groups of participants: curators in art galleries, and artists labelled/with IDD. The study consisted of five phases:

1. Pre-study: Engagement with the community in the form of informational interviews and training with allies in the community, and literature review;
2. Data collection: Semi-structured interviews with curators, workshops with artists labelled/with IDD, and field notes;
3. Coding and thematic analysis;
4. MRP writing; and
5. Presentation in plain language and Easy Read back to the community.
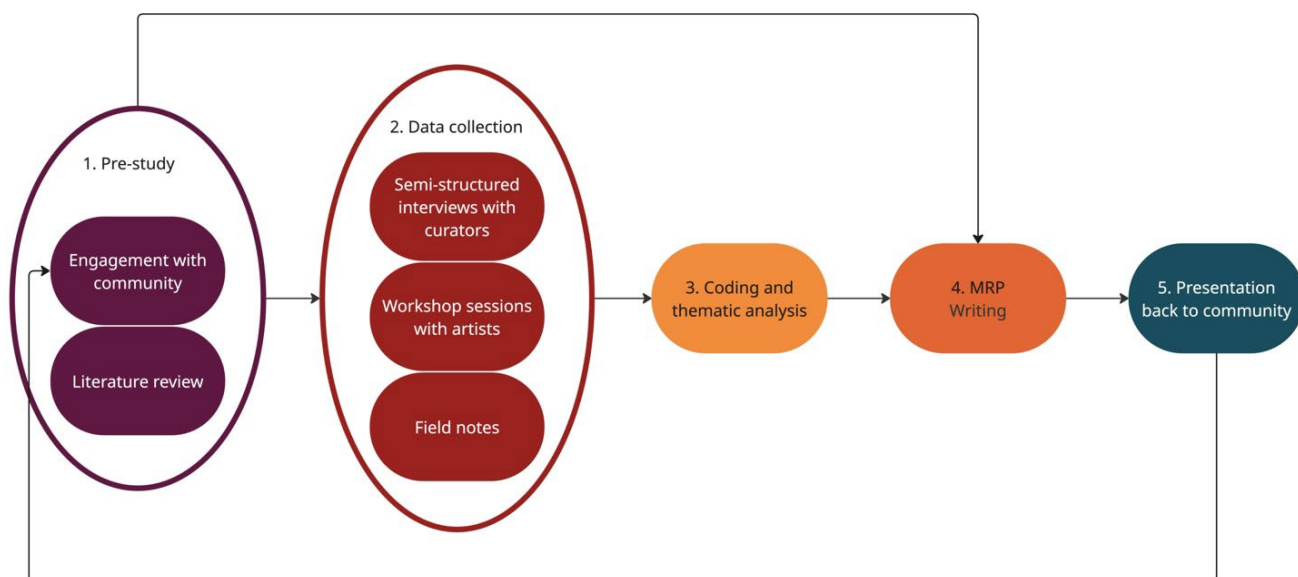


Figure 3. Research process

There were three main methodologies used in the design and analysis of this research project:

1. Five Principles of Inclusive Research;
2. Inclusive Arts; and
3. Curatorial Dreaming.

These methodologies were selected based on the population group that I worked with, artists labelled/with IDD. As much as possible, inclusive design and emancipatory

principles were incorporated into the project design. In several sources about working with people labelled/with IDD using arts-based principles and inclusive research, the same sources were referenced, as discussed below.

# Five Principles of Inclusive Research

Inclusive research is defined as research that includes people with disabilities as active participants in research processes, rather than as research subjects (Schwartz et al. 2020). In at least three articles referenced, Walmsley and Johnson's five principles of inclusive research, developed in the context of the learning disability field, was discussed as a viable option for incorporating the perspectives of people labelled/with IDD in research. There are some criticisms of these principles, including the fact that the principles have mostly been applied to single research studies and teams and that literature reviews have been limited in incorporating the voices of researchers with intellectual disability (Schwartz et al. 2020). However, these principles were still helpful in thinking through the various ways to include the voices of people labelled/with IDD and to reflect on the power dynamics present in research processes. Further, the research principles were used in combination with other sources to plan each stage of the research process. Please see the chart below for reference to how each principle was applied to the project.

| Five Principles of Inclusive Research (Walmsley and Johnson 2003) | Implementation of Walmsley and Johnson's Five Principles |
|---|---|
| The research problem must be one that is owned (not necessarily initiated) by disabled people. | I gave artists a plain language version of the main research question and invited them to do a journal exercise between sessions, documenting their thoughts, ideas and sketches related to the question. |
| It should further the interests of disabled people; non-disabled researchers should | Starting from the planning of the research, expert interviews with allies and |

| Five Principles of Inclusive Research (Walmsley and Johnson 2003) | Implementation of Walmsley and Johnson's Five Principles |
|---|---|
| be on the side of people with [intellectual disability]. | subject matter professionals were used to inform the research process, including suggestions of methods, sources to inform methodology, and training. In addition, I had several meetings with studio staff prior to beginning the research process. During these meetings, I presented the research questions, goals of the project and an outline of research activities. These meetings were important for building trust with the community, showing a commitment to inclusion for artists labelled/with IDD and also an ability to fit within the goals of the studio. Prior to beginning research with the artists, Curator 3, who participated in an interview and a workshop with artists, and I took part in a training session led by studio staff. This training included meeting with potential participants and observing one of their classes to get a sense of how their regular programming worked. The meetings and training with the studio invited me to hone the research plan and tailor the activities to suit the needs of the group. |

| Five Principles of Inclusive Research (Walmsley and Johnson 2003) | Implementation of Walmsley and Johnson's Five Principles |
|---|---|
| | During research activities, I used a collaborative and ongoing consent process, using plain language, teach-back questions, Easy Read formats and gestures to enable communication between myself and artists. |
| It should be collaborative — people with [intellectual disability] should be involved in the process of doing the research. | An iterative process was used throughout the course of the project. While the research activities were planned prior to beginning sessions, some adjustments were made throughout the course of the project based on feedback received during sessions, upon observation and in discussion with staff members after sessions. Pivots throughout activities were made as needed to adjust the language and level of the activities. |
| People with [intellectual disability] should be able to exert some control over process and outcomes. | In the last session, I discussed with artists what the output/report could look like. They were asked their preferences about what was included in the report and given a second consent form that included all the photos taken of their artworks and of them throughout the research activities. Artists filled out this form, with the help of studio staff, in some cases. This was an important step since the initial consent form gave overall consent to taking |

| Five Principles of Inclusive Research (Walmsley and Johnson 2003) | Implementation of Walmsley and Johnson's Five Principles |
|---|---|
| | photos of artists and artworks. The form given in the last session got into specifics, giving artists agency and choice over which works of they would like published in the report. |
| The research question, process and reports must be accessible to people with [intellectual disability]. | As discussed above, the final session included discussion with the artists about what the final report would look and feel like. I also committed to making a plain language and Easy Read presentation back to the community following the publication of this report. |

Table 1. Implementation of Walmsley and Johnson's (2003) Five Principles of Inclusive Research

There were limits to applying the five research principles fully, and in particular, the first research criterion: "The research problem must be one that is owned (not necessarily initiated) by disabled people." While I gave artists a copy of the research question in plain language and invited their ideas, to facilitate a meaningful exchange about the research question would have required having several weeks to work with artists to draft a research question. This was not within the bounds of the amount of time allotted by the university for a master's project. It might have been a different project entirely had this research criterion been implemented to the extent that I had hoped. This is a factor that I and other researchers should consider for future projects. Further, many institutions might have been wary about starting to work with a researcher unknown to them on a project whose research question had yet to be developed.

In terms of implementing the third research criterion, "It should be collaborative—people with IDD should be involved in the process of doing the research," this was not

able to be implemented for this project to the extent that I would have liked. In the future, I would like to include artists labelled/with IDD on the research team and in determining the course of each step of the process: defining research questions (discussed above), planning the consent process, leading research activities, collecting and analysing research data, and drafting the report. Again, this would have necessitated a much longer research process.

# Inclusive Arts

Another source referenced throughout the literature about working with artists labelled/with IDD is Alice Fox and Hannah Macpherson's *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research: A Critical Manifesto* (2015). Choice and freedom are key principles highlighted in the book, written to further collaboration on equal terms between learning disabled and non-learning-disabled artists (2015, 83). Fox and Macpherson discuss how people with learning disabilities might not be in a position where they are given active agency and choices in their own lives. They argue that art activities offer them the ability to make choices independently and that facilitators should actively work to invite artists labelled/with IDD in as co-researchers and equal collaborators. Their book echoes several aspects of the five principles of inclusive research. In particular, Fox and Macpherson explore how to make research outputs accessible and inclusive to artists, collaborators, and researchers labelled/with IDD (2015, 159). They advocate for accessibility measures in the report, such as visual communication, plain language and ensuring that the researcher is clear who the report is for when designing it. As noted above, I plan on developing a tailored, plain language and Easy Read presentation back to the community. In addition, Fox and Macpherson suggest using similar aesthetics to the artists' works to incorporate their voice into the design, something that I incorporated into this report.

Fox and Macpherson also discuss the concept of flexibility and ensuring that there is enough room to pivot and adapt frameworks to include everyone and invite their participation. This is another important principle which was applied by having an iterative process from week to week as well as during sessions: adjusting according to the artists' needs, their interests, and feedback from staff and facilitators. There is also practical advice in *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research: A Critical Manifesto* that I

considered during the design of the research, including having sufficient time to establish trust, the importance of consent and treating people as an end (not a means to an end) (2015, 127).

Aligned with the approach in Fox and Macpherson, and particularly the caution against treating people as a means to an end, is the concept of pathological altruism. Liz Jackson defines pathological altruism as the "well-meaning efforts that worsen the very conditions they were intended to help" (Jackson 2019). This orientation towards the world, and disabled people more specifically, causes them and their bodies, to be seen as a "project, portfolio enhancer, symbol of the designer's altruism" (Jackson 2019). Disabled people are often served by a design, but they are not the designers. This concept was useful to consider whether the project was and continued to be aligned with the goals and desires of the community and not just with my assumptions of what they wanted or needed. Jackson presents an alternative where disabled people work alongside non-disabled people; this is a radical act, according to Jackson (2019).

Although the idea for my project comes from a gap that I have noticed, I considered if there could there be legitimate reasons for this gap. One that occurred to me is that artists labelled/with IDD might not want to participate in the traditional art gallery model. This is the motivation for the research question: Do artists labelled/with IDD want to have their works exhibited in mainstream art galleries and participate in that process? It was important for me to check the very idea of my project with the community I am working with and their allies. Prior to beginning this project, I was only able to connect with allies of the community. There were restrictions on the university's side with REB approval being required to interact in any meaningful way directly with a population they consider to be vulnerable.

# Curatorial Dreaming

Since this research is art gallery specific, it was appropriate to combine inclusive research methodologies with curatorial-based methodologies. Curatorial dreaming is a methodology coined by cultural anthropologist, Shelley Ruth Butler and sociocultural anthropologist and curator, Erica Lehrer. It is a practice of imagining exhibitions or interventions in museums and galleries as a tool of critique. It offers concrete alternatives rather than just theory and can yield results that subvert how a specific

subject matter or theme has traditionally been represented. For example, historian of medicine and exhibition curator, Manon Parry in her imagined exhibition "abNormal: Bodies in Medicine and Culture," invites visitors into the conversation by allowing them to respond to exhibition content, dialogue with other visitors' contributions and challenge popular and scientific images of bodies (Butler and Lerner 2016, 37-38). Ultimately, the imagined exhibition challenges the ways in which bodies and their ailments are presented in medical museums. In general, this methodology might include discussion of proposed sites of intervention, and writing or composing didactic or other content to aid interpretation. Curatorial dreaming was easily interwoven into the other methodologies of the project, as it lends itself well to methods that are hands-on and participatory. This project and its activities offer a critique of the lack of representation for artists labelled/with IDD in art galleries by generating alternatives for affirming representation led by members of this community.

# Research Design
## Pre-study

Prior to obtaining Research Ethics Board (REB) approval, I conducted informational interviews with three allies in my topic area: one scholar in disability and museums/galleries, and two professionals who work at art institutions that support artists labelled/with IDD. In addition, I consulted with a fourth expert via email about the methods for the projects. All professionals provided key information, resources and advice that informed the methods and methodology of the research.

As part of the pre-study phase and before finalizing the content of the workshops, I attended a training session led by studio staff and observed one of their classes. The training covered current definitions, effective communication, and strategies for working with artists labelled/with IDD, which were helpful for planning the workshops.

# Recruitment Process

I reached out to curators who I suspected, based on their past work, would meet the participation criteria and provided an overview of the study via email. All curators I reached out to worked for a Canadian art gallery. If they were interested in participating,

I scheduled a time to go over the study and the informed consent form with them. Only one curator did not respond to the call to participate.

Curators were selected for an interview based on the following criteria:

- Curators of art and/or gallery professionals responsible for exhibition-making, residing in Canada.
- Interest and openness to working with artists labelled/with IDD in a collaborative and open manner.

In terms of selecting a curator who would be both interviewed and participate in workshops with artists, location relative to the artists' studio was an additional factor in deciding which galleries to reach out to. I reached out to two galleries local to the studio. One gallery professional responsible for exhibition-making was interested and I scheduled a time to go over the study and informed consent form with them.

To recruit participants from a studio that supports artists labelled/IDD, I went through administrative channels to request permission to make a presentation to artists. I reached out to organizations whose artists met the eligibility criteria. This was based on information from organizations' websites and past informational interviews with staff about the study and the studio's interest in taking part. Artists were recruited based on the following criteria:

- Individuals living in Ottawa or within 2 hours driving distance who, at the beginning of the research period, identify as having a lived experience of intellectual and/or developmental disability.
- Individuals practicing at least one artistic discipline or means of artistic production.

The first inclusion criterion did not prove to be the most helpful, as the latter part "identify as having a lived experience of intellectual and/or developmental disability," is based on someone accepting a label that they did not necessarily choose for themselves. In the end, I was less interested in determining if people met a certain diagnostic label. Rather, the goal was to align this project with other artistic development opportunities at the studio and to focus on the artists' voices being heard. In addition, it was crucial for the project to acknowledge the real barriers that prior to beginning the study, the studio staff agreed the artists face. Nevertheless, the studio I

worked with was one that included the words "developmental disability" on its website. All artists labelled/with IDD recruited were from the same studio located in Ontario.

# Study Participants

I decided on the sample size based on saturation, as outlined by researchers, Malterud et al. (2016) in "Sample Size in Qualitative Interview Studies: Guided by Information Power." Balancing these with suggestions from inclusive design practitioners of ideal co-design group sizes, I decided to recruit between 5 and 10 people for workshops.

# Ethical Considerations

This study has been approved under REB File 102591 and adheres to ethical guidelines.

Prior to interviews with curators, I had an initial meeting to discuss the project and go through an informed consent form. Curators were given the opportunity to ask questions throughout the process. They were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could decline answering any questions. Regarding data collection, curators and I discussed that if they choose to withdraw from interview activities before the three weeks have elapsed, data will be deleted completely. They were also informed that once three weeks have passed after data collection is completed, it will no longer be possible to withdraw data from the study, as this is when the data analysis will begin. Since interviews were scheduled during a separate session, key parts of the consent form were repeated at the beginning of interviews to ensure curators' ongoing consent to participating in the study.

The consent process for artists required additional research and consideration of accessible supports. Given the limited resources in this topic area, some research in the field of pediatrics was consulted, particularly having to do with navigating the consent process. These sources were reviewed with a critical lens, in conjunction with resources outside of the field of pediatrics. No practices were used in this research project that were not equally supported by research outside the field of pediatrics. This was crucial to avoid continuing a history of assuming developmental parallels between children and adults labelled/with IDD. Backed by research that suggests visual and plain language consent forms invite participants to better understand the consent process (Teachman

et al. 2014, 8), I designed an Easy Read consent form. Easy Read format makes reading more accessible for people labelled/with IDD; it includes images and plain language descriptions of each part of a process or concept. Most of the visuals were obtained via a paid subscription to Photosymbols, a library of images that feature people with learning disabilities which in the UK includes people labelled/with IDD. I confirmed with staff at Photosymbols that the images were able to be included in my consent form and recruitment materials. A challenge in creating an Easy Read consent form was selecting pictures that summarized a complex topic in one image, such as a collaborative curatorial process. In some cases, multiple images with accompanying plain language explanations were necessary (Herron et al. 2015, 265). Using the same image to represent the same or related topic throughout the consent process and research activities was an important design consideration (Herron et al. 2015, 265) to create connections between topics and for continuity.

Including someone who knows the potential participants well and can identify dissenting behaviours is important to invite greater understanding from participants. Prior to going through the consent form, the studio I was working with briefed parents and care partners on the study. Parents and care partners then went through the consent form at their leisure with the artists. Although this was not ideal for ensuring independence of choice for artists and I would have preferred that I had gone through the consent forms with the artists, their parents and care partners, this was the process that the studio used for their own projects, partnerships and off-site trips. I felt slightly uncomfortable with this as it felt I was participating in the idea that people labelled/with IDD are eternal children (Stalker 1998, 8-9). However, accessibility of the process for some people labelled/with IDD may involve having a parent or care partner participate in the process with them, and in this case go through the consent form with them.

Although the studio did not give consent on behalf of participants, the structure was such that they could block or enable the participation of an individual. This is a phenomenon observed in other research involving people labelled/IDD and other disabilities that might intersect with these disabilities. Stalker, for instance, writes that "staff on the ground wield considerable power in terms of facilitating or impeding access…Obtaining professionals' blessing to proceed did not automatically mean that

individuals with learning difficulties would agree to take part in the study: professionals did not agree on behalf of service users" (1998, 8). Taking this into consideration, I highlighted to studio staff that it is ultimately the artist who needs to consent to participation.

Measures were implemented to ensure that participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, as well as to decline participation in specific activities or to refuse answering any questions. According to Simons et al. (1989), cited in Stalker (1998), people with learning difficulties might lean towards acquiescence, meaning they might say yes to something without feeling there is a real choice being offered. Simons (1989) and Stalker (1998) conclude this is because their lives are controlled by others and not due to disability. Therefore, at the start of each workshop session, I went through a consent presentation that contained the same visuals as the consent form. Participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could decline answering any questions or participating in activities or the study altogether, and that this would not affect their relationship to the researchers in any way. During each session, I used teach-back questions, which meant I asked artists to repeat my explanation in their own words and invited them to take their time to process the information. Both physical and verbal indications of consent were accepted. In addition, throughout the research and where necessary, I checked in with individuals' participants and those who knew them well to ensure they still consented to participating.

During the last workshop, participants were reminded that once three weeks have passed after data collection is completed, it will no longer be possible to withdraw data from the study, as this is when the data analysis will begin. They were also reminded that if they choose to withdraw from interview activities before the three weeks have elapsed, their data will be deleted completely.

Aligned with the principle of ensuring participants had agency of choice throughout the project, during the last workshop, I gave participants a booklet of all the photos taken of them, their art produced before and during the project. Artists were invited to check off 'yes or no' that they would consent to the photo being included in the report. Therefore, any photos included in the report have the expressed permissions of

the artist pictured or who created the work. On the next page is an image of an artist's consent form. The artist indicated they did not consent to one of their artworks being included in the report. Although their consent forms are not included in this report, another two artists also indicated there were works they did not want included in the report. This was significant as in some research, this population group is assumed to have a tendency towards acquiescence. However, artists clearly felt comfortable and confident enough to take ownership of their works as evidenced by them indicating the works they would not like included in the report.

| | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| | ✔️ | ❌ (circled) |
|  | ✔️ (circled) | ❌ |
|  | ✔️ (circled) | ❌ |

Figure 4. Artist 2's consent form for inclusion of images of their artworks and self in report

# Data Collection

This study used two main methods to collect qualitative data: one-on-one interviews and group workshops. Interviews were conducted with three curators about their experiences working with artists labelled/with IDD. I conducted six workshops with artists labelled/with IDD and during one of these sessions, one curator, who was also interviewed, took part. During all sessions, I gave participants worksheets and activities to complete either during the session, or outside of the session, if additional time was needed.

# Curator Interviews

Adapting the methods from a foundational study in this area called "Buried in the Footnotes" by Sandell et al. (2004), curator interviews were used, with the knowledge that the Canadian art gallery, and intellectual and developmental disability context is different. Interviews offered the opportunity for in-depth discussion with each curator. The interviews were 1 hour and 15 minutes and were semi-structured and included questions designed to find out more about the curator's process; and representation for artists labelled/with IDD, whether in their collections, if applicable, or in past projects and exhibitions. The questions inquired about what they thought the barriers were for artists labelled/with intellectual and developmental disabilities and what role they believed curators have in addressing those barriers. I provided questions to curators a few days in advance, and they had the opportunity to provide follow-up information after the interview was complete.

# Workshop Planning and Preparation

The bulk of the research for this project involved an extensive series of workshops. A full description of each of the workshop session activities is included in Appendix A. Five sessions with four artists labelled/with IDD were held at the studio they regularly attend. One session with a curator, who was also interviewed, was held at the curator's gallery. Methods included art-making activities, observational techniques and questions posed in a group setting. These methods were informed by several sources. Since the

research in this area is sparse, research from different disciplines but connected to the overall topic and research questions was consulted.

Art-based methods were utilized since this is a method with which all the participants were familiar and comfortable. In addition, since the population group was artists labelled/with IDD, it was important for the methods to be flexible enough to include those who may be non-verbal or less verbal.

According to Ivan and Roy Brown (2003) and Rea Dennis (2002), people who are non-verbal may be excluded when using methods that rely on verbal communication:

> A large number of artists living with cognitive disability in inclusive arts organisations have complex communication difficulty, including being nonverbal. The voice of those artists who cannot speak for themselves might be disregarded or excluded when the research method is an oral interview. (as cited in Yoon et al. 2021, 447)

Thus, throughout the planning of methods, it was important for me to consider different ways of communicating with artists and how they might communicate with me. In addition, I consulted with studio staff on the appropriateness of activities and made adjustments according to their recommendations.

An initial period of getting to know participants is crucial for trust building (Mactavish et al. 2000; Stalker 1998, as cited in Lige 2011, 132). Research from Schwartz et al. (2020) also support this approach, asserting that especially if there are no existing relationships between participants and the researcher, time spent building trust and familiarity is important for research with people labelled/with IDD. Studio staff agreed with this approach, as they use a similar approach when they invite co-op students to shadow classes, which is a regular occurrence at the studio. Therefore, to maintain continuity with the artists' regular programming, part of the initial three sessions was dedicated to getting to know the group through questions and observing their regular programming.

Those who are perceived as having communication difficulties or differences require support throughout the research process to enable their participation. According to Teachman et al. "persons with communication impairments are often excluded from research on the grounds that they cannot 'speak for themselves" (2014, 3). People who have communication impairments are not a homogeneous group: it can include different

types of disabilities and those who do not identify with the disability label (Teachman et al. 2014, 4-5). Therefore, it is important to adapt the approach to the individual(s) with whom you are collaborating. When collaborating with individuals labelled/with IDD, it is recommended to provide multiple formats and to use plain language (Williamson et al. 2020, 5). Taking this research into account, I formatted questions in plain language and supported them with visuals. Most of these materials and questions were reviewed by studio staff prior to the sessions to ensure accessibility.

Throughout much of the literature that discusses working with individuals labelled/with IDD, time is an important factor to consider in supporting individuals to participate fully in the research process. According to gender and women studies scholar, Ellen Samuels, normative time structures can be a barrier to those with bodies who reject those structures (2017). Artist and design researcher, Sara Hendren talks about her experience with having a son with Down Syndrome and the extra time he needs, in comparison with her neurotypically developing children (Ku 2023). Hendren challenges how the concept of time is designed to benefit some humans over others, and inquires into her son's misfitting in the world. People labelled/with Down Syndrome experience a slowness in the world and stigma for that; Hendren asks "what does it mean to be a variable body in the world and how does this change our ideas about the normative world?" (Ku 2023). Hendren questions the productivity and speed imposed on children from a young age that continues over the course of adulthood. According to Surrey Place and their guide on "communicating effectively with people with developmental disabilities," it is important to give people sufficient time to understand, communicate and ask questions (2011). This rejection of normative time was evidenced throughout the project and particularly during workshops. One of the first adjustments made to the plan for workshops was switching the first three sessions from interviews with artists, to time spent getting to know them in a more organic manner. This meant that some of the first three sessions were spent observing them in their regular programming and asking them a few questions to get to know them versus a formal interview or focus group. I also planned for additional time being needed for participants to understand questions and other activities. Having sufficient time to understand the needs and communication style and quirks of the participants was another important

factor. Check-ins in the form of teach-back questions and slowly going through visuals that accompanied questions were two techniques used that necessitated having more time to discuss the concepts with the group.

The timing of sessions was based on when artists participating typically attended programming at the studio. There was a total of six workshops, which were scheduled on Mondays. Given the studio's competing commitments, there was about a month break in between workshops two and three. However, between most other workshops, there was about a week or two, which allowed both for continuity, but also enough time for me to adjust activities based on debriefs with staff, my peer mentor, and my own observations from previous workshops.

Drawing on my experience working in museum education and gaining knowledge of the methods most familiar to the artists, I planned several hands-on activities and questions for each workshop in consultation with studio staff. In addition, I used Jade French's *Inclusive Curating in Contemporary Art: A Practical Guide* (2020) to help plan activities and, in some cases, templates from this book were adapted to my specific research activities. Most questions had specific questions to be discussed with the group, which were framed in plain language and had images to accompany them to explain the meaning of the question. The questions were reviewed by a staff member to ensure they were framed in a way that individuals could understand.

# Workshops

Prior to beginning the main activities of each session, I went over the consent presentation in plain language with supporting visuals. Throughout the sessions, I was open to the different ways in which people communicate and process information. For example, although I was not able to video record the sessions, I documented significant non-verbal communication during and after each session. In addition, during the transcription process, I noted non-speech utterances, validating that silence, non-verbals and non-speech utterances are all forms of communications.

For some individuals labelled/with IDD, inclusion of people familiar with them and their life experiences can be a form of access. This is sometimes rejected by disabled artists who lean into values of interdependence and autonomy in an effort to distance themselves from the medical and charity models of disability. This happens to the extent

that there is a rejection of relationships that contain elements of interdependence and care, such as the relationship between a care partner and an artist labelled/with IDD. However, for some artists labelled/with IDD, this is a life giving and crucial relationship for their art making (Thomas 2021, as cited in Chandler 2023, 3). Therefore, during most sessions, at least one staff member and sometimes a volunteer were present and able to ground the artists in previous experiences related to the content of the questions.

# Workshop Follow-up

Although I had an overall plan and goals for each session, I took an iterative approach to the activities from week to week. It was important to set aside time to make alterations to processes and activities so that each artist was included and carried along as the project developed. After each session, I reviewed notes and most weeks, debriefed with studio staff and my peer mentor to plan the upcoming session. Since staff knew the artists better than me, this was a crucial step in making sure the activities were relevant to the project and at an appropriate level. I also completed journal reflections after each session to ensure that the process was adjusted according to the needs of participants. The reflection questions below invited me to think through in an iterative manner about how I could facilitate the next session:

- Did you reflect back what you understood from the participant?
- What barriers do you observe to the research process?
- What needs are the artists expressing? How are they expressing them?
- What accommodations/adaptations can I make?
- Where do you sense moments of joy/excitement?
- Where do you sense questions/not full understanding?
- Is there anything I want to change for the next session?
- Are there different/better ways of asking the questions/presenting activities?

This chapter has detailed the methods used to conduct this research, along with the strategies taken to ensure validity, ethical integrity, and participant care. These methodologies and methods were crucial in generating the insights discussed in the next chapter, which examines the study's findings.
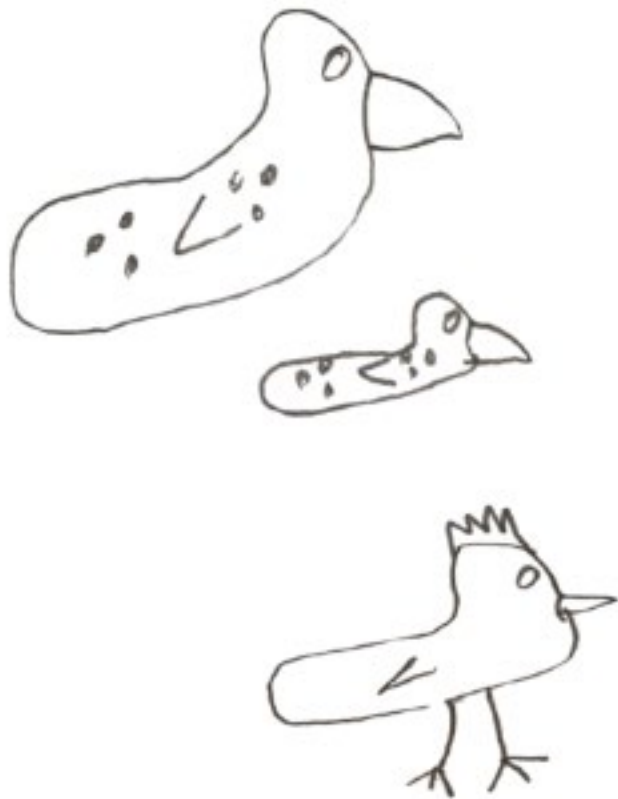
Figure 5. Artist 3, *I like Loones*, Graphite on paper, 2025

# Chapter Four:
## What We Found

# Findings
## Coding and Analysis

The coding process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-part approach to thematic analysis. Raw data took the form of audio recordings of interviews and workshops, in addition to photos of artistic responses by artists. Since there were numerous errors in the automatic transcripts, I reviewed and corrected transcripts and, in some cases, manually transcribed sessions. To begin the coding process, I approached the curator interviews, and workshops with artists and artistic responses as two separate data sets, each with their own categories and themes. Finally, I completed an analysis comparing the themes generated from both data sets.
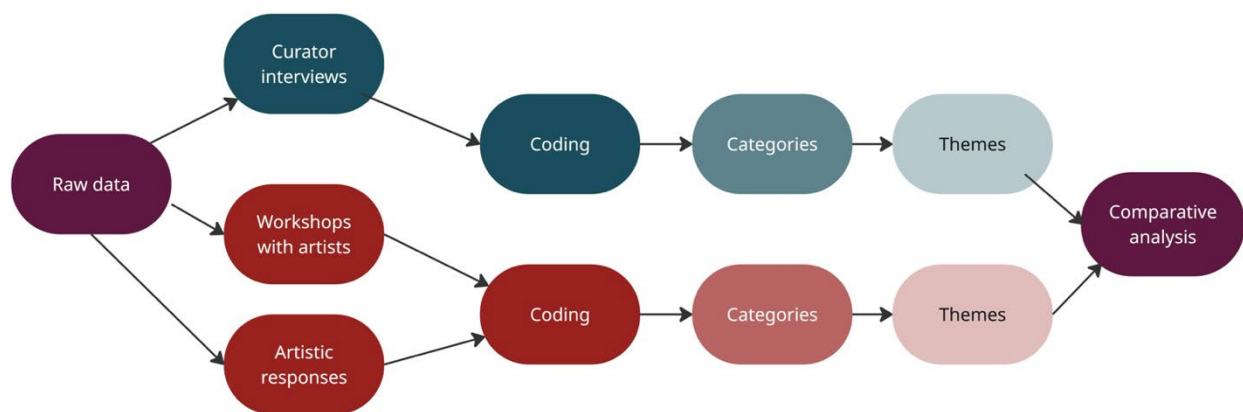
Figure 6. Coding process

305 initial codes were generated from the three curator interviews, using a line-by-line process. Following that, several categories were created and finally collated into themes. Throughout the process of developing themes, I took an iterative process, finding patterns, recoding, and re-organizing themes. Four main themes emerged.

There were 692 initial codes generated from the six sessions with artists, using a line-by-line process. The data set included both what was said during workshops and artistic responses on worksheets. While collating this data, I reviewed field notes ensuring to take non-verbal cues into account during the analysis process. From the initial codes, eight categories were created and in a third iteration, three themes were generated, each with sub-themes.

Themes from interviews and workshops are described in distinct sections on the pages that follow. Finally, the themes from the two distinct data sets were examined for commonalities that I will discuss more in [Bringing the Findings Together](#).

# Emerging Themes and Observations from Curator Interviews

In the section that follows, I will present emerging themes and my observations from interviews with three curators from three art galleries in Canada. Coming back to the topic of the research, which was to explore the lack of representation of artists labelled/with IDD in Canadian art galleries, the research questions were:

- What are the barriers that perpetuate a lack of inclusive representation for artists labelled/with IDD in art galleries?
- What role do curators play in furthering inclusive representation?
- Do artists labelled/with IDD want to have their works exhibited in mainstream art galleries and participate in that process?
- What are affirming ways in which to engage with and present the works of artists labelled/with IDD?

The findings are organized under four themes:

1. Physical and Informational Accessibility First and Foremost
2. Staying within and Challenging Traditional Curatorial Models
3. Working within Established Networks
4. Following the Leadership of Artists Labelled/with IDD

To differentiate the voices of curators from my interpretation and observations, their quotes are indented in a larger, purple font.

# 1. Physical and Informational Accessibility First and Foremost

A theme that arose in the research was making spaces more accessible to disabled visitors. The interviews were focused on inclusion in exhibition-making processes and representation. However, throughout all interviews, the idea that an institution's focus

for disabled people should be physical and informational accessibility first and foremost emerged, albeit in different ways.

Curator 1 when asked about levels of representation for different demographic groups in their institution's collection, they mentioned a growing awareness of increasing representation for Indigenous, racialized and artists who are women. But for the most part, physical and informational accessibility currently is the focus when it comes to disabled people:

> We've had recent moves to bring our institution to a place where it's more accessible for folks with disabilities. But that conversation has not transferred over to the collection as of yet and so that focus is definitely more on viewers and visitors to the gallery. (Curator 1)

Curator 3 reflected on how the current research project has led to greater awareness of areas of improvement with regard to informational accessibility. They noted the strategies they've learned throughout the project to facilitate accessible arts programming and services for visitors in general. In particular, they expressed a desire to engage consultants on how to frame shows for different types of learners, which might also encompass people whose first language is not English, alongside disabled visitors.

Some of the areas for accessibility improvements that were discussed during interviews were: improving didactic information, especially when it comes to conceptual art; incorporating non-verbal communication into interactions with visitors, including visual communication and sign language; improving physical navigation; and having audio descriptions.

Curator 2 was an outlier in this theme. When they first started working at their current gallery, they were invested in a check box approach, ensuring the institution was meeting accessibility standards that aligned with legislation. But they acknowledged this likely came from a place of not being in community with other disabled people. In contrast, their approach now is quite different:

> Access is really important for us as an organization because we think about accessibility, not just as something that is added on or something that's included as kind of an afterthought, but

> really, we're interested in how as a community, we're building an aesthetic of access so that it kind of becomes, you know, a vital part of disability culture. (Curator 2)

Through my interviews with the three curators, I observed that a barrier for artists labelled/with IDD might be the idea that an institution must focus on physical and informational accessibility first, before addressing issues of representation for disabled people, and in particular artists labelled/with IDD. There may be specific institutional pressures that contribute to this phenomenon depending on the size of the gallery.

# 2. Staying within and Challenging Traditional Curatorial Models

Addressing the question of the curator's role in inclusive representation is the theme of staying within and challenging traditional curatorial models with regards to representation for artists labelled/with IDD and disabled people more broadly. This theme was seen across all curator interviews, albeit in slightly different ways. In addition, further institutional barriers for artists labelled/with IDD are discussed in this section, including attitudes that reinforce traditional curatorial models.

There might be various reasons, including practical, as to why curators might stay within traditional curatorial models and practices with regard to representation for artists labelled/with IDD.

For example, Curator 3 acknowledged there are gaps currently when it comes to representation for artists labelled/with IDD on staff:

> At this time, we don't currently have any staff members who have disclosed or self-identified as artists with intellectual and developmental disabilities. (Curator 3)

When asked about barriers they imagine artists labelled/with IDD might face in the mainstream art world, Curator 1 discussed the concept of stereotypes. They described how those biases can create barriers for artists labelled/with IDD wanting to expand their network:

> Maybe there are museum folks or curators who wouldn't feel comfortable meeting with or talking with such an artist. (Curator 1)

Ultimately, this type of attitude results in a loss of networking opportunities on both the curator's and the artist's end.

Similar to the idea expressed above by Curator 1, Curator 2 notes that some art galleries might collaborate with artists labelled/with IDD and more generally disabled artists at the educational and programming level.

However, it is often difficult to get access to curators:

> …A lot of spaces do have a more charitable model. They'll have an exhibition in kind of a relegated communal space in the educational sort of museum side of things and I don't say that to discount the education or public programming arms of those institutions, they're actually incredibly hardworking. They do what they can with what they have, but often times, in my own experience of trying to get any artist that we've worked with to be able to have a meeting with a curator from an institution is still very, very difficult. (Curator 2)

This passage highlights how these biases can manifest in fewer professional opportunities for artists labelled/with IDD. Curator 2 attributed part of this phenomenon to the fact that they are few disabled curators in leadership positions, which means there is a lack of understanding of the gaps and barriers for artists labelled/with IDD. They explained it is difficult to address this issue within the larger arts ecology because there is a dearth of opportunities and multiple populations in need of more affirming representation.

Curator 2 also discussed how bias is a factor in why artists labelled/with IDD are given fewer professional opportunities, if they receive an exhibition opportunity at all:

> People oftentimes think of working in community with artists labelled with intellectual disabilities as almost in that charitable manner. But there are incredibly thought provoking, incredibly powerful works that because of those attitudes don't become acknowledged, don't get seen by the broader public. (Curator 2)

All three curators represented various stages of the journey towards more inclusive representation for artists labelled/with IDD. Nevertheless, each curator discussed ways in which their gallery is pushing the boundaries of traditional curatorial practices and exhibitions in general.

Curator 3 highlighted that their institution is a site of innovation and experimentation in terms of artwork and practice, bringing critical conversations forward in the realms of social, political, cultural and environmental topics. During their gallery's most recent call for submissions, staff reached out to communities, individuals and institutions that have not been well represented at their gallery in the past. However, they did not reach out to institutions that offer specific support to artists labelled/with IDD or disabled artists in general.

Nevertheless, they noted that disabled people could still have been reached:

> We also reached out to [name redacted] health centers…and so there would be individuals who likely identify as having a disability who are served by that institution, for example. (Curator 3)

Curator 1 discussed the concept of risk-taking in exhibitions. They work with both a historical and a contemporary collection. During past exhibitions, they have purposefully presented different types of art and art history than have been classically shown. However, most of the contemporary artists they exhibit come with an established exhibition history. This included the artists labelled/with IDD that they worked with on a recent exhibition. This exhibition partnership was cultivated by studio staff supporting artists labelled/with IDD. These staff also happened to be local artists previously exhibited at the gallery. I discuss this more in depth in the 'Working within Established Networks' theme below.

The institution where Curator 2 works is invested in challenging traditional curatorial models and building an aesthetic of access, meaning that accessibility is a part of the artwork and process of making it. Curator 2's focus is on exhibiting innovative works from artists who might not have previously had as many opportunities. This aligns

with questioning a disability art canon to ensure that disability arts remain flexible enough to continue being innovative and avant-garde.

Curator 2 expressed:

> I worry about this idea of a disability arts canon coming forward, one that's been so informed by disability rights that doesn't tell the full story of disability. (Curator 2)

Curator 2 is mindful of not replicating harmful historical models. During our interview, they discussed how the disability arts movement began with disabled people rejecting their art being classified as art therapy or "Outsider Art." They connected this phenomenon to how the medical model plays out in various ways within the larger arts ecology today. For example, sometimes disability artists reject anything that is perceived as non-agentive and non-autonomous, since many disabled people have had their voices taken away from them and they want to reclaim the narrative. Curator 2 added complexity to this example by challenging the idea that all non-agentive ways of working are harmful to moving disability justice and arts forward. They gave the example of artists labelled/with IDD working in tandem with parents and/or care partners. This type of collaboration may not be entirely autonomous or independent but is a valid form of access. Further, it creates a different relationship to art creation.

All curators were at various stages of staying within and challenging traditional curatorial models with regard to representation for artists labelled/with IDD. In general, each curator's institution has innovative practices. Obstacles towards achieving greater representation for artists labelled/with IDD included the following: a lack of data about disability representation in the collection; a lack of representation of people labelled/with IDD on staff; and a lack of reaching out directly to organizations supporting artists labelled/with IDD. Biases were also discussed, such as the difficulty in getting access to curators at some institutions, which might manifest in fewer professional opportunities for artists labelled/with IDD. Finally, the idea of embracing artists who create art in ways that might be interpreted as non-agentive emerged as an opportunity to invite audiences to question upholding autonomy and independence as markers of successful disability inclusion.

# 3. Working within Established Networks

In all three interviews, the theme of 'Working within Established Networks' emerged. This theme contributes to the discussion of barriers that perpetuate a lack of inclusive representation for artists labelled/with IDD in art galleries. Further, it adds to the discussion about the role that curators and their institutions play in both inclusion and exclusion. Curators talked about different roles within established networks surrounding artists labelled/with IDD such as curators, studio staff, local artists, care partners, and family. People within these roles form connections with each other and institutions, like studios supporting artists labelled/with IDD and art galleries, that become established networks. Some artists labelled/with IDD are able to access exhibition opportunities through these networks. On the other hand, this theme also highlights the ways in which these established networks might hinder other artists labelled/with IDD from accessing similar opportunities.

Artists labelled/with IDD who are a part of an organization, such as a studio, might benefit from staff members' connections to access artistic development opportunities, such as an exhibition of their work. Curator 1 noted that many of the artists, before being shown at their gallery, had been through verified art schools and were celebrated in many spheres. Their gallery has partnered with the same disability arts organization on several occasions. Recently, they had an exhibition with them in a more formal space with a publication and a longer exhibition period. Curator 1 highlighted the role that staff from disability arts organizations had in making the partnership successful. They also noted that many of those staff are also artists represented in their institution's collection. Further, staff selected which artists would participate in the exhibition and also mentored the artists by sharing their experiences of putting an exhibition together. Artists selected for exhibition were ones who already had a large body of work from which to draw.

Curator 1 noted that the network of the organization was a key part of the success of the recent exhibition with artists labelled/with IDD:

> They were coming from within this sort of established network of their organization and had all of those other artist peers and framework of support. (Curator 1)

Caregiving and familial relationships can also play a role in the opportunities that artists labelled/with IDD are able to access. In Curator 2's interview, there is an acknowledgement of both the collaborative potential and power dynamics at play when working with artists labelled/with IDD who have caregivers, care partners and/or family members who support them in their art practice and daily activities. Curator 2 acknowledged that disability arts spaces may feel uncomfortable and uncertain interacting with a care partner and/or parent, who for example speaks on behalf of an artist. This may be since historically disabled people have been spoken for. At the same time, it is important to make space for care partner and familial relationships in the context of arts creation and practice. Curator 2 discussed the power dynamics at play and the concept of interdependency, while acknowledging the political potential of working in new collaborative ways with the gallery, artist labelled/with IDD and artist-care giver.

In addition, Curator 2 also noted being mindful of inequities that might emerge with regard to more well-resourced care partners and/or parents versus artists who may not have those supports, and ensuring the latter have an equal say:

> We've always been kind of wary of the artist not being properly represented when it comes to that kind of dynamic, but also the flip side is when they don't have an advocate, when they don't have somebody speaking on their behalf, the others who do often will end up with more opportunities. (Curator 2)

Curator 3 noted the budding relationship between their gallery and the studio we worked with on this research project. In particular, they noted meeting the participants and being grateful for the relationship building this project has facilitated. Curator 3 highlighted the importance of not assuming what the community needs and asking them directly, which can only happen once reciprocity and trust are established.

As explored above, established networks between studio staff and art galleries; and between caregivers, parents, artists and art galleries contribute to artists labelled/with IDD being able to access exhibition opportunities. At the same time, these relationships should be developed ensuring trust and reciprocity, and maintained

carefully to ensure that the artists labelled/with IDD with less access to these networks and relationships are not excluded.

# 4. Following the Leadership of Artists Labelled/with IDD

This theme responds to the question of the affirming ways in which to engage with and present the works of artists labelled/with IDD. Strategies offered by curators include a discussion of their role as a connector between artist and institution, the importance of relationship building and being flexible with adjusting exhibition processes to make room for the voices of artists labelled/with IDD.

Curator 1 spoke about how they see their role as the connector between artists and the rest of their institution, feeling like a translator between the two groups. In a recent project where they worked with artists labelled/with IDD, this manifested in artists being involved in designing the set or mood of the space, and overall exhibition design, such as how elements were hung in the space. In addition, Curator 1 spoke about getting to know the artists labelled/with IDD to the point that they can make fine, detailed decisions about the exhibition on behalf of the artists, such as how the works are matted and which specific colour of white to select.

In general, Curator 1 highlighted the importance of following the artists' lead:

> You're really wanting the artist that you're working with to feel as though their exhibition represents what they're wanting to share with the world. (Curator 1)

Like Curator 1, Curator 2 also described their role as curator as one of a connector, which sometimes involves balancing interacting with non-disabled arts organizations and systems that have not imagined or invited disability into it.

While this current project was the first time Curator 3 worked with artists labelled/with IDD, they echoed similar sentiments about relationship building. They spoke about how they work collaboratively with artists and let them make the majority of decisions about the curatorial practices on their shows. At the same time, Curator 3 acknowledged the different levels of support that any artist might need and the adjustments they make to their collaboration style.

For example, Curator 3 will give artists their perspective on the space and community surrounding the gallery but ultimately, specific choices are up to the artist:

> My perspective [is] to help inform the curation and the installation, but ultimately the vast majority of the onus is placed on the artist and I'm just in a more supportive role. (Curator 3)

When asked about affirming representation for artists labelled/with IDD, Curator 3 noted not making assumptions about what the community needs and hearing from them directly. They advised developing relationships so that future projects can be designed collaboratively, based on community needs and desires.

Curator 2 described how in a recent exhibition, where they worked with artists labelled/with IDD, they undertook a process of co-writing the exhibition statement. They collaborated with artists to write the text. Then a collaborator from another institution synthesized the work. Curator 2 noted this was slightly different to their other exhibition processes but that in general, their gallery's exhibition processes are flexible enough to make room for many variations in how artists might like their works presented.

Curator 1 has also worked with artists labelled/with IDD to co-author exhibition materials. This was the first time these artists were invited to participate in a writing project of this scale. Curator 1 spoke about the biases that come up when writing a more academic text, such as stringent proofreading and editing, which can sometimes remove the unique voice and style of the author.

So, in this context, Curator 1 took a different approach to ensure the writing was still accessible while maintaining the overall style of the artist:

> It was not how I would typically write about an exhibition and so definitely adopted, you know, the kind of language and style that that artist had used in their essay…I think it was a little bit more of a whimsical style. And a lot more, probably informal than how I typically write. (Curator 1)

Both Curator 1 and 2 described adjustments made to the timeline of the exhibition in order to accommodate a more involved collaborative writing process with the artists.

Curator 1 noted that in a recent exhibition wherein they collaborated with artists labelled/with IDD, they were mindful that artists had the time to express themselves how

they wanted and added some buffer time to timelines. In addition, Curator 1 indicated that being flexible with meeting times was important due to practical factors like unreliable transit.

Curator 2 also described taking a slower approach during a recent exhibition collaborating with artists labelled/with IDD. They noted that overall, their exhibition processes are not strict or overly structured, meaning that each exhibition has its own unique process.

While working recently on an exhibition with artists labelled/with IDD, they planned for a longer process to ensure artists' voices were meaningfully heard:

> There were six artists from [name redacted] studio who were brought in as the curators to help make the choices on which works were presented, making sure that the stories told were accurate, and making sure that their voices were part of an important and major part of the exhibition. I think it's also been a long process. It's been a multi-year process. (Curator 2)

All three curators described making adjustments to timelines in general. While Curator 1 and 2 spoke about this in the context of exhibition processes with artists labelled/with IDD, Curator 3 spoke about this concept more generally.

Approaches for moving towards more affirming representation for artists labelled/with IDD included a discussion of the role of the curator as a connector between artist and gallery's processes. In particular, this can be a delicate balance when the relationships are between disabled artists, a gallery exhibiting their work, and a partnership with a non-disabled institution. In such cases, the curator might assist with helping to navigate these relationships to ensure the voices of artists come through. Co-authoring of exhibition material was discussed, including being mindful of maintaining the unique voice of artists in writing. Adjustments to institutions processes, including timelines, were also identified as being supportive to the inclusion of artists labelled/with IDD in exhibition making processes.

# Emerging Themes and Observations from Sessions with Artists

Below, I will present the emerging themes and observations from workshops with four artists labelled/with IDD. I will highlight the barriers identified during engagement with aspects of the curatorial process, whether artists want to have their works exhibited in mainstream art galleries, and how to present their works in meaningful ways, regardless of the venue. The findings are organized under four themes, with some having sub-themes:

1. Voices of Artists
2. Distinct Studio Culture
3. Using Current Artistic Expertise
4. Artists' Professional Development

I discuss what was presented to me at face value and aim to avoid putting words into the artists' mouths. Throughout the analysis and writing process, the notion of accountability was important. Kirsten Stalker cautions against researchers adding words not spoken by individuals, especially when those interpretations go against the person's affect and gestures in that moment (1998, 12-13). Throughout the findings, I also make it clear who is speaking when I quote or paraphrase to avoid blurring the lines between my words, the curator's and the artists'. In addition, drawing on the work of inclusive art researchers, Fox and Macpherson (2015), I balanced the polarities of conventional textual representation with the individual speech patterns, non-verbals and voices of artists labelled/with IDD (28). Therefore, throughout the section below, I present excerpts that balance the distinct voice patterns of artists and important non-verbals, with minor edits made for clarity. To differentiate dialogue with artists as separate from my own interpretation and observations, quotes are indented in a larger, purple font.

## 1. Voice of Artists

Throughout the course of the project, I got to know each artist as an individual. All participants had a unique voice as artists, having distinct communication styles, and expressing interests in addressing particular themes and subject matter in their artistic practice. In the section below, I explore the elements that make each artist uniquely

them, which would be a crucial step for future curators working with this population to take note of and incorporate into curatorial processes. In addition, affirming ways of engaging with and presenting their works also emerged.

## Artist 1: Understanding the Self through Art

Artist 1 has a very distinctive art style, very much their own. Often showing human figures depicted in a distinct style, with outlines of parts making up limbs and joints, and circles for the knees, hips, and elbows. I was curious if this was a clue into the process by which Artist 1 first learned how to draw figures, as for me, the shapes recalled a wooden mannequin model. While some of the examples seen at the studio of Artist 1's art were figurative, some of the examples produced during this study were more abstract, see for example, Figure 1. In the first and last sessions, the studio staff and I discussed the work in Figure 7 with Artist 1. Artist 1 shared that each of the figures represents them. Given this information, it is interesting to note the different colours and facial expressions of each figure. This work made me wonder about the internal life of this artist, and whether these might represent different emotional states, such as joy, anger and fear or surprise.
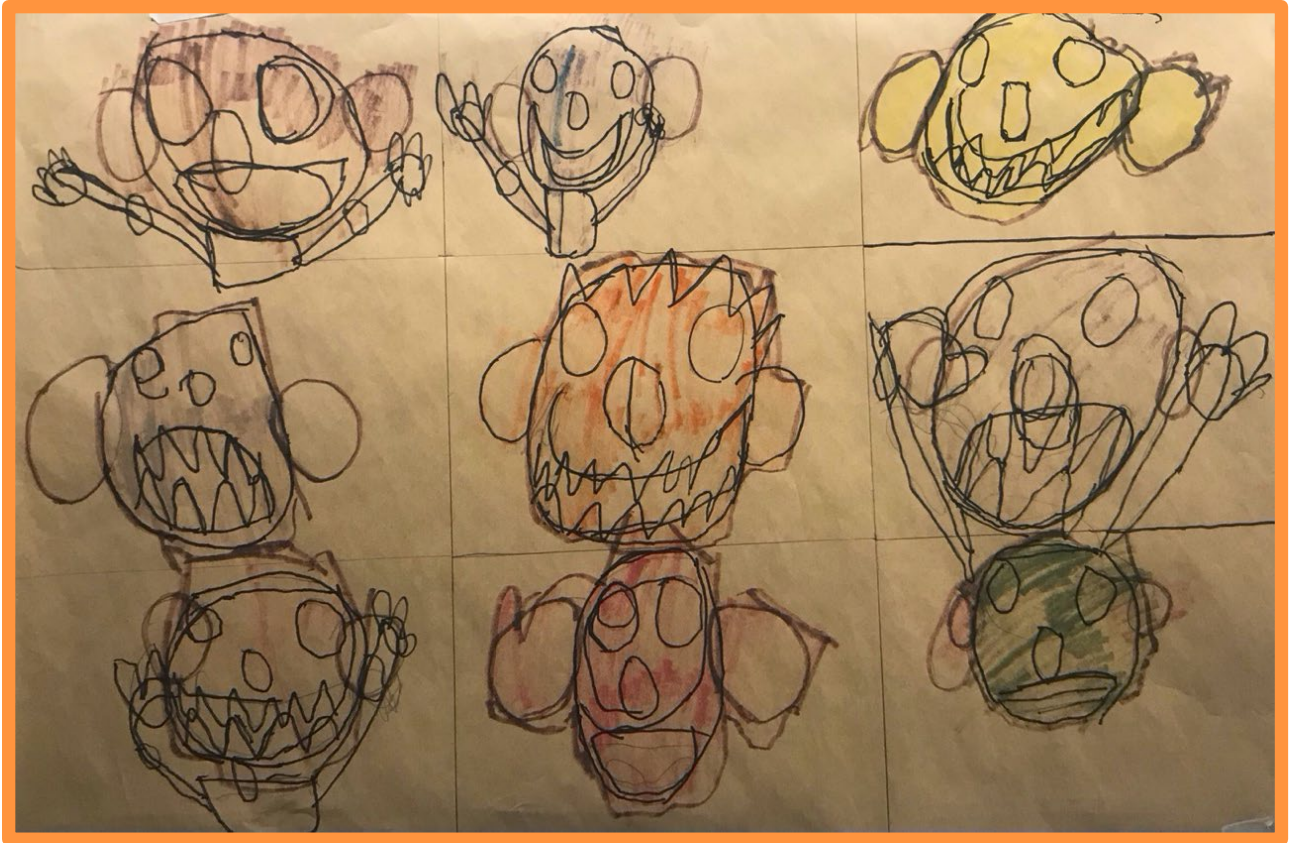
Figure 7. Artist 1, Artwork depicting multiple faces, Marker on paper

To me, it recalls studies of different facial expressions.

Below is an exchange with Artist 1 about the work:

Staff: Was it anybody specific you were drawing?
Artist 1: Non-verbal indication of yes.
Staff: Yeah? Who is it?
Artist 1: It is. Uh, I draw me, right?
Me: It's you?
Staff: It's you!
Artist 1: Yeah...
Me: So are they all you?
Artist 1: Mmm.
Staff: Yeah.

Artist 1 had several works displayed in both the hallway and the larger classroom space at the studio. In the portrait discussed below (not pictured as the artist did not give permission), the artist is depicted in brown, a shadow-like in front of a blue, purple

and teal background. There are wavy shapes across the canvas, depicting movement in the water.

Recognizing that I did not realize it depicted them at first, Artist 1 and I had the exchange below:

> Artist 1: You know it's me, right?
> Me: It's you? So, it's a self-portrait?
> Artist 1: Mmmhmm.
> Me: Oh, I didn't know that.
> Artist 1: Right. I made swim, right?
> Me: You're swimming?
> Artist 1: Mmmhmm.
> Me: Do you like swimming?
> Artist 1: Mmhmmm.
> Me: So, where are you swimming? Is it in a pool?
> Artist 1: The swimming pool.
> Me: Swimming pool. And are these the colours you're seeing when you're swimming? So, this is the water?
> Artist 1: Mmhmm. Yeah!

Many of the examples seen from Artist 1 depicted the self. Artist 1 was less verbally expressive, so I felt it was particularly relevant that many of their works depicted them in various scenarios, including different emotional states. For curators working with artists who may be less verbal, recognizing and celebrating multiple ways of expressing and communicating ideas may be a crucial step for collaboration.

Although the artist's intent still felt opaque after the project concluded, I questioned whether or not knowing the intention was essential to interpretation. In art history, the intention of the artist is sometimes unknown, and interpretation happens based on limited information and can still be analyzed. Ideally, if these works were to be exhibited in the future, more research on the pieces might be required. This research process could include finding out more about the artist's life in general to gather biographical details, talking to the artist about any source materials used and speaking with family or facilitators who might have guided the creation of the work and if it was based on a specific prompt. All of these considerations could allow for more in-depth interpretation to take place.

# Artist 2: Connecting through Humour and Shared Memories

From the first session, Artist 2 was warm and welcoming to me at the studio, openly sharing about the stories behind their works. They led me on a tour of the artworks in the hallway, pulling in other artists to talk about their own works. Artist 2 was very candid about some of the more personal aspects of their life, and I could feel how this open heartedness translated into their art.

Throughout the sessions, Artist 2 demonstrated curiosity, whether that was about me, the curator at the local gallery we visited, or an artist whose works we saw at the gallery:

> Curator 3: We have some poems and some poetry by an artist named [redacted]…
> Artist 2: Right there.
> Curator 3: …and then an artist named [redacted] did a whole bunch of things. Every time I saw her, she was working on something.
> Artist 2: Why's she looking out the window?
> Curator 3: So she's the one who made this maze that you were noticing, Artist 2.
> Artist 2: Oh, oh yes. What's this maze?
> Curator 3: So this what's this something that [name redacted] made.

Artist 2's works felt extremely personal and relational. They often used humour and laughter as a way of connecting with others. The painting in Figure 5 depicts a cooking class at the studio where they learned how to make pizza. Since the class took

place during the COVID-19 pandemic, masks were worn during the cooking class and in the painting, we see three of the figures are depicted wearing masks.



Figure 8. Artist 2, Artwork depicting a cooking class, Acrylic and marker on canvas

During session 5, Artist 2 had the opportunity to discuss this work with the group:

> Artist 2: Do you remember [lists names of facilitators for cooking class]?
> Artist 3: Yeah.

Artist 2: They came, uh, I don't know what year. Yeah, they taught…
Artist 3: Artist 4 was here for it too!
Artist 4: Ah yeah, the cooking…

Overall, I noticed Artist 2's works were incredibly relational and about connection. They brought the group together, prompting stories about shared experiences. This ability to connect to others through their work in this way was very distinctive to them. A future exhibition of their work might include retelling of the stories behind artworks, in collaboration with other people to take part in the retelling and recalling.

# Artist 3: Growing as an Artist-Curator

Artist 3 seemed not only engaged with the practice of making art but also in aspects of the curatorial process that were explored during this project. Preliminary ideas about themes and subject matter for future exhibitions that they might like to have emerged.

Throughout the sessions, I noticed a few key interests of Artist 3's emerging, which were hockey and birds. When asked about their favourite works, they responded with hockey. While it was still unclear whether that meant they considered hockey to be an art form, or their favourite works of art were those featuring hockey or a combination of both was unclear. That being said, I incorporated this interest into subsequent sessions by including examples of hockey-themed exhibitions for the artist to get a sense of what such an exhibition could look like.

Artist 3 also loves birds. During the visit to the local gallery in session 4 and prompted by an artwork depicting a loon, Artist 3 told a story about how when they travel by bus every day, they see loons in a swamp on a specific road in town. They recalled seeing an adult and baby loon that is depicted in the drawing below as a response to a work of art the group discussed at the local gallery. The prompt was "does anything in the gallery remind you of something from your life?"
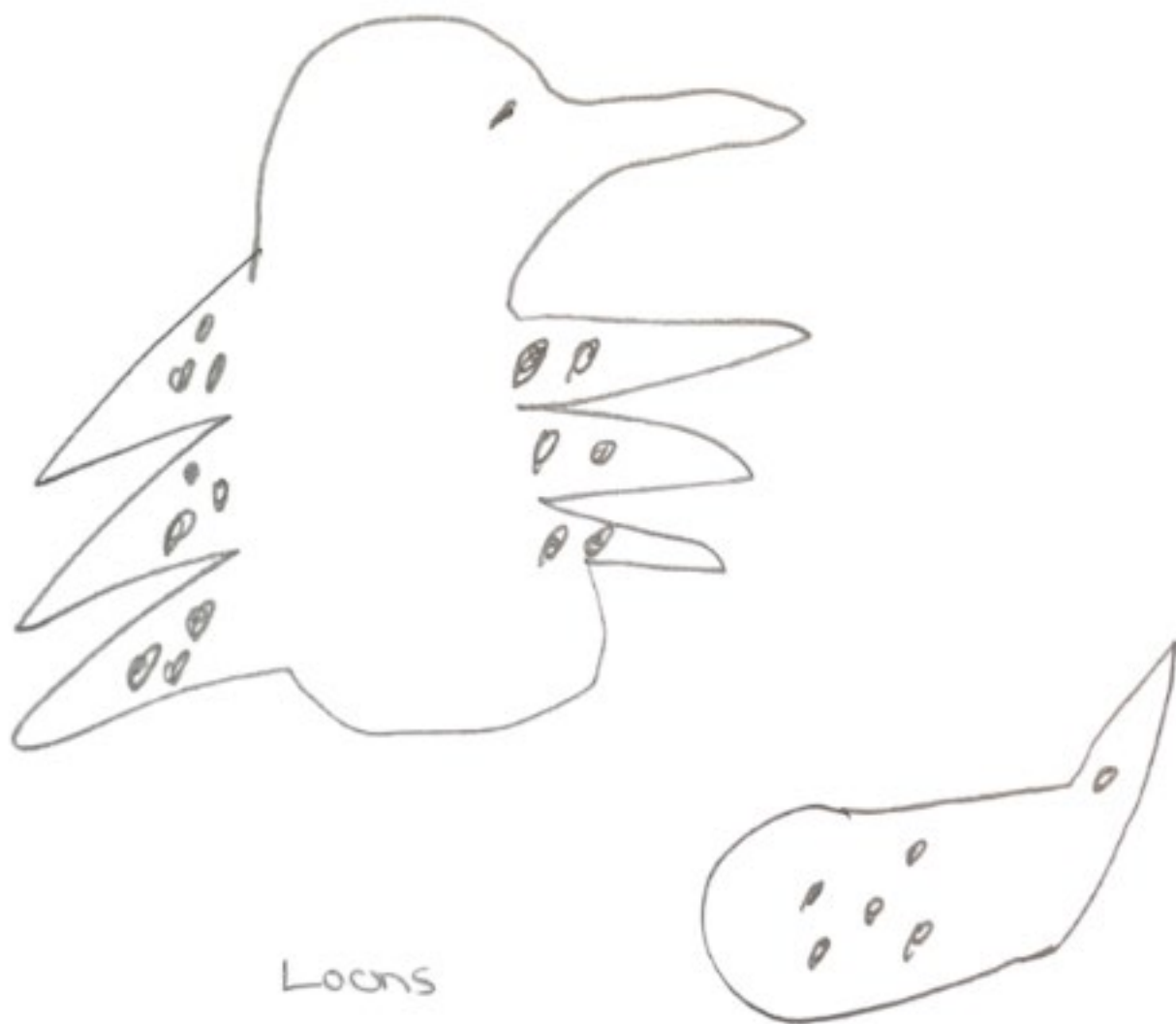
Figure 9. Artist 3, Artwork depicting two loons, Graphite on paper, 2025

Artist 3 was invested in curatorial activities throughout the course of the project. Some of their key interests, such as birds and hockey, were expressed and explored in discussion and activities.

## Artist 4: A Glimpse into the Artist's Inner World

Artist 4 seemed keen on letting me into the inner world of their artistic process. During session 2, Artist 4 showed me their art and sketchbook, including sketches and pieces of writing that explained the thought process behind their sketches. While Artist 4 indicated that they did not want photos of some of these works included in the report, it was clear they were invested in showing me these works as a look into their inner world and personal art practice.

Artist 4's process seemed to differ from other artists, in particular from Artist 1, who for example, seemed to draw what was in front of them in the moment. In contrast, Artist 4 sometimes drew from memory:

> Me: And when you're drawing, are you drawing from memory? Or do you get a photo?
> Artist 4: Yes. In my mind.

Artist 4 has a strong interest in Disney, including castles, princesses and Animal Kingdom. While on a tour of the studio, Artist 4 pointed to "Animal Kingdom," a drawing they produced of several animals and indicated it was the same one they had pointed out in the larger studio space. I asked if they had done this one first and they said yes, they drew the work pictured in Figure 10 followed by the larger version, pictured in Figure 11.

Figure 10. Artist 4, *Animal Kingdom* sketch,
Coloured pencils and marker on paper

Figure 11. Artist 4, *Animal Kingdom* final,
Marker, coloured pencils and pastel on paper

Artist 4 used their sketchbook to think through their art and used this visual tool as a way to communicate their process. Their artworks explored a few key themes but most notably, they expressed a desire to have an exhibition in a church where they grew up.

# 2. Distinct Studio Culture
## Culture of Care

During the workshops, a culture of care emerged and manifested in several different ways between artists and between studio staff and artists. This was something I noticed from the first session and tried to incorporate into my ways of working with the group. This theme is of note as it illuminates potential barriers that perpetuate a lack of inclusive representation for artists labelled/with IDD. Further, it is also a key factor for curators to consider incorporating into their exhibition making processes.

From the first session, it was clear that the artists deeply care for one another. Whether that was checking in to make sure the other is ok, or reminding facilitators about another's snack time, or making sure the other person understands the activity. In particular, I noticed Artist 3 deeply cares about Artist 1. Artist 1 is less verbally expressive and requires a longer time to process.
Knowing this, Artist 3 would often check in with Artist 1 to ensure they understand the activity or concept being discussed.

> Artist 3: Those are art pictures.
> Artist 1: Art pictures.
> Artist 3: [Artist 1's name redacted] Ok buddy?
> Artist 1: Ok.
> Artist 3: Good. Now they understand.
> Me: It's a really good question, so, we will look at this a little bit later. This is our model of our museum or gallery.

In other instances, the culture of care manifested in the group working collectively to remember a shared experience. For example, during one session, while discussing past museum and gallery visits, members used a process of asking each other questions, sparking recollection from members of the group until they got closer to recalling as a group the location of the field trip.

In the second session, I brought in a model of a gallery space with small figures who had various types of disabilities, including a person who is Blind and uses a white cane, a person in a wheelchair, and a Deaf person who uses sign language. While the artists did not necessarily have the vocabulary to voice the name of the accessibility technology the Blind person was using, they could relate back to another artist in the studio who uses a white cane.

# Cultural Communication

Cultural communication also emerged as a sub-theme of studio culture. The four artists I worked with all had very different communication styles.

While discussing the model of the gallery space, Artist 1 kept referring to it as a house. I was unsure if he knew the model was meant to represent a museum or gallery and did not have the vocabulary or if there was a misunderstanding about what the space was meant to represent.

> Me: Why are we doing this study? So, we have a museum up on the slide and an arrow pointing to this text: We want your stories and art in museums and galleries. Do you have any questions on that?
> Artist 3: Nope.
> Artist 1: Raises hand.
> Me: Yeah.
> Artist 1: Uh, I got a question. No-tice uh uh uh project there is a ...with a house.
> Me: Yeah!
> Artist 1: Mmm.
> Me: So, yeah, absolutely. So, this is a model of our museum or a gallery.
> Artist 1: Yeah. Mmmhmm.
> Me: So kind of like a house, but it's a house for art.
> Artist 1: Yeah?
> Me: Yeah, so we got our art on the walls.

Using a 'yes and' approach, I incorporated the artists' contribution. I validated what they were seeing and related the concept of a house to a museum or gallery as a house for art. In the subsequent workshops, wherever possible, I incorporated the

vocabulary of a house for art into the discussion. I also used the physical model of the gallery and connected that to the image the group was looking at on the slides.

Artist 1 was not overly expressive in words and benefited from having a staff member who knew them well present during workshops, which I noticed encouraged conversation. I noticed Artist 1 frequently saying yes in response to questions. As the project progressed, I learned this response may not have necessarily been an affirmative to the question but more an indication of 'yes, I've heard you,' as they would often repeat the question back to me. This seemed to occur more frequently when there might have been gaps in understanding. This offered me the opportunity to clarify and rephrase using different strategies to lead to more understanding.

> Me: So, I know this is maybe a bit abstract, but Artist 1, what do you understand from what we just chatted about?
> Artist 1: What we chat about?
> Me: Yeah.
> Artist 1: Uhh, what we chat about? Yeah. Uh.
> Me: With this question, what is an exhibition? So, what do you think an exhibition is?
> Artist 1: What an exhibition is? I don't know. What?
> Me: We're going to see some examples of different exhibitions…

There were also moments where Artist 1 seemed to be searching for a visual to explain what they had drawn, which highlighted the importance of various forms of communication and participation. Some repetitions seemed to imply a question mark at the end like the exchange above with Artist 1, while others seemed to imply recognition and understanding, such as the exchange below.

> Me: They said that this artist is Deaf. Do you know what that means?
> Artist 3: Yes.
> Artist 4: Yes.
> Me: So, they use sign language.
> Artist 3: Sign language!

It was important for me to attend to the fact that participants' repetitions carried different meanings depending on the context. Sometimes it was a cue to pause and explain a

particular topic, or move on to expand on the topic. In addition, Artist 1 in particular often communicated using non-verbals, which was important for me to be mindful of during the workshops and in reflections following the workshops. The exchange below shows one of the facilitator's taking note of a key non-verbal from Artist 1 that gave clues into their enjoyment of a particular part of the project.

> Staff: Would you want to do more drawing, or working with Artist 3 and Artist 2?
> Artist 1: Non-verbal indication of yes.
> Staff: Yeah. What about things like visiting other galleries? What would you think? If that was an option, would you want to visit more than just one?
> Artist 1: Mhm.
> Staff: Yeah, it's a big smile there.

Staff, being someone familiar with each of the artists' communication styles, was able to pick up on Artist 1's non-verbal communication. Another key non-verbal that stood out from the exchanges with Artist 1, was the amount of time they spent drawing a particular artwork in the gallery we visited during the project. At the beginning of the visit, they seemed unsure what to draw, but by the middle of the session, they spent a significant amount of time with a particular artwork, wanting to capture as many details as they could. This showed me that Artist 1 was not only able to make their own decisions about how to use their time and what to draw but was also able to express a preference for exploring one artwork over another. For example, during our gallery visit, Artist 1 spent a considerable amount of time with a sculptural artwork depicting a maze. Their interpretation of this artwork is in Figure 9.

Figure 12. Artist 1, Interpretation of maze artwork in local gallery,
Graphite on paper, 2025

Cultural communication was also observed in the some of the artists' works, like the example from Artist 4 below. This artwork depicts a spider web with, when read together undecipherable, symbols caught in the web. At the center of the web is a book, similarly with unrecognizable symbols. Upon discussion with Artist 4, they let me know this represented the barriers they face with understanding the written word.
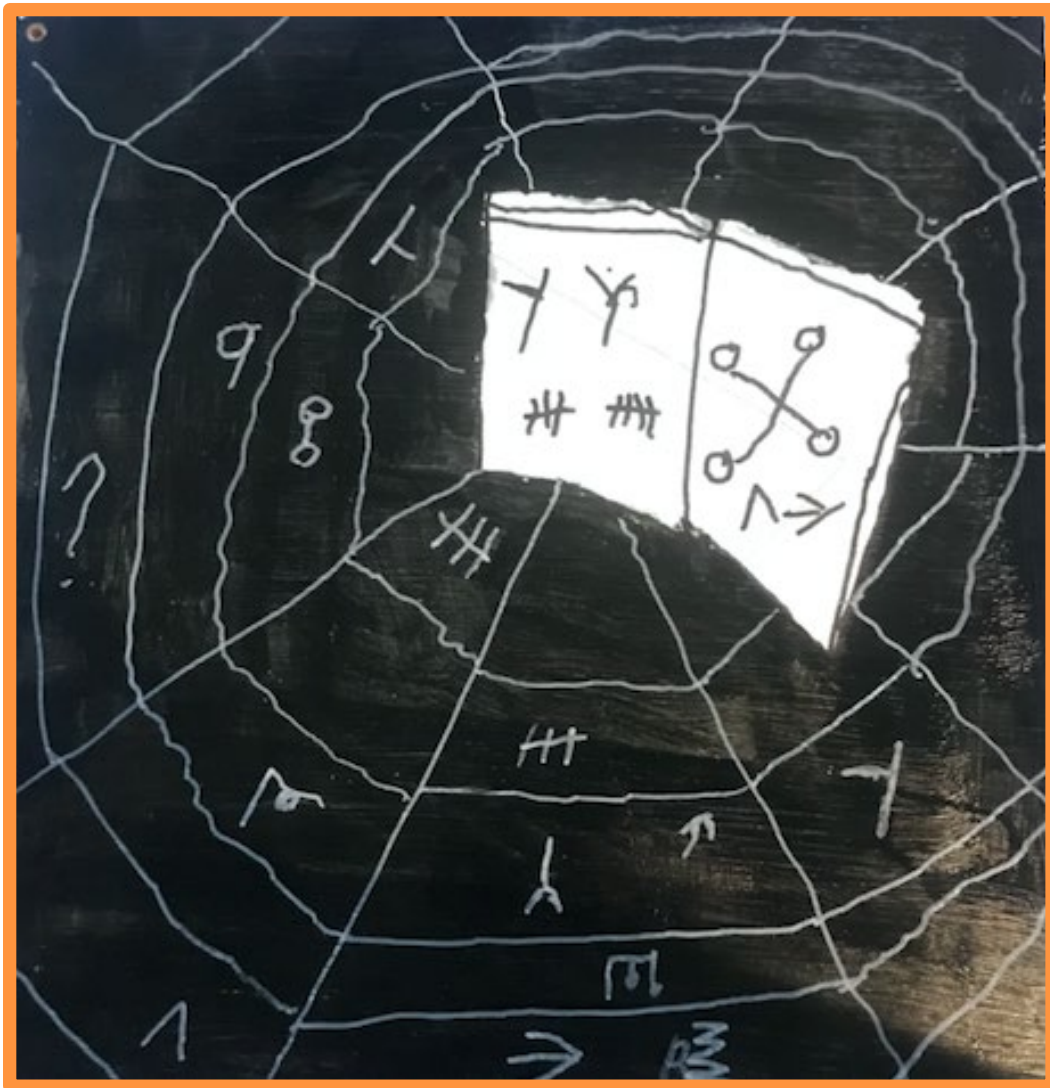


Figure 13. Artist 4, Acrylic and marker on canvas

The bringing of unrelated symbols together to represent their misfitting with written communication in English was another key aspect for me to keep in mind when bridging communication between myself and the rest of the group and resulted in having multiple modes with which to engage with a particular question or topic.

# Differing Levels of Support

There were different levels of support needed by each of the artists and in different ways.

From the first session, even just as an observer to the regular artistic programming, I was assumed to be in charge, with Artist 2 asking me, "Can I use some coloured pencils, Natalie?" I used every interaction as an opportunity to redirect decision-making to the artists and observed studio facilitators doing the same. This phenomenon of artists checking in frequently for permission was seen throughout the project. During workshop 4, artists were given the opportunity to choose between taking photos in the gallery with a tablet from the studio or drawing. Only one artist chose the photo option but they seemed hesitant to take photos. A studio staff member offered to take photos for the artist, and it was unclear if this added to their hesitancy, possibly at having to ask permission each time to take a photo. However, it is also possible the artist simply wanted to be present during the discussion and gallery tour, and taking photos interfered with that for them. The phenomenon of checking in for permission is possibly a socialized factor, so I took this as an opportunity to give artists a choice during activities and lead throughout the project as much as possible.

During workshop 2, artists were given a worksheet to complete that outlined their needs for support. Examples of completed needs worksheets are in [Appendix C](). Artist 2 noted needing to concentrate and participate as important for them to be able to do their best. They also noted that feeling confident would help them feel like the project had gone well. Artist 3 noted they need time to think about things as being important to them doing their best. To the question of what would help them feel like the project had gone well, they wrote "Phote Of My Art," so throughout this report, I was intentional about including photos of their works. I used these worksheets to conduct the sessions in ways that met the needs of artists. For example, I went slightly slower when I was introducing an activity or asking a question, taking pauses and checking in frequently to ensure artists understood the activity. I was also mindful of asking one question at a time as I observed potential misunderstandings when more than one question was asked in a row. In the exchange below, I observed Artist 3 modelling a better strategy for communicating with Artist 1 by asking two questions phrased in plain language.

Me: Artist 1, if you want to keep working on this during the week, you can, ok? Then this one is about how would you feel having an exhibition of your art? So, if you saw your artworks up in a museum or gallery, how would that make you feel?
Artist 1: That would make me feel good.
Me: Yeah, so you can think about how you would feel.
Artist 1: I might have a hard time making that, right? (referencing the model of the museum)
Artist 3: How would it make you feel? Happy?
Artist 1: It would make me happy.

While it was helpful to have staff and volunteers attend the sessions to help rephrase, add to collective memory and bridge communication gaps, there were times where it felt like it hindered artists answering on their own. However, I also acknowledge that without staff support in certain situations, interactions might have necessitated a longer session and required me to use a different kind of strategy for asking questions. For example, a strategy in which I keep getting more and more specific with the question depending on the response from the artist. It is also possible that the artist could have gotten tired with this type of question style, and it was easier for the facilitator to respond. However, I hoped this was a decision the artist would signal and not for a facilitator to make that decision on their behalf.

During this project, I observed that there was a unique studio culture, based on a culture of care, with artists demonstrating an understanding of each other's needs and strategies to meet them. This included reminders about snack times, collective recalling of memories and ensuring the other understood activities and prompts. Cultural communication also emerged, which included unique intricacies in dialogue, meaning expressed in non-verbals and art used as a means of communication. It was also crucial to explore the needs of artists as a way of further understand their studio culture. This led to understanding that while artists are capable of making decisions themselves, since they may have a history of being denied these choices, they need support to be able to do so. Curators working with artists labelled/with IDD who are a part of a studio might take note of the unique studio culture while collaborating with them.

# 3. Using Current Artistic Expertise

This theme explores the observations about artists' current artistic expertise and knowledge, challenging misconceptions that artists labelled/with IDD are not professional artists and therefore would not have the capability to have a professional exhibition of their works. During the project, I observed several ways in which the artists used their current knowledge and expertise in the arts.

While looking at examples of different exhibitions to invite the group to think about how they might like to display their works in the future, we viewed an online exhibition featuring Maud Lewis' artworks.
Below is an exchange from that session:

> Artist 4: Maud's house!
> Me: Yeah!
> Artist 4: We've seen the movie.
> Me: You've seen the movie?
> Artist 4: Yep.
> Me: About Maud Lewis?
> Artist 4: Yeeeppp!

This exchange above tells me that Artist 4 can recall specific artworks and associate them with the artist who made them. In addition, artists were able to identify certain media if they were familiar with them from their work. For example, while looking at an exhibition of paintings and sculptures, artists were able to correctly identify these mediums. In addition, artists' knowledge of media helped them relate to the works discussed during the gallery visit.

> Curator 3: Has anyone ever done any collage before?
> Artist 2: Uh.
> Staff: You guys have done lots of…
> Artist 2: Yep.
> Staff: …collage
> Artist 2: We did!
> Curator 3: So, what did you cut up to make your collage?
> Artist 2: Uh we cut up with magazines, like, yeah.
> Curator 3: Magazines?
> Artist 3: Magazines…

Curator 3: Yep
Artist 2: Yep
Curator 3: Did you cut up any old pictures?
Artist 2: Uh, yeah. Yeah, we did.
Artist 3: Yeah.
Staff: Couple of people did.
Curator 3: Nice.
Staff: They did a project where they used craft paper…
Curator 3: Oh, so cool!
Staff: …and then collaged on all of those interesting things they made them, them.

During session 5, we furthered the discussion of how works of art could be brought together in conversation. One of the artists was able to bring their knowledge of mediums and materials to come up with ways that two artworks I brought from home, a quilted jacket and a collaged zine, could be paired together.

I encouraged the artist to deepen their thinking by prompting them in the exchange below:

Me: Let's talk about why these two works could how to go together.
Artist 2: Patch, patch! Patches, patchwork, you know? Patches here.
Me: Ok, that's interesting.
Artist 2: Yeah.
Me: So, patchwork, how does that tie into this one?
Artist 2: Oh um, if you put Mother's Day on there…

We also used the artists' own works to discuss why two works were brought together in conversation in the studio hallway gallery. The works on the next page were painted by Artist 2 (Flower) and Artist 1 (Caterpillar).
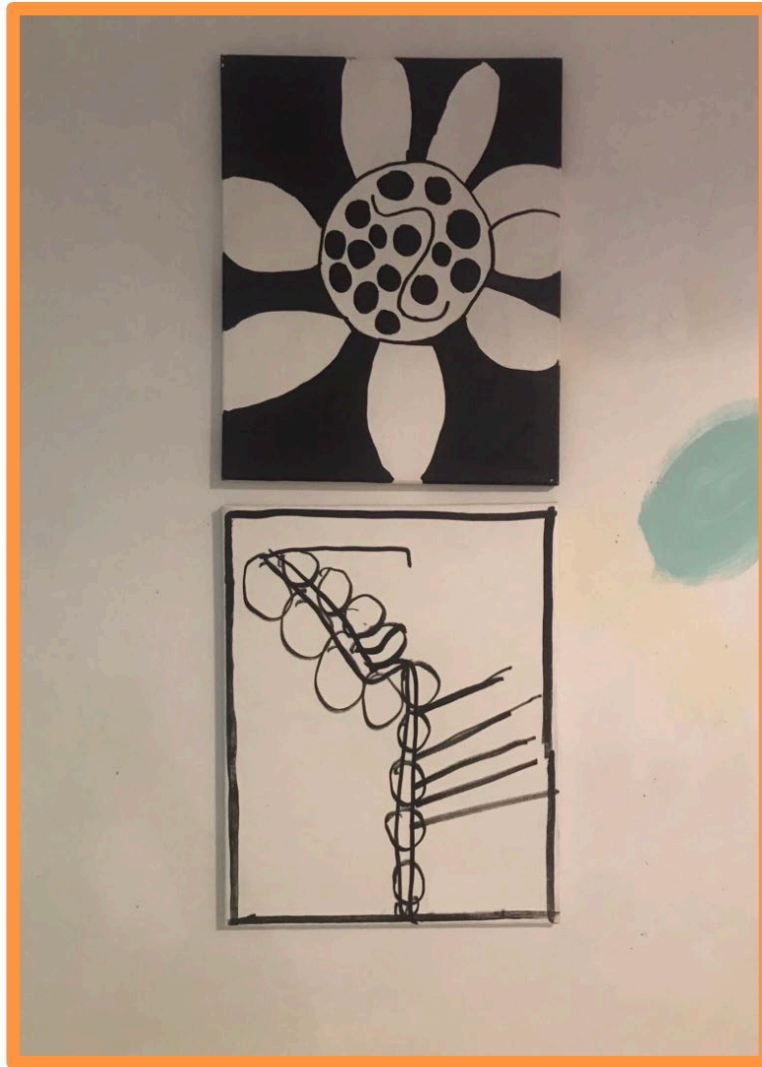
Figure 14. Artist 2 and 1, Flower and caterpillar,
Acrylic on canvas

Me: Why do we think they brought these two works together in conversation? Are there things that are similar?
Artist 3: Probably the caterpillar going to meet this flower.
Me: That's interesting. I really like that. Why else do you think they brought these together? Is there anything that looks the same about them?
Artist 3: They're both black and white.
Me: They're both black and white.
Artist 4: That's true.

The exchange above shows that artists are capable of thinking through different reasons for which two artworks were brought together in conversation. This included thinking about colours in common with the works, but also the ways in which the subject matter from each painting could be connected to tell a story.

I observed artists use their knowledge and artistic expertise in activities related to the curatorial process, including recognition of famous artists' works, identifying and speaking about mediums and creatively thinking through how and why to pair artworks together. This theme is important in being able to challenge biases related to artists labelled/with IDD not being at the level of professional artists, as they have a significant knowledge base and creativity.

# 4. Expanding on Artists' Professional Development

This theme explores how throughout this project, artists were able to expand on their arts education, developing new knowledge and skills; and express professional development goals as artists. Curators might use the observations in this theme to challenge misconceptions about artists not being able to participate in exhibition making processes.

During session 2 and 3, I introduced the artists to a model of a gallery space that included figures that could be moved around the maquette to explain the role of a curator and how artists can collaborate with a curator. In addition, I printed miniatures of artworks from the National Gallery of Canada's collection for the artists to rearrange into different types of display and to try different colour combinations on the maquette walls.

> Me: The artist can chat with the curator about how…
> Artist 2: Ok, yep.
> Me: …they want their artworks arranged.
> Artist 2: We should put the artwork here and then here. Looks a bit…*Laughs*
> Me: Yeah, these walls are kind of looking a bit bare, eh?
> Artist 2: Yeah! yeah, yeah, yeah.
> Me: And then you can choose different colors…
> Artist 2: Ohh-K!
> Me: …It's up to you.

Artist 2: I don't think bland. *Laughs* Brown? *Speaking quietly about colour choices.*
Me: So, there is purple…Yellow…
Artist 2: Yellow. We could do yellow.
Artist 3: Yes.

Part of the project involved a visit to a local gallery and a meeting with their curator, Curator 3, who also participated in an [interview for this project](#). In the past, the artists we worked with visited local museums and galleries; and ones outside the city. During this project, they were able to expand on their knowledge of art and exhibition making in conversation with Curator 3. We began the gallery visit with discussing the different things a curator does to tell the story of the exhibition. Artists started to think about how they might display their works of art in a gallery setting.

Throughout the gallery visit, which involved a tour of two gallery spaces and a presentation of a previous exhibition, artists were introduced to new mediums and new ways of presenting works, which expanded their knowledge of the arts and how to exhibit works of art.

Me: What are some of the ways that a curator can create stories?
Artist 2: Oh, we can write.
Me: So, the font, color…Artist 3 brought up where the exhibition is located and the different artworks that you're selecting.
Staff: How you group them, how you name them.
Me: Does anyone have any questions on that so far?
Curator 3: I have another idea. I think lighting.
Artist 2: Oh, lighting yes.
Curator 3: You'll notice right now: we're sitting in the dark a little bit.
Artist 2: Yeah, yes.
Curator 3: I'll turn on the lights in a minute…
Artist 2: Ok.
Curator 3: …but lighting is something that these artists thought a lot about for their story.

During the visit, the group discussed a conceptual work of art. Curator 3 introduced the work by passing around a piece of scrim, the same type of fabric used in the artwork. This gave the artists a tactile point of reference. Staff also reminded artists of their previous experience working with scrim fabric while working on performance-based projects on stage, where scrim was stretched over tubing and images were projected onto it. At the same time, artists still may have been confused about the artwork and its meaning, as many of the frames of reference for them when creating their works are figurative. Artist 1, in particular, seemed perplexed by this work saying, "I don't know what to draw." The drawing below is from Artist 1, with the section in the upper left corner representing the more conceptual work that was composed of tent-like structures that mirrored the shape of the gallery's ceiling, with words projected onto them that mimicked the way a karaoke song's lyrics tick by, with the words highlighted in yellow. Artist 1 seems to have drawn the letters that were projected.

Figure 15. Artist 1, Interpretation of works at local gallery,
Graphite on paper, 2025

Curator 3 acknowledged the more conceptual nature of the work, and staff helped to continue to bring the work into a more familiar frame of reference for the artists, including reminding them of their experience using scrim during performances.

> Staff: Is there anything you want to draw from this space that stands out for you?
> Curator 3: I know this is really different type of art than you're maybe used to doing. There's nothing hanging on the walls.
> Artist 2: Oh well. Haha. Oh, this one.
> Staff: Well, this is it's a lot like when we get on stage.
> Artist 2: Yeah.

While we looked at other galleries that were more familiar formats to the artists, with artworks hanging on the walls, the conceptual work seemed to really challenge the group. This introduced them to a new type of art and way to use a gallery space. Some of the artists had previous experience with choosing how their works were displayed in studio spaces. Others did not have or recall that experience, or may have assisted with putting up their own works, but were not involved in the overall conception of the exhibition.

> Staff: So, did anybody here help Facilitator 3 when he was putting all of this together? I know he usually has help, but I don't who helped him with this.
> Artist 4: And, not me.
> Staff: Not you. Artist 3?
> Artist 3: No.
> Staff: What about you Artist 1, did you help put any of these up?
> Artist 2: I think yours.
> Artist 1: Yeah.

During workshops 3, 4, and 5, we explored the artists' visions for their own exhibitions. Artist 3 was interested in having a future exhibition of their works displayed at a local sports venue where they often frequent to watch hockey games.

> Me: So, you want to have an exhibition there?
> Artist 3: Yeah.

> Me: Is that where you go for hockey? To see the hockey game?
> Artist 3: Yep.
> Me: So, can you tell me a bit about why you'd want to have an exhibition there?
> Artist 3: I'd like to have an exhibition at the [name redacted] so I can show my art.
> Me: Yeah?
> Artist 3: Yeah.
> Me: Why would you want to have it there?
> Artist 3: Because it's a nice place.
> Me: What's nice about it?
> Artist 3: They can put a stage in the hockey arena. And set-up stuff for art and that.
> Me: On the stage?
> Artist 3: Yeah.
> Me: Oh cool.
> Artist 3: And on the floor.
> Me: On the floor. When you say the floor, is that like where the rink is?
> Artist 3: Yeah, where the rink is.

Other artists had venues in mind for their future exhibitions that also aligned with places that were meaningful to them and their identity. When exploring where Artist 4 would like to have an exhibition of their art, they described a small church located in the town where they grew up.

> Me: Why would you want to have it here?
> Artist 4: I am a Catholic.
> Me: Ok so that feels important for you, in terms of your story to have it there?
> Artist 4: Yeah.
> Me: That makes sense. And it's ok if you don't know what artworks you want to have there yet, just that that church feels like an important part of your identity.

In a subsequent session, I included an example of an exhibition that took place in a church setting to invite this artist to start to imagine what the exhibition could look like.

While the artist had experience visiting at least one museum or gallery, they chose this church as their preferred location for an imagined future exhibition of their work. This was a meaningful observation to note, as artists might not necessarily desire or only desire to have their works exhibited in art galleries, but in other locations tied to personal identity.

During the session at the local gallery, Artist 3, Curator 3, and a studio volunteer had a moment of co-design, where a bird and hockey exhibition was dreamed up.

> Volunteer: What about you Artist 3, is there anything that you would do if you were having an art exhibit?
> Artist 2: Loons!
> Curator 3: The loons!
> *Laughter*
> Volunteer: Very cool.
> Curator 3: I would come see that show. All about birds.
> Artist 2: yep.
> Volunteer: yeah, I feel like it would be a bird show.
> Curator 3: A bird and hockey show.
> Artist 3: Yep.

This was a key moment, as the exhibition did not emerge in isolation but in dialogue with both the artworks at the gallery and in reflection with the group after the visit. Curators might take note of co-designing even the themes and subject matter of artists labelled/with IDD to ensure exhibition content is meaningful and important to them.

In the last session, Artists 1 and 3 were invited to experiment with arranging the works selected during week 5 during their exhibition making exercise. Artists 2 and 4 were absent this day, and Artist 1 stepped away for a break during this exercise. Pictured in Figure 13 is the arrangement that Artist 3 came up with for their imaginary exhibition. Their entire curatorial dreaming exhibition can be seen in Appendix E.
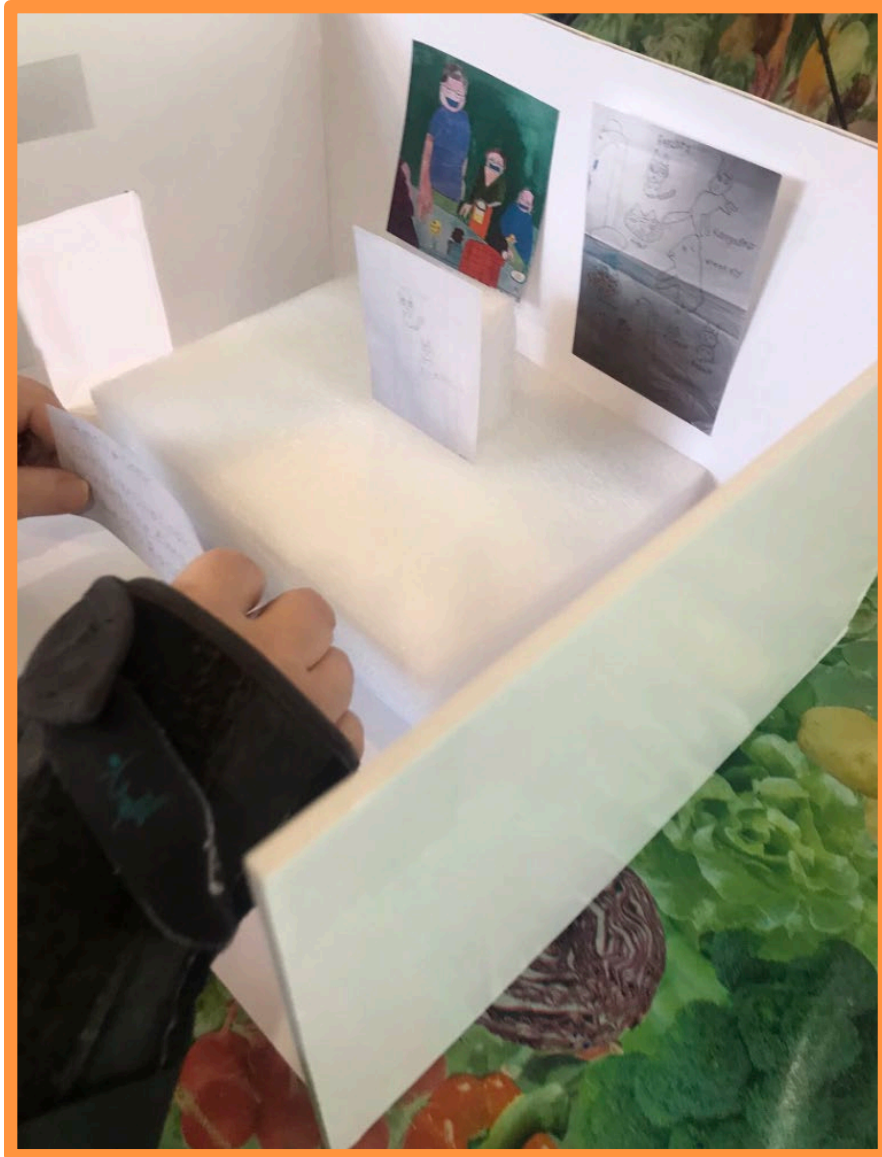
Figure 16. Artist 3 using a maquette to arrange artworks

One of the goals of this project was to empower and equip artists with the tools so that they can participate in exhibition making processes in the future. One of the techniques explored for involving them in curatorial processes was relating unfamiliar materials and design techniques to things with which they were familiar. Another technique used was roleplay for a curatorial dreaming exercise (Appendix E): I divided artists into pairs, one played the curator and one played the artist; the curator interviewed the artist about one artwork; then they switched the roles, and finally each pair came up with a story and theme for an exhibition of two works. I also used a

maquette as a tactile and visual tool for artists to discuss the role of the curator, and collaboration between artists and curators, in addition to exploring different combinations of arranging works of art. Interesting themes and observations that emerged were that artists have ideas about future exhibitions they might like to have, including having the exhibition at venues that are significant to them. Another interesting observation was that an idea for a future exhibition emerged with a co-design between curator, studio volunteer and artist during the gallery visit in workshop 4.

# Bringing the Findings Together

After the analysis was complete for both sets of data, the themes were compared and brought together into a framework, discussed more in depth in the [implications of the research section](#). Below, I discuss the findings from both data sets: interviews with curators, and workshops with artists labelled/with IDD and their artistic responses. Note that some of the findings overlap and connect to two research questions. As a reminder of each research question, they are reiterated below, and the interpretation of the findings associated them follows.

## What are the barriers that perpetuate a lack of inclusive representation for artists labelled/with IDD in art galleries, and what role do curators play in furthering inclusive representation?

Several barriers were explored during the interviews with curators and in workshops with artists. Bias was a theme seen across interviews, whether that was communication, cultural or attitudinal. Bias can manifest in terms of the opportunities given to people with disabilities and in particular, people labelled/with IDD. When it comes to disabled people and people labelled/with IDD in particular, disability is considered in terms of accessibility first and foremost. For example, while the project was focused on representation for artists labelled/with IDD, Curator 3 expressed that an aspect they found useful about the project for them was learning how to better facilitate accessible arts programming for individuals labelled/with IDD. When people with IDD are considered as artists, exhibitions often take place in smaller and less standard exhibition spaces, often meant for community exhibitions rather than professional artists. Bias also arose in the data in terms of communication barriers. During the

workshop session at the local gallery, I observed that the artists were called on in terms of their level of ability to express themselves in words. This was likely to be an unconscious bias. However, it created a hierarchy in the sessions where the artists who were the most verbal got the most time to express themselves and ask questions.

Another barrier that emerged across the two sets of data was established networks. Established networks were observed to facilitate connections in some ways and perpetuate exclusion in others. Curators 1 and 2 both worked with studios that support artists labelled/IDD in recent exhibitions. Curator 1 noted the framework of support that the studio offered was a big part of what made the exhibition process successful and, in particular, the network the studio staff brought with them in terms of their status as professional artists. Curator 2 acknowledged the positive potential of established networks in terms of care relationships but also raised questions about the power dynamics. Artists with stronger-voiced advocates might inadvertently be able to access more opportunities than less resourced artists, which can contribute to exclusion. In workshops with artists, I noticed the framework of the studio offered both support and the possibility of some artists accessing more opportunities than others. For example, I noticed that certain artists had more artworks on display than others. This presented a challenge for the artists with less works displayed to participate in curatorial activities if, for example, they wanted to pick their own works to imagine in an exhibition. It is possible that the artists who have more works on display were more prolific or attended the studio more often, so this aspect needs further exploration.

The diagram in Figure 18 represents the network of connections discussed during this project. Note that the diagram may vary depending on the ecosystem surrounding a particular artist or studio supporting artists labelled/with IDD. So, the diagram aims to illuminate the individuals and institutions connected to artists labelled/with IDD as explored in this project. The squares represent the institutions: studios supporting artists labelled/with IDD, art museums and galleries, and institutions, which is a broad category but could be anything from a local arena or sports venue or a respite house. Circles represent individuals in this network. The circles attached to the studios and art museums and galleries are coloured in a lighter red and blue because these individuals are often bound by bureaucratic and other institutional processes.

Local artists are represented in yellow and are at the center of this diagram, connected to individuals and institutions with a dashed line, showing their ability to move more easily within these connections to make new connections directly and are comparatively less bound by institutional processes than those connected with solid lines. In contrast, while this network represents the connections around artists labelled/with IDD, they are still on the edge of this network, bound by the connections that others can provide for them to connect to curators and education staff at art museums and galleries.
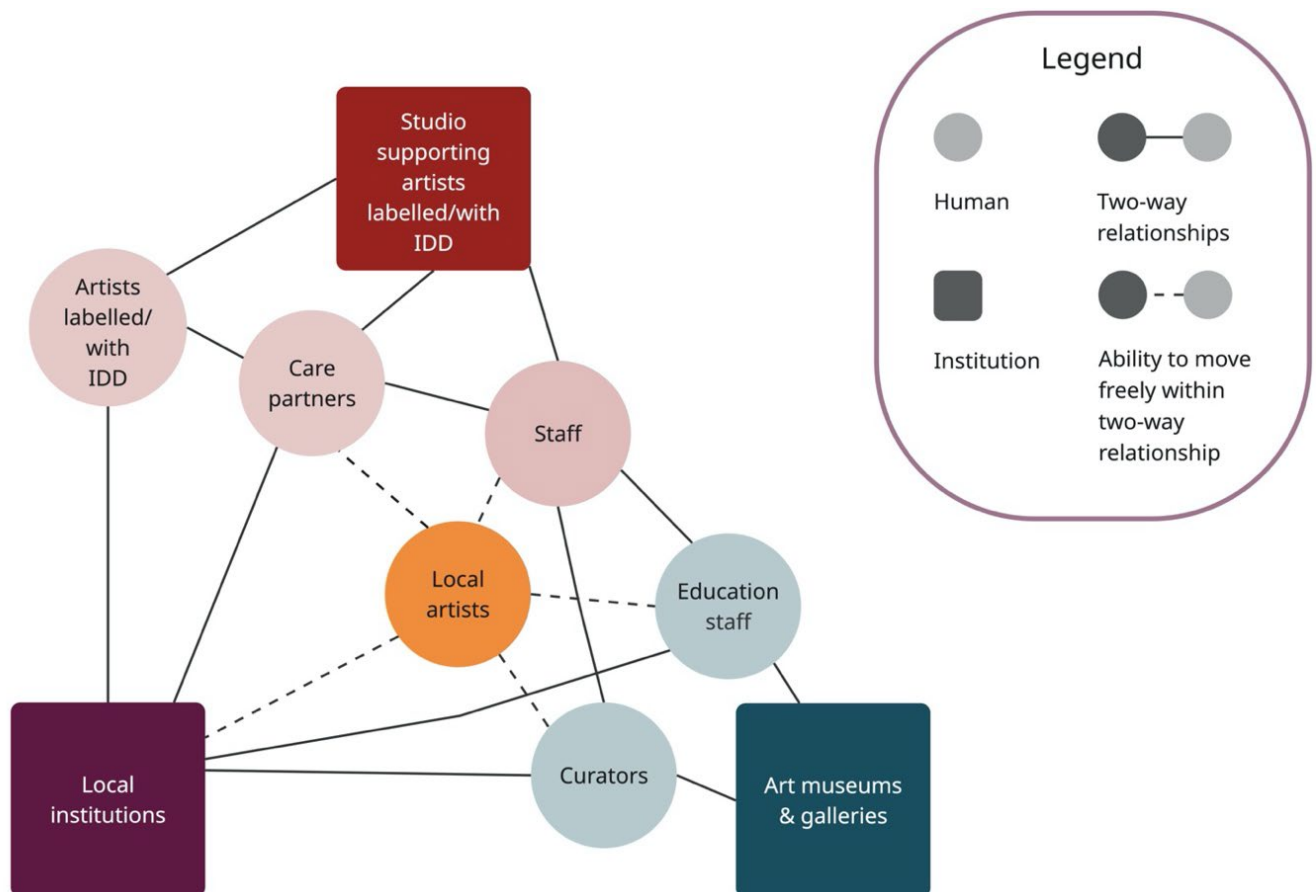


Figure 17. Network of connections surrounding artists labelled/with IDD

If positive and affirming representation for artists labelled/with IDD is going to be acknowledged more readily and increase in mainstream arts institutions, curators have a role to play. They must first recognize the gap in representation, which can be supported by data from their collections or previous exhibitions. Actions for improvement in this area might include tracking and benchmarks for representation as a starting point.

Disability is considered only to the point of disruption in some institutions, meaning that only those artists with disabilities who are easily able to fit into normative arts institutions are invited to exhibit. Some museums and galleries are not at the point to consider tracking and increasing representation for artists labelled/with IDD, while they are beginning to consider tracking representation for artists who are women, and artists who are racialized and Indigenous.

To mitigate the biases discussed above, curators might start to acknowledge and recognize how their own biases play out. They might also start to form connections to community organizations that support artists labelled/with IDD to challenge any unconscious misconceptions and get to know artists as talented, deeply collaborative and capable individuals.

In working directly with artists labelled/with IDD, curators will likely have to challenge some of the capitalist ways of working and ableist ideas unconsciously accepted. Namely, the desire for efficiency, and normative verbal and written expression. Many artists labelled/with IDD may have normative verbal capabilities, while others may be non-verbal or anywhere in between. Learning about and experimenting with different modes of communication will be important for bridging cultural and communication differences between curators who are non-disabled and artists labelled/with IDD.

Challenging biases entails interrogating the binary opposition that positions the medical model for complete rejection and the social model for uncritical embrace in its present-day usage, while instead integrating ideas from both models. To be successful in achieving affirming representation for artists labelled/with IDD, nuance must be present around ideas of autonomy and independence. Some artists labelled/with IDD may require as part of accommodations, having a family member and/or care partner working with them in a collaborative way. Curators might start to see how this aligns with how many artists already in the canon have worked collaboratively with others to complete their works.

## Do artists labelled/with IDD want to have their works exhibited in mainstream art galleries and participate in that process?

During workshops with artists labelled/with IDD, two artists expressed a desire to have an exhibition of their works in the future. However, in both cases, the venue for that future exhibition was not an art gallery, but alternative venues: a church and an arena. These were venues that were meaningful to the identity and interests of those artists. In addition, during the activity where artists experimented with the roles of artist and curator and how collaboration might take place, one artist expressed they wanted to be the artist, while another seemed very engaged and keen on curatorial activities, including a preliminary co-designed concept for a future exhibition of their work. That being said, during this project, only one gallery was visited, and we worked with a small group of artists, so it is possible that if more galleries were visited and other artists were included, that the findings for this question might change. Including artists labelled/with IDD already familiar with curatorial processes might also prove fruitful in getting a more fulsome picture and to contrast with the experience of artists who have not had the opportunity in the past to participate in exhibition making processes. In sum, further data is required to explore this research question in more depth.

## What are affirming ways in which to engage with and present the works of artists labelled/with IDD?

There were some findings towards affirming ways of presenting the works of artists labelled/with IDD throughout the project. Working with established networks can be a start but as discussed above, one should be mindful of power dynamics and hierarchies that might emerge and ensure equitable participation of artists. While maintaining necessary accessibility supports for artists, more leadership and decision-making should be handed over to artists. This means making room for how artists see themselves and inviting artists to make decisions about how to exhibit their works and throughout the course of the curatorial process, even if they stray from traditional curatorial practices. However, as preliminarily explored in this project, this needs to be done in an incremental and supportive way, as many individuals labelled/with IDD are not given opportunities to make even the smallest decisions in their daily lives.

"You're really wanting the artist that you're working with to feel as though their exhibition represents what they're wanting to share with the world."

Curator 1

# Chapter Five:
## Frameworks

# House for Art Diagram

The house for art comes from an exchange with one of the artists, described in the "Cultural Communication" subtheme. During a workshop, Artist 1 and I were discussing an image of an art gallery, and they interpreted it as a house, so I brought those things together to form a "house for art." Throughout the analysis portion of the research, I thought about how I could incorporate this idea into a framework for curators to reflect on collaborating with artists labelled/with IDD to further inclusive and affirming representation. The house for art has three main parts: a door, a curator, and an exhibition. Each component is described below, along with reflection questions for curators.
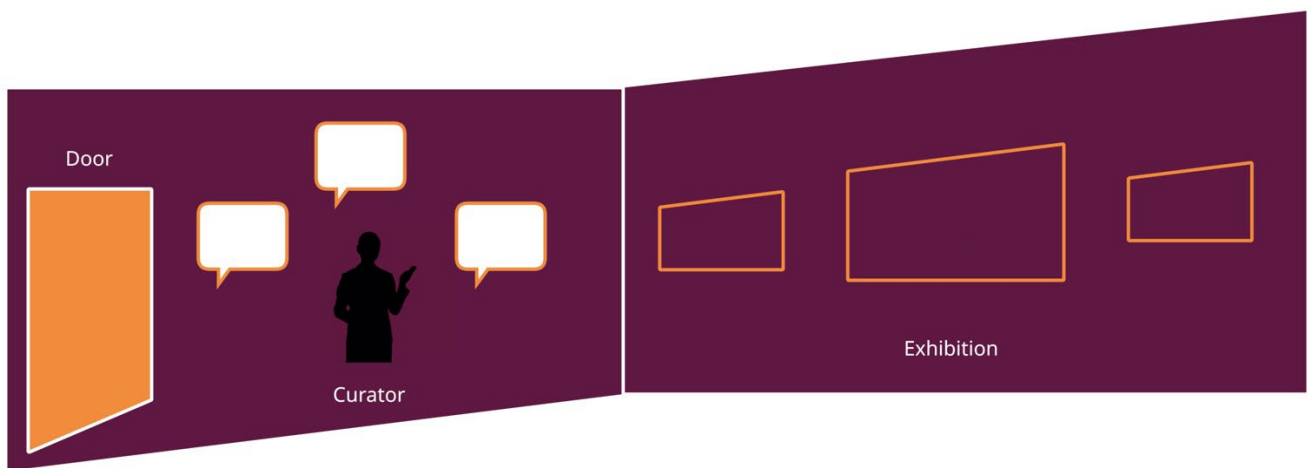


Figure 18. House for Art

Door – The door represents a decision point. Questions related to the door explore steps for getting artists labelled/with IDD "in the door" of an art gallery, including whether they wish to have an exhibition in that setting or elsewhere.

- How have you developed a relationship with the artist in a slow and mindful way to understand their professional desires and goals?
- How might the venue selected for exhibition connect to a meaningful part of the artist's identity? Does the artist have a particular venue in mind?
- To what extent is the artist familiar with the curatorial process? What training and support might be needed for them to participate in this process?

Curators – The curator represents the role that they play in furthering or hindering inclusive representation of artists labelled/with IDD in mainstream art galleries.

- In what ways have you acknowledged the gaps in representation for disabled artists and in particular, artists labelled/with IDD at your institution and in your practice?

- How have you critically examined the role that biases play in excluding artists labelled/with IDD from being represented at your institution and in your practice?

- How have you explored, celebrated and practiced multiple modes of communication to be able to collaborate with artists labelled/with IDD?

Exhibition – The exhibition questions cover the steps towards engaging with and presenting the works of artists labelled/with IDD in inclusive and affirming ways.

- What steps did you take to co-develop the exhibition theme and subject matter with the artist?

- How have you included care partners and other collaborators in a meaningful way?

- How have you ensured equitable participation of artist(s) to incorporate all voices, including those who may be less well-resourced in terms of network connections and advocacy?

- In what ways have you supported artists in taking ownership and making decisions about the exhibition in an incremental and gradual way?

# Implications of the Research

Drawing on the work of museum studies scholar Heather Hollins, I created a framework for art galleries to move towards more affirming representations for artists labelled/with IDD. Hollins' framework shown in Figure 16 is adapted from Majewski and Bunch's (1998) three tiers of access to the museum: access to physical spaces of the museum, access to intellectual and sensory aspects of the exhibition, and representation for people with disabilities with exhibition narratives.
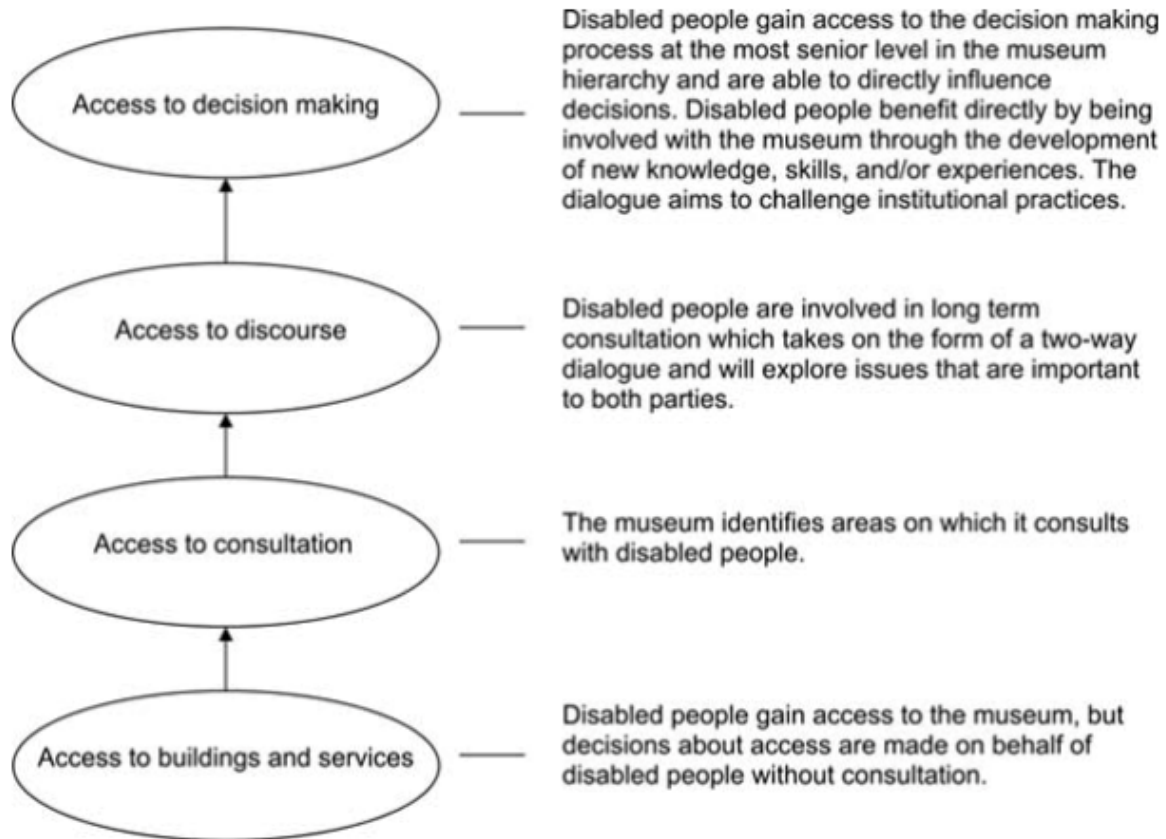
Figure 19. Hollins, Heather, *Towards emancipatory practice: evolving relationships between disabled people and the museum* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 235, fig. 16.3

Similar to both Hollins', and Majewski and Bunch's diagrams, my framework shown in Figure 17, starts with physical access but adds informational access at the baseline level. For museums and galleries to advance inclusion for artists labelled/with IDD, curators might start to form relationships with organizations that support disabled people and disabled artists. At the level of "Disability to the point of disruption", the inclusion of artists with disabilities in exhibitions for the most part, reinforces traditional curatorial practices; disabled artists' inclusion is contingent on them not disrupting those norms and practices. To advance to "Working within established networks," curators might start to challenge traditional exhibition, canonical and curatorial practices within the mainstream arts ecosystem. Curators might start to work with organizations and individuals that support artists labelled/with IDD, learning their culture, ways of communicating and incorporating their art into standard (not just communal) exhibition spaces. At this stage, studios supporting artists labelled/with IDD might help artists form

connections to curators and arts institutions and mentor them in those connections. To get to the fourth level, "Leadership of artists," curators might challenge hierarchies present within established networks and work to understand and challenge those power dynamics. At this stage, studios and curators working with artists labelled/with IDD support artists in decision making more and more. Consideration of what it might look like to collaborate with artists labelled/with IDD outside of the network of a studio might be considered if sufficient relationship building has happened to the point that trust, reciprocity, and accessibility is present.

Leadership of artists

Transitional period

Working within established networks

Transitional period

Disability to the point of disruption

Transitional period

Physical and informational accessibility

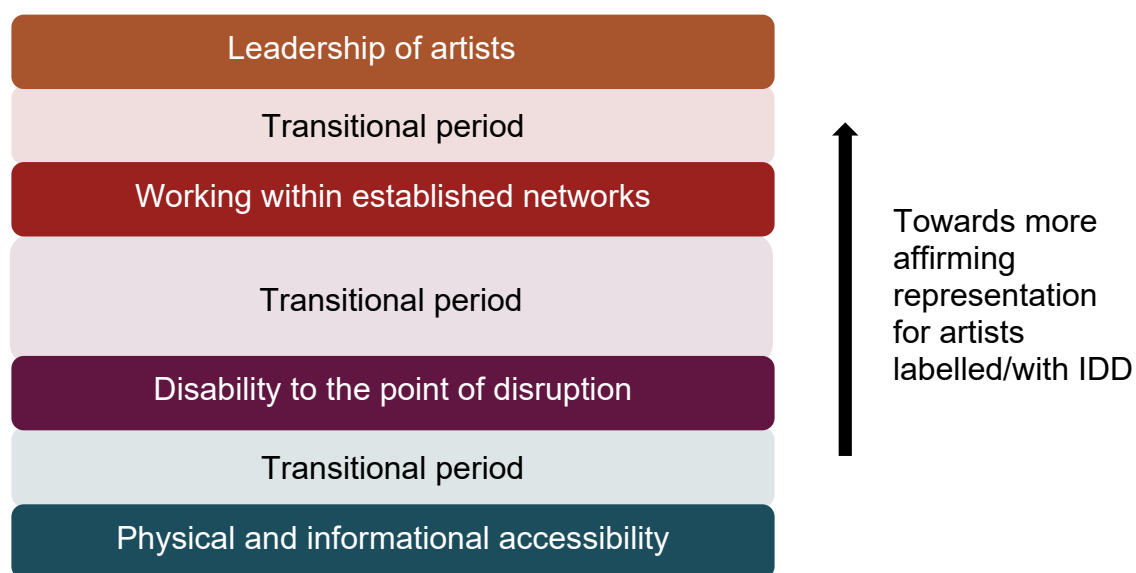Towards more affirming representation for artists labelled/with IDD

Figure 20. Towards more affirming representation for artists labelled/with IDD in art galleries

Figure 21. Artist 2, *Cruise ship*, Acrylic on canvas

# Chapter Six:
Lessons and Looking to the Future

# Limitations of the Current Project

There were limitations to the current research project that are described in detail below.

## Sample Limitations

A small sample size was a concern in the present study. With only 4 artists participating in workshops and 3 curators interviewed, the sample size was quite small. This presented challenges for data saturation and limits the generalizability of the research. Further, there were many weeks where artists could not attend sessions due to unforeseen circumstances, so for some workshops, only 2 or 3 artists were able to contribute to the research during the scheduled session. Since the goal of the project was to bridge connections between curators and artists labelled/with IDD, the intention was for artists to work consistently with a curator for a maximum of 6 sessions and a minimum of 3 sessions. While I planned for 3 sessions with the curator at the local gallery we visited, due to unforeseen circumstances, there ended up being only one session with a curator. This limited the data collected with regard to collaboration between curators and artists labelled/with IDD.

## Recruitment

Recruitment of the artists took place through one studio that supports artists labelled/with IDD. The studio had the ability to reject participation in the project, without any input or contact with artists to verify if they would have liked to take part. Further, since all artists came from the same studio, there was no opportunity to assess how variances in studios' processes might impede or progress inclusion for artists labelled/with IDD.

## Data Collection

Since some of the artists I was potentially going to recruit were non-verbal or less verbal, video recording was going to be an important element for ensuring communication cues were not missed. These recordings would have been used to note both verbal and non-verbal communication in interview transcripts. However, the studio did not give me permission to video record but was comfortable with audio recording.

Video recording would have added another layer of being able to understand artists and should be considered for future projects.

Automatic transcription for artists was significantly worse than for curators, so there was a large amount of time spent on transcribing each session. The transcript was not only inaccurate but also left out voices and non-speech sounds that could clearly be heard in the recording. Voices were changed and erased. For example, in one instance, an artist who sometimes stutters answered, "I went to [redacted] on the weekend" to the question of, "what were you up to this weekend" and because of the stutter, this was transcribed as "Thank you. Going to respect him for." This transcription not only changes the words, but also the meaning and intention of what is being said. In addition, non-speech sounds are also erased. Non-speech sounds, especially within the community of people labelled/with IDD, can be a very important aspect of communication, indicating, for example, someone might need more time to respond, or they have not understood the question and need collaborative rewording. The ums and uhs are important pauses that might mean something different depending on the intonation, length, etc. of the sound; the transcript also erased those.

# Support Persons in Sessions

Part of the accessibility of the research process was inviting parents and/or care partners selected by artists to take part in a manner that supported the artists. In the end, none of the artists had care partners present, however, the studio I worked with offered staff and volunteers who were familiar with each of the artists' ways of communicating to be present for sessions to assist with bridging communication gaps. However, since the studio staff was small and in the midst of several other large-scale projects and competing priorities, there were two sessions where staff were not able to be present.

# Timing of the Sessions

The research timeline was limited, and while there were 6 sessions with artists, there was a significant amount of time needed to ensure artists understood the prompts and that the research activities were explained using different modes of communication. Therefore, the amount of time spent in each session was slightly longer than expected

by 30 minutes, making each session approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes. While this was longer than the initial timing of sessions, from a logistics perspective with the studio, this was the length of the artists' morning class.

Since some artists were not able to attend all sessions due to unforeseen circumstances, artists either completed worksheets during the week in between sessions when I was not present, or they completed it during the next session with me. Although not ideal, I would explain the activity to studio staff to relay to artists and in one case, sent a video explaining the activity. This caused a delay to other research activities taking place. At the same time, I was mindful to make room for these disruptions while also balancing the research delivery timelines set by the university.

In addition, more time would have been desired to get to know artists in a slower manner, to ensure trust before launching into the research process. This would have also allowed me to familiarize myself with each of the artists' ways of communicating and better understand them. However, the time constraints in this case did not allow for a longer timeline for the present study.

# Graphics for Greater Understanding

While graphics were used in the consent form and activities, including questions being asked of artists, dedicated research towards designing graphics that can represent abstract concepts and multi-step processes was desired throughout the project.

# Designing the Report

While part of the last session was devoted to designing the report with artists, since timing was limited and only 2 artists were in attendance, it was not as collaboratively designed as would be ideal. Some of the artists' desires for the report were noted throughout the workshops and those were reflected in the design of the report. In addition, colours that were significant throughout the course of the research were included in the design. However, a more involved collaborative process for designing the report was desired but again, would have necessitated a longer timeline for the study.

# Researcher Identity

While I have connections through prior volunteer experience to studios that support artists labelled/with IDD, I am not a person labelled/with IDD. Due to this, the observations and interpretations are made through lenses that are not unique to a person labelled/with IDD, and thus may be limited in applicability for this population. To mitigate any potential biases in future researcher, including artists labelled/with IDD in all stages of the research process and in the core research team, would be essential for future research.

# Conclusions

This research made visible the pathways for future research in the domain of affirming representation for artists labelled/with IDD in art galleries in Canada. To explore this topic area comprehensively, a more involved and longer research timeline is necessary. This would facilitate involving artists labelled/with IDD in each stage of the research process, inviting them to become true co-researchers and co-designers. A more involved co-design process might look like having an artist labelled/with IDD or a group of artists labelled/with IDD inform each stage of the project design, from the consent process through to the analysis stage and checking data.

Another potential area of future research that might facilitate a deeper co-design process is working collaboratively with curators over an extended period. This might involve working with a group in an art gallery environment to gain a more in-depth understanding of current barriers and the reasons behind them. In addition, working with a curator, or curators and artists over an extended period, going through an actual curatorial process, would potentially allow for more recommendations to be brought forward towards a collaborative and inclusive framework.

While surveys of museum collections pertaining to disability representation exist in the UK, I am not aware of similar surveys in Canada. A large survey of art gallery collections and/or past exhibitions for institutions without collections would also be necessary to fully assess the current state of lack of representation for artists labelled/with IDD.

Working within the established networks of studios that support artists labelled/with IDD offers supportive frameworks to ensure accessibility for artists. However, as discussed in this report, there are concerns about power structures, exclusion and hierarchies potentially being reinforced. More research is needed into this area which might include an exploration of what collaboration with artists labelled/with IDD outside of studio structures looks like. This might include investigating if such collaboration currently exists and how to facilitate it in a way that upholds supportive structures while questioning power hierarchies.

Going through this research process has invited me to start to consider the current state of representation in art galleries in Canada for artists labelled/with IDD. While there were limitations to the current study, there are also useful considerations both for curators working in institutions and for studios that support artists labelled/with IDD to work together to recognize the gaps in representation and to work towards more affirming representation for artists labelled/with IDD. My hope is that this research gains momentum and affirming representation becomes a reality for more artists labelled/with IDD.

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# Appendices

# Appendix A: Description of Workshops

## Session 1 to 3: Getting to Know Each Other

### Objective

For researchers to get to know the participating artists in an organic way.

### Prior to Sessions 1 to 3

I reviewed key engagement strategies, like pausing frequently, checking understanding and teach back questions. In addition, prior to session 2, I discussed with staff how to meet the needs of and engage with specific artists that I observed were less verbal during the first session.

### Description of Sessions 1 to 3

Length of sessions: increasing amounts of time per session – 30 mins, 45 mins, 1 hour. During session 1, I met three of the participants artists for the first time and we went on a mini tour of the studio, including seeing some of their artworks exhibited in the hallway. During the latter part of the session, I observed the artists' regular studio class using the following questions and topics, to prompt the observation of particular phenomena (Anderson and Bigby 2021):

- Interest in artmaking
- Level and kind of support given
- Interactions between staff and artists
- Support with daily functions from staff?
- Do artists choose what they want to make?
- Are artists able to develop own style? How is this encouraged or discouraged?
- Behavioural re-directions?
- How do artists interact with each other?
- How do they feel around staff?
- Development of identity as an artist – do they consider themselves artists?

- Do they get paid for their work?

- Do they feel connected to local community?

During session 2, a fourth artist joined the research group. A member of staff joined the session to reframe questions and relate back to concrete experiences of the artists. We continued to get to know each other by going on a tour of another studio space where some of the artists' works were exhibited. I asked the artists questions verbally and had worksheets with the same questions, to find out more about their favourite mediums, how they make their art, prior experience and interest in having an exhibition of their art in the future. I used graphics and images to facilitate understanding of the questions. During the latter part of the session, I introduced a maquette of an imaginary gallery space and went over some key concepts, like what an exhibition is and the role of the curator. I invited the artists to play with the model, changing the colour of the walls and rearranging the artworks to demonstrate different design choices for exhibitions.
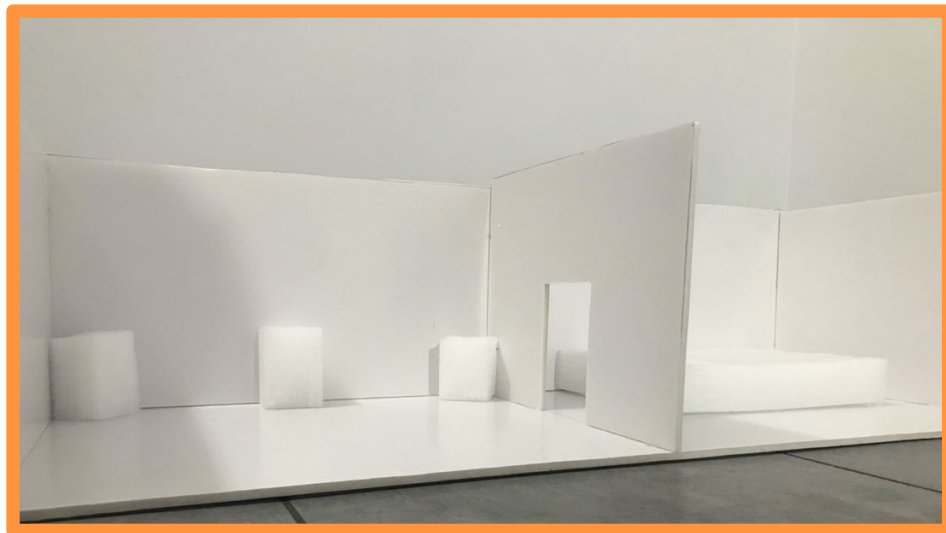


Figure 22. Maquette of imaginary gallery space used during study

During session 3, since there was a more significant amount of time since the last session, I re-introduced myself to the group. I expanded on the discussion about having an exhibition of their work in the future and invited artists who had not previously completed the worksheet to do so during this session. Artists were given worksheets to

complete about their needs and desires for the project. The worksheet was adapted from Jade French's *Inclusive Curating in Contemporary Art: A Practical Guide*. I used a series of exercises that French calls one-page profiles (2020, 38-39), which were designed to help individuals in the group learn about each other as individuals and how best to work together. Her worksheet included four parts: how best to work with me, my picture, during this project, it's important to me that and what people about me. My adaptation was based on the specific context for my project and feedback from staff on how prompts should be framed for the group. Examples of completed one pagers/needs worksheets are included in Appendix C. I also introduced the activity for the next week, the visit to the local gallery, with images of the curator we would meet, and key spaces and exhibitions we would see.

## Session 4: Site Visit to Local Gallery

## Objectives

For the collective to think about the stories they connect with in the gallery and whose stories might be missing. The purpose of the site visit will serve as "research" for their imaginary exhibition concept.

## Prior to Session 4

I relied on French's guide in planning the site visit to a local gallery. On page 27 of *Inclusive Curating in Contemporary Art: A Practical Guide* (2020), French includes a checklist to help facilitate the planning of a research visit. I adapted this list to suit the particulars of the visit to the local gallery and met with staff at the gallery and studio twice to discuss each item on the list. A copy of my adapted checklist is in Appendix B. This discussion also ensured that the visit considered the needs of the specific artists involved. Using the information from the adapted checklist and in collaboration with the curator from the local gallery, I created an access guide for the visit using images and information supplied by the local gallery's access guide and in meetings with the curator that was presented to artists during workshop 3.

Prior to the museum visit, I also collaborated with the curator on the script for the tour. Two months prior, both of us attended training at the studio and had the basics of framing programming for the group. I offered additional advice based on working directly

with the artists for three weeks and consulting with staff. My advice for the tour script was for it to be written in plain language and for content to relate to prior experiences the artists had. In addition, I advised that for any questions posed for them to be about concrete observable things in the gallery. Balancing the needs of the artists, I also ensured that the content related back to the goals of the research, including discussing exhibition themes and design choices.

## Description of Session 4

Length of session: 1 hour and 30 minutes.

During session 4, three artists were accompanied by a staff member and volunteer to the local gallery. I met the group at the gallery and introduced them to the curator. We briefly discussed how the curator creates stories in an exhibition through different things like colours, fonts, choice of artworks, themes. The curator led a tour and discussion questions in two key gallery spaces and a discussion of a past exhibition using slides. After each gallery, we prompted slow looking, encouraging artists to make note of artworks that grabbed their attention and why. We also frequently prompted artists to make observations, ask questions and interpret the works in their own words. Throughout the visit, artists were invited to either take photos using iPads or to sketch artworks. Prompts for sketching included noting which artworks were their favourite, which reminded them of something from their lives, and taking note of elements that could serve as inspiration for their imaginary exhibition concept.

# Session 5: Curatorial Dreaming

## Objective

For the collective to explore the curatorial process by working together to come up with a narrative that connects two of their artworks for an imagined exhibition.

## Description of Session 5

Length of session: 1 hour and 30 minutes.

All four artists were present for session 5. We started with a video of Michelle Bennie, a curator and artist labelled/with Down Syndrome from the National Access Arts Centre. In the video, Michelle outlines her spontaneous and creative curatorial process. I

paused the video at key points to ask artists what Michelle was doing or explaining in that particular moment. We used the video to discuss the idea that someone can be both a curator and an artist. Following the video, I went over two key steps of the curatorial process. The first step was research and planning. We discussed two artworks I brought from home: a quilted jacket and a collaged zine. Using these examples, we discussed the different ways in which we could bring these works into conversation, including talking about how they were made and themes that tied the two works together. The second step was discussing how to bring works together in conversation. We looked at three examples of online exhibitions, including examples that tied to the specific interests and experiences the artists had expressed in previous week. I distributed worksheets to the artists and walked them through the curatorial dreaming exercise. We used roleplay to understand the role of the curator and artist in exhibition-making. Step one and two was research: the person playing the artist selected a work to have in an imaginary exhibition, and the person playing the curator interviewed them and asked questions like, "what is it called and why?" and "what is it about?" Then, they switched roles and repeated the research step. The third and final step was to bring the two works together under a title, theme, and a poem or story about the two works. To assist artists with pairing works together, I drafted a one pager with suggestions of different ways to bring works together in conversation, such as colour, shape, textures, materials, subject, and theme. An example of an exhibition by Artist 3 and 4 is included in Appendix E.

# Session 6: Wrap-up Discussion

## Objective

Close our activities with a wrap-up discussion, talking about the past weeks of collaboration, what the relationship will look like moving forward after this project and what they might want to see for output on the project, other than the MRP report.

## Description of Session 6

Length of session: 1 hour and 30 minutes.

During session 6, two artists were absent, so only two artists participated. A staff member also joined us for this session. We reviewed images and video from the past

five weeks of workshop sessions to prompt comments from artists. I had three main questions for the first part of the session, which were: "what did you like about working together and if we did the project again, what would you change or want to do differently and how can museums and galleries make it easier to get your art on their walls?" For the next part of the session, we focused on the report. I presented some examples of how the report could look and asked the artists what they liked and didn't like about how the artworks were presented. During this part of the session, I also asked artists to fill out a worksheet that included all of the artworks I had previously taken images of and asked for their permission to included individual works in the report. The artists who were away were given the worksheets to complete another day. During the last part of the session, I invited artists to use the maquette and images of their artworks and interpretation of their imagined exhibition from session 5 and experiment with arranging them in the space. I concluded by thanking the artists and handing out cards selected with them in mind.

# Appendix B: Gallery Visit Checklist

The following checklist was adapted from Jade *French's Inclusive Curating in Contemporary Art: A Practical Guide* (2020, 7). It was used in discussion with studio staff and the gallery curator to plan our visit.

## Transportation
- ☐ Taxi drop off and pick up location
- ☐ Meeting location

## Health and Safety
- ☐ Evacuation route
- ☐ First aid
- ☐ Space for snack and to sit
- ☐ Water fountain
- ☐ Lighting
- ☐ Quiet space
- ☐ Plan for potentially upsetting or offensive material

## Physical Accessibility
- ☐ Distance between key points
- ☐ Any ongoing building renovations
- ☐ Flat and even surfaces into and throughout building
- ☐ Ramps for steps and raised areas
- ☐ Elevator
- ☐ Accessible washrooms
- ☐ Clear signage
- ☐ Seating available during tour and activities

## Content Accessibility
- ☐ Review gallery's accessibility guide
- ☐ Large print activity handouts
- ☐ Plain language explanations on tour
- ☐ Visual aids to support explanations
- ☐ Audio guides available
- ☐ Access table with fidget spinners, sunglasses
- ☐ Review accessibility of text panels and labels

## Content of Tour and Discussion
- ☐ Themes
- ☐ Artists in exhibition
- ☐ Exhibition design
- ☐ Curation as storytelling

# Appendix C: Needs Worksheets



Figure 23. Artist 2, Needs worksheet, Graphic on paper, 2025

What I need to do my best and participate fully

Time to thing about things

How I see myself as an artist...

What will help me feel like the project went well...
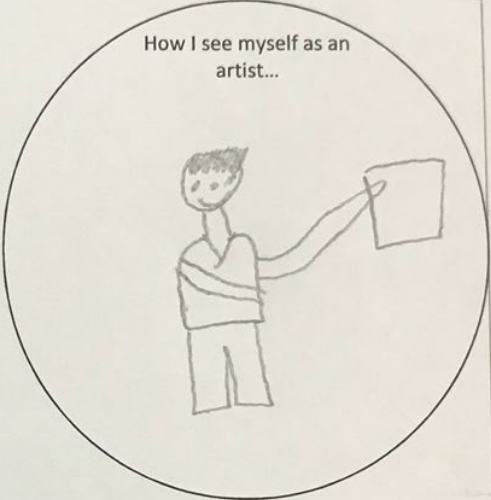
Phote of my Art

My favourite works of art...

IS Hockey

Worksheet adapted from French, Jade. *Inclusive Curating in Contemporary Art : A Practical Guide*. New edition. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2020.

Figure 24. Artist 3, Needs worksheet, Graphic on paper, 2025
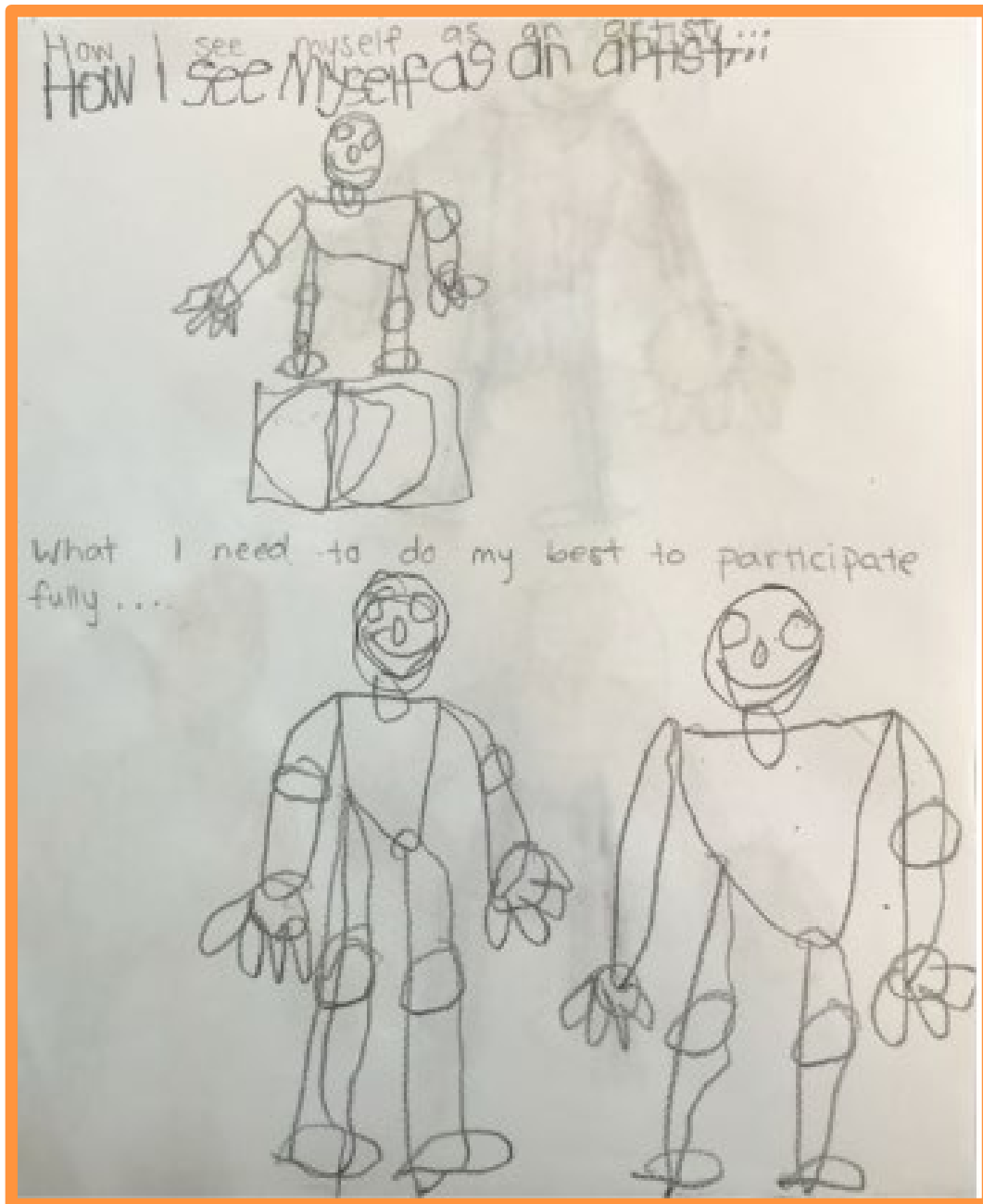
Figure 25. Artist 4, Needs worksheet, Graphic on paper, 2025

# Appendix D: Exhibition of Your Art



Figure 26. Artist 1, How would you feel having an exhibition?
Graphite on paper, 2025

# Appendix E: Curatorial Dreaming

## *Amail Cook | Animal Cooking*
Exhibition by: Artist 3 and 4



Figure 27. Artist 2, *Cooking class*, Acrylic and marker
on canvas
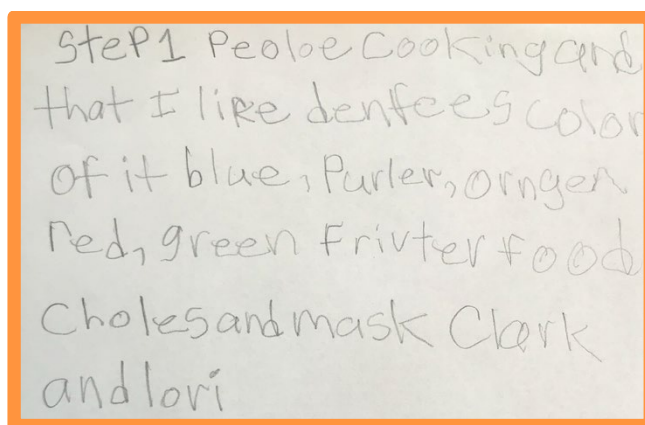


Figure 28. Artist 1, Interpretation of *Cooking class*,
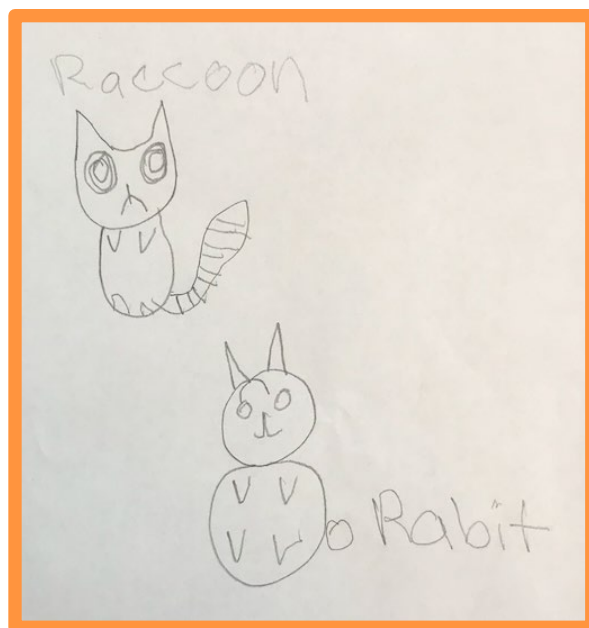Graphite on paper, 2025

Figure 29. Artist 4, *Animal Kingdom*, Marker and pastel on paper

Figure 30. Artist 3, Interpretation of *Animal Kingdom*,
Graphite on paper, 2025
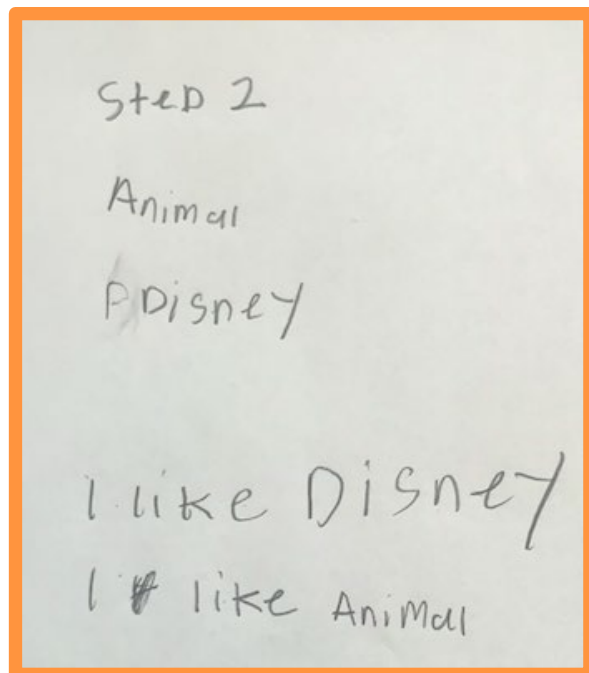


Figure 31. Artist 4, Story of *Animal Kingdom*,
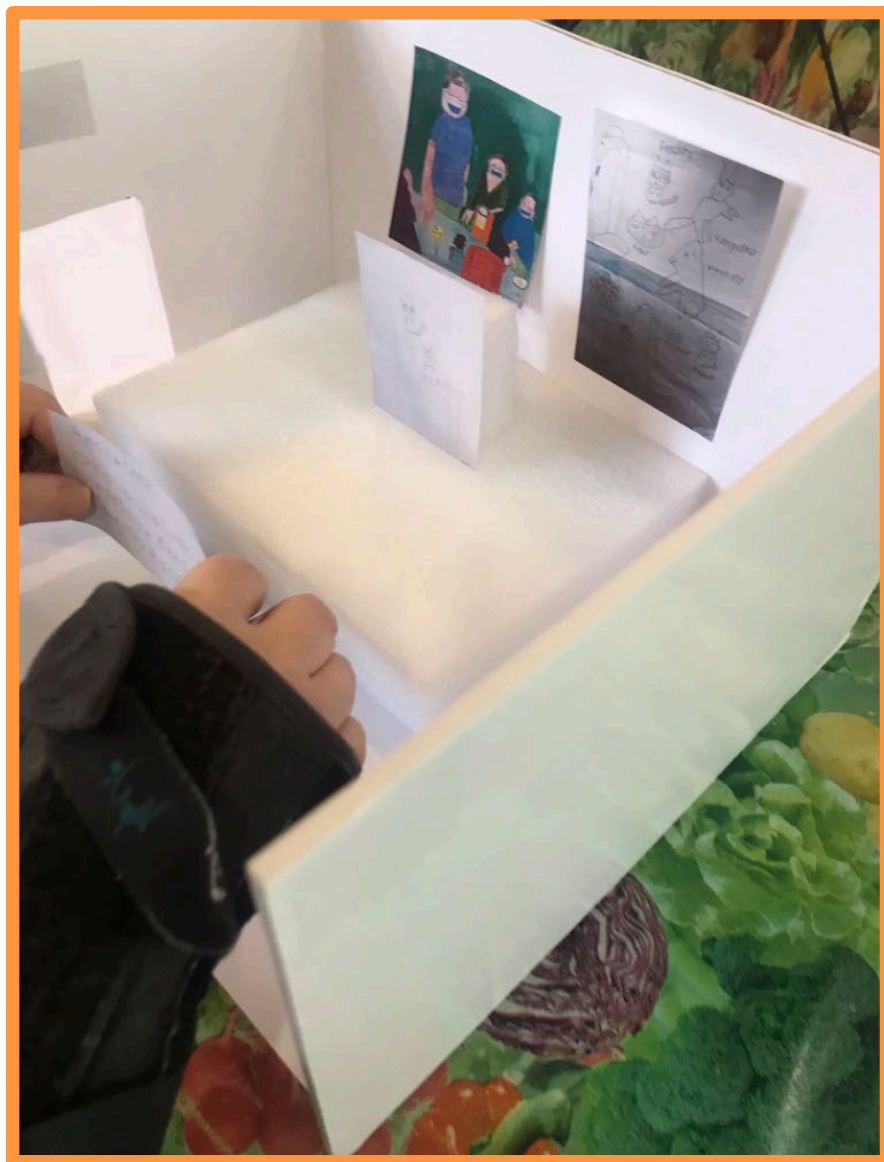Graphite on paper, 2025

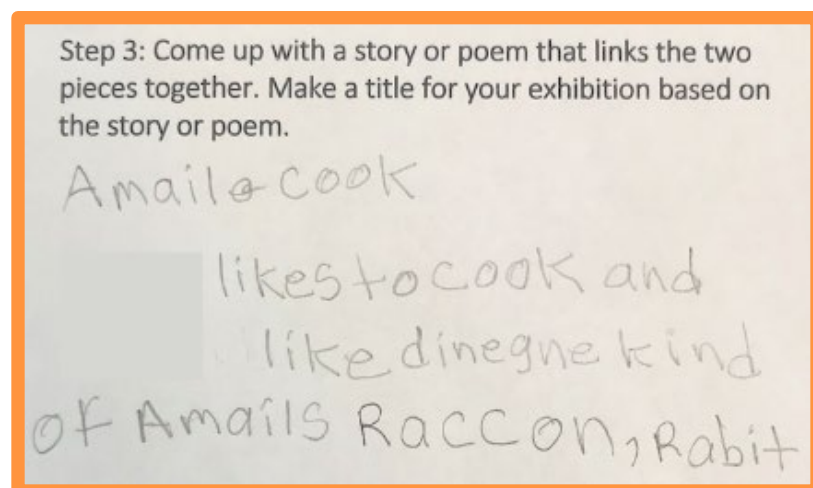Figure 32. Artist 3 arranging the works in *Amail Cook | Animal Cooking*, 2025

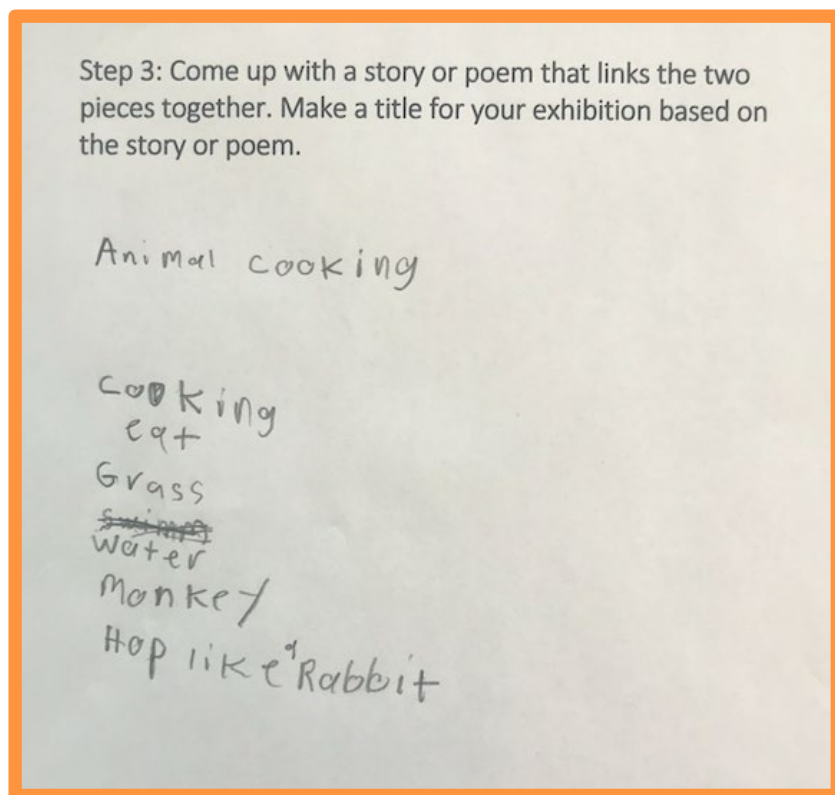Figure 33. Artist 3, Story of *Amail Cook | Animal Cooking*,
Graphite on paper, 2025



Figure 34. Artist 4, Story of *Amail Cook | Animal Cooking*,
Graphite on paper, 2025

# What can galleries do to make it easier to get your art on the walls?

getting to work to them
getting to no them

Artist 3

# A House for Art: Inclusive Representation for Artists Labelled/with IDD in Canadian Art Galleries