



Exploring the identities and experiences of autistic girls

Welcome to Our World: Exhibition Programme

Playing A/Part explores the identities and experiences of autistic girls through interdisciplinary research (Arts and Psychology) and creative practices: www.playingapartautisticgirls.org.

It is a collaboration between the Universities of Kent and Surrey and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. We have focussed on autism and gender as an important theme for new research because girls, women and marginalised genders are under-represented in studies of autism. Our participants are autistic adolescent girls (aged 11-16) in different educational settings (special schools, units, mainstream, selective). As participatory community research, we have autistic people engaged in all aspects of the project as researchers, practitioners, advisors, and professional artists.

In this exhibition, we feature some of the tools used in the project and selected artefacts produced by our participants. These materials emerged through three phases of the project:

1. Co-discovery at Limpsfield Grange School (a specialist school for autistic girls in Surrey which is unique in the UK and in Europe as a bespoke educational setting for this adolescent population).
2. Workshops in person in schools (Spring Term, 2020, prior to Covid lockdown)
3. Online workshops and zoom sessions in which the creative tools were adapted to an online platform, Prospero.

Content of Exhibition

MASKS

A range of masks are on display. The project explored masks and masking, a strategy autistic girls and women have reported and which has been well documented in research on autism and gender (social camouflaging). This is often a reactive and protective response, to be compliant with social expectations; to fit into a neuro-typical world, to hide a sense of difference. It can lead to internalising problems. It also means this population can be very observant, social actors, aware of the behaviour of others.

By playing with masks in a creative space, we develop a vocabulary and self-awareness of masking, performance and the roles we play in everyday life. The masks are hybrid; participants choose an animal and a fantasy or mythical creature as well as working with aspects of their own characteristics. Hence the masks blend aspects of the real and imagined. The activities enable the girls to feel agency in their performative acts; to make creative choices and to see the impact of this on audiences; so masking moves from being a reactive strategy to a pro-active act.

PUPPETRY

The exhibition features a reconstruction of the paper puppets used in our co-discovery workshops. The Limpsfield Grange participants gave these puppets some surprising personalities; one group made them into cats! Some of the puppets were re-discovered in the boarding house when the participants took us on a tour of their school. These puppets had been personalised and had developed their own relationships with the girls and with each other! Whilst these puppets worked well in some settings, in others they were problematic due to the noise of tearing and scrunching paper as well as the skeletal appearance. So, for the online resources, sock puppets and songs enabled us to explore choices for clothing, colours and music

DEN (sound installation)

The den became an important feature of the workshops and our exploration of creative space. We explored place and site (imagined and real) the qualities needed in terms of sound, light, time (night or day), temperature and then the contents (tools, objects, animals, food). There was recognition that anxiety associated with space and place is produced by the environment rather than the individual. This extended into our music workshops where the students designed sound installations for their personalised dens. The den in the exhibition features one of our sound installations

LABYRINTHS

The labyrinth emerged as one of our co-discoveries about autistic sociality and sensory processing. The labyrinth offers a processing and reflective space, individually and in a group. These are the special qualities we discovered:

- Structure: not a maze: single route, no failure or getting lost
- Place holders: personal space on the labyrinth for diary writing
- Opportunity to engage with process, giving time for noticing and recording thinking and feeling in relation to activities within the session
- Embodied activity using walking and movement in process of meaning making
- Can be used as a time out space when needed
- Can be used as a creative resource to generate ideas
- Aesthetic qualities contribute to focus and engagement: indoors or outdoors, immersive sound and light labyrinths, easy to create with cups, shoes, etc
- Cultural and creative history/contexts appropriate for 'serious play'

FILMS

There are two films featured in the exhibition:

1. **Labyrinths** by Sonia Boué, Sonia is a multiform artist and has worked with the project team at Limpsfield Grange School. This film was made during the first phase of the project and reflects the exploratory play-based encounters between the practitioners and participants. Sonia is also a writer on autism and art, and a leading consultant for neurodiversity in the arts.

I Feel Different: film animation, produced by the project team during lockdown, based on the research from the first phase of the workshops and interviews. It was one of nine research projects selected as part of the BBC's Culture in Quarantine "Animated Thinking" series (BBCiPlayer). The film explores the untold stories of autistic girls and women in their own words to provide an insight into the intensity and sensory reality of their experiences. Sound version is available on the project website