

Case study. *Why can't we do this IRL?:* FACT's Learning Team Duty of Care

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Some context

FACT is an art organisation located in Liverpool. We work at the intersection of Art, People and Technology through a programme of activities, exhibitions and learning projects. Our programme reflects on the impact of technology both in our everyday lives and as an industry.

FACT has always had a strong community/participatory focus through different Engagement, Communities and Learning Programmes. It is important to remember we are part of a city that is currently the third most deprived in England. These levels of deprivation have been exacerbated by austerity politics and the impact of cuts from central government. What does art mean in this context? What is our role as an art gallery within the city?

Why and what is FACT's Learning Duty of Care?

This case study presents the Learning team's experience producing collaborative work with artists and participants. It draws upon our project, *Why can't we do this IRL? (WCWDTIRL)* and the development of our proposal for a Duty of Care.

We worked together with,

- Helen Starr, an Afro Carib cultural activist, producer, curator and FACT's 2019 curator in residence
- Megan Broadmeadow is a visual artist that works with installation, video, VR and performance.
- A group of young people, mainly from Team Oasis in Dingle.

James Nilson, Community Leader from Team Oasis has been interviewed for this case study together with Megan, Helen and Carlos Marfil and Jenny Watts, members of the Learning team.

WCWDTIRL is a VR film exploring the consequences virtual world actions have in the real world. The artwork, created by Megan Broadmeadow and an intergenerational group of participants, was curated in collaboration with Helen Starr, as part of her FACT exhibition, *you feel me_*. It is based on the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2)* and a series of videos on YouTube showing different ways an avatar abuses a non-playable character in the game. People started questioning whether this should be celebrated, treated as a real crime, or viewed as just a game.

The Duty of Care, more than a set of guidelines or a best practices document, collects what we think are the basic principles when working in collaboration, based on what we learnt throughout the production of *WCWDTIRL*:

1. The recognition of participants as experts. The young people were expert gamers and had an understanding of video games and online culture. The group of adults researched the historical side of the characters.

=>The artist proposed a framework to convey strands of that knowledge through the art creation, but participants did not lead on the artistic vision.

James talks about this experience: "~~W~~ *What it was Megan's vision, she was very open with everyone's thoughts on where it should go... Megan was the director in the project and*

everyone else, the kids were the staff and you guys were there to put the pieces together. The director cannot put a film together on their own... . Megan just made the whole environment comfortable, for them to be themselves and have their own interpretation of the project”.

2. The importance of the aesthetic experience of the final artwork for the audience. Their project was not going to be presented as a participatory artwork but as contemporary visual art. Participants were aware that the artwork was going to be part of an exhibition at FACT, they visited the site, learned about the other artworks.

=>The artwork is concept driven and the final output is intended for exhibition purposes and criticised by values associated with aesthetic art experiences.

3. The ethical responsibility towards both the artwork and the work of the participants. Their work is part of an artwork that will be presented in different artistic contexts.

=>If we take art-historian Claire Bishop’s reflections on participatory social arts: *“By avoiding questions of artistic criteria, the community arts movement unwittingly perpetuated the impression that it was full of good intentions and compassion, but ultimately not talented enough to be of broader interest”*, (Bishop, 2012). We brought WCWDTIRL to the core of the gallery and exhibitions’ programme, asking ourselves what ethics and safeguarding do we need in place to balance the power dynamics between the artist’s vision and participants’ needs?

The Duty of Care is a work in progress, infiltrating the day to day work of the organisation. It is part of the artist’s and curator’s contracts and is shared across teams, even those who do not work with participants.

Carlos Marfil from the Learning team explains a key discussion in his opinion around the principles: *“The preservation of the sacred space the participant holds during the artistic engagement, through conversation with the artists, reducing institutional noise that may interfere, setting clear standards for best practice, and imbuing the projects and their facilitation of clear political subtexts that provide the participants with the tools to become actors of change in their communities, once the project finishes”.*

The Duty of Care is based on our own discussions to reduce our replication of oppressive institutional behaviours. It is not just a document that we distribute to our collaborators or a contract that we sign, it is a shared approach towards our mutual responsibility as a group of people working together to produce the best artwork, while providing the best care to create the best learning experience.

Our journey towards the Duty of Care

In 2019, Helen Starr, joined FACT’s team from July 2019 to February 2020. She challenged our perception of ourselves, both institutionally and as agents in the community, through our language (verbal and non verbal) and our behaviours. Time constraints and capacity are intrinsic to the arts, sticking to production timelines related to exhibitions. She introduced us to “liming”, a get together with loose informal time constraints, the Trinidadian’s understanding of time. It “gave permission” to value the time we put into thinking about participants and our “duty of care” towards them.

WCWDTIRL is the result of our shared interest in how we understand the dominant systems of control. It questions the responsibility of mass media (Youtube and social media) and the video game industry in perpetuating those systems.

As Helen puts it: *“Virtual, AI and digital systems are no longer simply modelling physical reality. They are shaping the way we behave and act with or without our knowledge and consent. They are transferring behaviours from a predatory, colonial past into the present and the future. They are reshaping us as humans. Do we allow it? Do we find another path?”*

Megan took the brief to the next level, presenting the human experience of going through those systems, presenting the non playable characters and machines as sentient beings that also want to tell their own story: the pain of the Suffragette being killed every time anyone watches the youtube videos or the crocodile forced to be a murderer.

As Jenny from the Learning team explains: *“The brief for the artist highlighted that the outcome of their work with participants would be shown within the gallery alongside other artists in the show. This in itself as a start off point was putting a learning project within an environment of high class art and wasn't separating the outcome from other pieces. This is something which the artist, the learning team, the participants and the audience were all aware of. Usually the process of a socially engaged artwork becomes the focus and the outcome just the added bonus”.*

Experiencing the Duty of Care

We will now share perspectives on the Duty of Care in this project through reflections on specific examples. These examples show where and when they noticed care being given and how this felt different to community art and SEA practice.

1. Helen Starr, Curator. Talking about the artwork launch:

As curator she showed her care for the project and everyone involved, by placing it prominently in the centre of FACT's main ground floor gallery, a decision informed by her analysis of how communities are marginalised by art institutions. She experienced the work for the first time alongside the participants and their family and friends at its launch.

For Helen, the most important care was supporting the young people to bring as many of their ways of being on the internet and the streets, to the art: *“This work, scored by Liverpool Grime artist Blue Saint - with the faces, bodies, ideas and most importantly the voices of the participants brought the street back into the art.”*

Helen also reminds us that the best manifestation of the Duty of Care is the artwork itself: *“As a curator being sited in Liverpool where Personhood history had intersected across gender and race allowed for a project around one of the most important current philosophical debates. Namely, the personhood of sentient AI. And what should be our Duty of Care towards a creature of such difference. If, as we claim, we are committed to not repeating the mistakes of past history.”*

2. James Nilson, Team Oasis. Talking about the visit to FACT:

For James there was a key moment in the project when the young people visited FACT for a tour of the exhibition, to see the installation that their VR film would be shown in.

James told us. *"Being able to bring the kids into FACT was great and you gave us a really nice personal touch to the project, we got to know you really well, you showed us behind the scenes and we got the first look where the thing would be, I think that made the kids feel really respected, their opinions, their time, which pushed them further to get more involved in the project."*

We showed them the exhibition that their work was going to be part of, to make the threshold they were crossing into the creative space of Megan's practice and the curatorial space of the exhibition, more tangible and accessible.

3. Megan Broadmeadow, Artist. Talking about the film shoot:

In the final film, there is a scene in which a 19th century's courtroom slowly spins and becomes the internet. This oppressive physical space, in which bodies are scrutinised and words parsed, is transformed into a place where the participants could perform, using the language of gesture, dance and online emojis they are experts in.

Megan identified the 360 film shoot for this scene as the moment that carried the most risk and needed the most care, *"For the film shoot time was tight and it was tense."* She acknowledged that the main risk was for participants: *"If we don't understand what their capabilities are."*

In the early stages of the project, Megan hung out with the young people, played and talked about RDR2, and discussed the theme: *"Where legality arises, who judges others, who gets to decide, who gets to decide in the online space because it's kind of a lawless space."* Megan spent time workshopping and devising performances for VR with the group, *"We tried to test things out in a low key manner, when it came to the filming we'd already tried things out a few times already."* It was vital for Megan to have this time to build creative relationships, but equally vital that she had license to create virtual spaces for performance based on her vision.

"I can create a film based on the people I know, I normally work with friends, I need to know them, it helps if I can have their voice in my head then I can build a space for them to inhabit."

In the middle of the film shoot, we did not have time to fall back on the kind of open ended dialogue that characterises so much community arts practice. We had to hold onto the shared trust and understanding that had been built up and focus on the direction Megan gave us.

"At the beginning I was stepping back, getting to know people and getting a feel for what people's skills were & what they would be able to do & then building it up for me to feel comfortable to take over more and bring more of my ideas as there are things that they can't feed into because they don't have that experience... There are times when you're trying to get their expression and their viewpoints, but there is also time when they need guidance."

Within the project the young people moved from the role of learner, engaging in activities designed entirely for their personal development, to collaborator, performing to make the best artwork possible. With this way of working, we lose the safety and comfort of the

student/educator dynamic. The more we removed the scaffold of mediation, the more directly the young people could encounter the difference of the space the artist created for them. When doing this the power dynamics between the young people and the artist becomes more ambiguous. During this film shoot, our duty of care was to feel the tension between artistic ambition and care for participants, then to make decisions that take both those needs into account.

Conclusions

Taking the time as a team to design The Duty of Care has put our understanding of collaborative processes into some much needed perspective.

We would like to finish this case study with Helen's own words: *"In my opinion, this divide within Art Institutions stems from colonial and paternalistic impulses; the two halves of a problematic coin:*

- *The role of "high quality arts" is to support the art institution as space of privileged seclusion - The Ivory Tower*
- *The role of "community arts" is to allow a bit of bleed from The Ivory Tower while maintaining the separation from the real world, lived experiences of the common people - The Moat"*

This project aimed to move past the moat, because we brought the participants, and their intersectional experience of injustice online and IRL, through the moat, into the most privileged space that FACT has, it's main gallery.

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