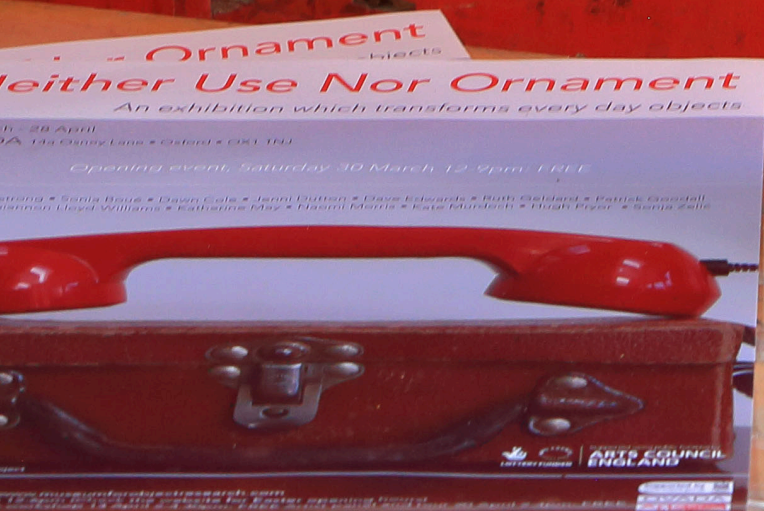


Neither Use Nor Ornament 1

*An Evaluation Document for the Arts
& for the Inclusion of Autistic Artists*



About NUNO

www.museumforobjectresearch.com/nuno/

In July 2018, Arts Council England agreed to fund 'Neither Use Nor Ornament' known as NUNO (under the Museum for Object Research Umbrella project) to bring together two seemingly very different artist networks on a level playing field, with an ambitious group show and event programme. One group identified as autistic, the other group did not.

This project, which took nine months to deliver, was created by artist and arts organiser Sonia Boué to explore autistic leadership, and to help advance the careers of some of the autistic artists on the project.

Sonia wanted to test her project design, and to prove the autism positive mentoring model for autistic artists she had created in collaboration with arts professional colleagues, Miranda Millward and Sarah Mossop. The idea was that this innovative project would be of benefit to all participants by prioritising access.

As the project developed, access needs were allowed to alter project parameters significantly, and yet we were able to deliver our project on time, with profound results for artists and excellent art. This is the story of how we did it, drawing on a range of sources including evaluation stories collected from artists and mentors.

NB. A note about language; we use the term autistic in this document to be as specific as needed to highlight a very particular cohort's need. One of our artists also has ADHD. Neurodivergent is generally used as a catch-all term for many conditions which may not present the same challenge.

Conversely, the term neurodivergent is often used either to show solidarity or 'soften' the effects of stigma for autistic people and NUNO has at times used it in our promotional materials to protect artists.

A 'living, breathing entity'

I designed *Neither Use nor Ornament* to accommodate autism specifically, and this has really meant something quite profound, ours is an innovative and pioneering approach.

Behind the scenes, areas of project design have been constantly tested, and adapted, by leaning into 'group brain' and specialised mentoring which is entirely tailored to the individual. The sensitivity required to constantly recalibrate ideas and practices for neurodivergent artists has split over to the benefit of all.

Disablement can come in many forms, and it's been important to be able to accommodate illness and the unforeseen. I have come to understand that founding a project on accessibility for autistics tends to means greater access for all.

Across the project, being open about my neurology has enabled others to learn about themselves in neurological terms, and this is also why my early thinking for this project has evolved so greatly.

Human neuro-ecologies are living, breathing entities, and viewed as such all boundaries and divisions slip away.

Neither Use nor Ornament (NUNO) was adopted as a title to allow us to work under one project umbrella.

The idea was for *Museum for Object Research* artists to exhibit together - they had been working on their proposals since 2017 and had a tight exhibition concept. *WEBworks* artists had come in later and would showcase their work in a related programme of events.

I didn't want to shoehorn *WEBworks* into the *MFOR* exhibition concept, but this worked against two core project aims; access and inclusion. *MFOR* and *WEBworks* had also begun to overlap.

Museum for Object Research is a resource and a showcase for artists whose work with objects forms the core of their practice, and who therefore identify as 'object artists'. We have been collaborating and curious about objects together online since 2014. An archive of blog posts collected from the A-N blog site, and our current posts can be accessed on: www.museumforobjectresearch.com.

WEBworks is a pioneering and innovative autistic-led project originating from Arts Council England funded research. We are a peer support and mentoring group of autistic and 'neurodivergent' creatives. We also provide a consultancy and advice service for arts organisations. *WEBworks'* research focus is autistic professionalism in creative practice.

Mapping *Neither Use nor Ornament*

I began this project with a foot in each camp - *MFOR* and *WEBworks* seemed to represent the two worlds I straddled as a late-diagnosed autistic person in a non-autistic world.

As *NUNO* has evolved, I no longer feel this. There is no division. In sharing my journey as autistic project lead, I've been able to build trust and understanding across the project.

I'm enabled to lead, and my 'shortcomings' are compensated for by what I've come to think of as 'group brain'.

Whenever I've needed it, there has been a rich pool of talent to draw on, a sea of helping hands, and extraordinary good will.

It's important to explain that not only is *NUNO* a responsive and relational project, it is also founded on the concept of 'neurodiversity'.

'Neurodiversity'

- Is a term used to explain the value of all neurological profiles. It draws on biodiversity as a model for thinking about human neurology.

- It refers to all humans, whereas the term 'neurodivergent' refers to humans who may differ from a supposed 'norm' (usually dyslexia, dyscalculia, ADHD, autism, or bipolar).

- It suggests that we need all kinds of brains to thrive as a species.

Neither Use nor Ornament timeline

- 2013 I inherited my grandmother's handbag. My object-art practice began.
- 2014 I created the *Museum for Object Research* (*MFOR*) on the A-N blog site. Artists come on board.
- 2015 A community of 'object-artists' gathered to create the *MFOR* community.
- 2016 I got my autism diagnosis.
- 2017 Miranda Millward and Sarah Mossop became my professional mentors.
- Arts Council England (ACE) funded my research into how to bring my *MFOR* blog to life, and lead my project autistically.
- I discovered a group of autistic creatives, and founded *WEBworks* (professional support and mentoring for 'neurodivergent' artists).
- 2018 Miranda and Sarah became core members of the *WEBworks* mentoring team.
- I developed partnerships with Arts at the Old Fire Station, Magdalen Road studios, OVADA and Oxford Dance Forum.
- ACE supported my proposal to bring *MFOR* and *WEBworks* artists together in an inclusive exhibition programme under my autistic project leadership. Oxford City Council gave us a Culture Fund award to make our website accessible.
- Naomi Morris' Research Residency at Magdalen Rd Studios launched our project in August.
- 2019 Hugh Pryor's supported *Still in Motion* exhibition and workshop at Arts at the Old Fire Station took place October 2018 - January 2019. Both proved successful and fertile testing grounds for the *WEBworks* model.
- NUNO* became one. The fourteen artists would exhibit together under one roof. I understood that the truly radical thing would be to make this exhibition about the work and not about autism.

Sonia Boué

A model for the arts

NUNO booklet mind map designed by Nick

Gaining a higher tier Arts Council England National Lottery Project Grant in 2018, NUNO became a bold experiment in autistic project leadership. Accessibility was built into the foundations of our project design, based on learning from a previous research and development award from Arts Council England in 2017.

We knew that accessibility for Sonia was vital in creating a workable project. We learned from research and development to make key networks and venues local to Sonia, and to work only with known people and contacts. Remote methods enabled Sonia to work for a second time with designer Nick Wood (based in Edinburgh), and the majority of NUNO artists who aren't local to Oxford, but importantly had built relationships over time (on both online social media platforms and during the research and development phase). Being hands-on where outcomes mattered was crucial.

Securing 'like-minded' partnerships was also vital in creating optimal conditions for Sonia to lead autistically. Genuine and secure partnerships with Arts at the Old Fire Station, OVADA, and Birmingham Open Media were key in unlocking access and demonstrating a willingness to

support and absorb information about authentic adaptations for autistic artists. These are relationships which have been built over time, with significant overlap in ethos and concerns (specifically in areas of building communities around inclusion).

Significant personal access costs were also built into the project. This enabled us to provide tailored mentoring where needed, and to put access for artists first. Building in a 10% contingency fund also proved vital in meeting unanticipated costs brought about by the need to be flexible and work around need.

Sonia's personal mantra regarding artist creative participation on the project was '*if it's not accessible, I've failed*'. We were also able to adapt the employment for autistic artists on the project when it became clear that a task was disabling in any way. We feel the influence of creating accessibility on our outcomes can't be overstated.

Mentoring (where required) was multimodal to make it accessible to all artists, so WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, Skype, phone calls, emails, and face-to-face meetings were all used depending on artist preference/need. It was our project culture to 'bend over backwards' to provide the flexibility required in each case.

The project gained praise from artists for our 'can do'¹ and often 'out of hours' approach to access. Any type of support required to be 'project ready' was forthcoming - including providing the security and structure of weekly meetings, moral support in countering ableism in the workplace, and working side by side to stay on track. The need for absolute autonomy where needed was also respected.

NUNO also provides an example of peers working across highly diverse neurological profiles. We fine-tuned communication on a trial-and-error basis wherever difficulty arose. NUNO benefited from high levels of trust and goodwill, and our investment in relationships came into its own, allowing for open conversations. As one autistic artist put it, '*we figured it out*'.

Communication difficulty appeared in relation to closer work and unclear task boundaries - the two main areas we found in which cognitive styles could be at odds. We've gained an in-depth appreciation of the benefits of delegating clearly defined, autonomous, tasks, and the practice of using remote means of communication to allow for processing when issues arise. This learning will inform our model and feed into future project design.

Ongoing support was also required by non-autistic artists on the project for their creative work (in one case) and due to ill health (in another), and they were able to benefit from our enabling 'can do' approach.

¹ Susan Kruse, Why NUNO is a model for inclusivity in the arts <https://www.museumforobjectresearch.com/why-nuno-is-a-model-for-inclusivity-in-the-arts/>



Sonia Boué talks to Colin and Helen Cook at the NUNO opening

Autistic Leadership

Leading NUNO project was a compelling, immersive, and creative process for Sonia.

NUNO was a higher tier level of funding² for Sonia, with more complex management demands, which enabled her to develop a vision of freelance project work in the arts as a dynamic, “living, breathing entity.”³

Thinking of the project as a neurological ecology, she adopted positive regard towards all project participants, and developed a collaborative leadership style in which roles became fluid and sometimes interchangeable.

² National Lottery Project Grant 15,000 +

³ Nuno catalogue p1 <https://www.museumforobjectresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/nunofinal.pdf>

Her focus was to develop and establish (longer term relationships of) trust among participants through open and thorough communication at each stage of the project; especially to explain the rationale for any project changes.

This enabled bold changes of direction, such as the decisions to scrap the idea of a separate programme of events, and to substantially modify our project imperative to make autism visible to audiences (the latter decision was made in order to safeguard individual artists). The former decision was also serendipitous in creating employment for one autistic artist, who helped model the gallery space to accommodate both networks (we had doubled numbers of exhibiting artists, and our programme became an extended one day event⁴).

Sharing her leadership process (through emails and blogging) enabled a culture of cooperation across the project, informed non-autistic participants about autism, and provided an element of leadership modelling for autistic artists. Artists reported feeling relaxed and confident about expressing their own concerns, knowing that they would not be judged for it.

Using an iterative approach to project work, Sonia developed a concept of 'group brain'. This refers to a practice of 'leaning in' to the existing skills and talents within the project when the need arises. Her vision of project work is a fluid and enabling resource, with benefits flowing in all directions, and participants therefore becoming more invested in positive outcomes (among many other pluses). Skills were drawn on where needed by adapting roles and playing to participants' strengths. We found this practice allowed for conventional boundaries to slip away. This was empowering for team members, and gave many opportunities for professional development.

Feedback from autistic artists was that the autistic leadership alone, bringing with it the 'no need to explain' (or justify) accommodations, was a major factor in enabling their work. Often the attempt to communicate needs in the workplace had been historically disabling and traumatising. NUNO provided a vital counterpoint to such experiences, in contrast to working for some local authorities, arts organisations, and freelance projects, where the struggle for participation has created serious obstacles both to inclusion and professional progress.

The unusual flexibility of NUNO was remarked on by one autistic artist: "it's been a very joyful, enthusiastic process."

Feedback from one non-autistic artist suggests a particular benefit from the autistic ability to sustain a focus on the detail:

"Your attention to detail was remarkable given all the demands on your time."

Another non-autistic artist experienced this leadership as creating a culture of kindness, which provided a calm atmosphere. A third said that the autistic leadership gave him confidence that we would succeed in our work.

⁴ The evolution of NUNO was hugely complex as the project brought together two unrelated and very different networks with diverse creative imperatives. The decision to merge the exhibition with the programme simplified everything, and enabled us to be selective about autistic exposure and create better inclusion outcomes. Once made, this decision allowed the project to achieve its optimum form.

One mentor observed that Sonia's lived experience enabled her to be more equipped to address autistic artists' needs than a non-autistic lead could be. Also, the degree of Sonia's willingness to shift project parameters to accommodate autistic artists was unlikely to be found in non-autistic project leads.

Two evaluation stories highlighted the exceptional labour and emotional toll of sustaining the level of care and attention to detail required to provide genuine accessibility for diverse minds.



Hugh Pryor with guests at his *Still in Motion* exhibition at Arts at the Old Fire Station.

Mentoring for success

A great deal of NUNO's success can be traced to mentoring relationships.

Sonia received key mentoring from Miranda and Sarah throughout the project. This enabled her to manage complex multiple demands, and up-skill by calling on their specific areas of knowledge to fill any gaps in her own experience. Sonia was also able to delegate certain tasks to her mentors at times of overload. This input and her mentors' willingness to employ the necessary flexibility to support Sonia was vital to project success, and we have identified the need for more capacity in certain areas for future project work.

For some artists, mentoring has been crucial in carrying out their individual projects, which in some cases enabled more sustained pieces than previously possible (due to hostile environments

and disabling working norms). Mentoring also provided a vital sense of security for some, allowing for a cessation of fight or flight responses (due to historic trauma⁵).

Intensive mentoring in two cases supported solo work (in the run up to NUNO), and allowed artists to meet deadlines and (in one case) to counter a significant performance anxiety. We worked extremely creatively with the pressure of deadlines and outcomes by providing multiple options for presenting works, including putting forward dates where possible, and presenting works online rather than in real time, if needed. It was understood in the case of performance that 'in the moment' comfort levels would dictate whether these accommodations would be necessary.

Maintaining flexibility while providing sufficient structure, and the scaffolding for some of our mentees to succeed, required a constant calibration - using mentoring to gauge and alter project design (ie to evaluate and respond on the go) is a key feature of our work.

For close mentees, mentoring gave an intimate window into project management through Sonia's open and collaborative management style. This can be seen as offering further professional development (for future leadership) which would otherwise not be accessible.

⁵ <https://theaspergian.com/2019/07/25/is-it-trauma-or-autism-or-both/>



Naomi Morris' *Falling Through 1*, performance at the NUNO opening

Working to counter ableism

We encountered ableism and internalised ableism⁶ in our work.

Art is not created in a vacuum. Challenging public perception by making autism visible proved a more complex project imperative than we could have imagined at the planning stage. Some artists found that it takes more than courage to 'come out' in the face of the very real societal ignorance and stigma that surrounds autism. Real harms can happen, particularly in the areas of mental health and employment. When some artists explored more concretely what had been an abstract concept, we hit a wall regarding visibility.

As making autism visible was a core project imperative arising from conversations with artists during planning, it required a good deal of processing and creativity to find ways around this

⁶ "Hello, internalized ableism" <https://www.autistichoya.com/2016/04/hello-internalized-ableism.html> This article by LYDIA X. Z. BROWN provides an excellent insight into the complexity of internalised ableism

significant obstacle in achieving autistic visibility *across diverse fora*. Selectivity and nuance became important strategies in our challenge of public perception. Safeguarding artists and enabling them to feel secure on the project became our main priority.

This impacted on marketing our project - an important area regarding Arts Council England funding. Yet, unwilling to risk absorption into more general narratives about autism (a historic public failure to read nuance), or expose historically traumatised artists to further trauma, we opted for a quieter and ultimately more radical approach to our work.

Diversity signalling as a cultural practice can be fraught. For some groups it can be predicated (in significant ways) on a loss of privacy. More specifically in relation to autism, for some of us, it requires our unmasking⁷. Unmasking, wherever possible, should remain a choice informed by knowledge of the risks involved within a particular context.

Artists on NUNO varied greatly in their comfort with unmasking, and some felt significantly unsafe depending on context, or when experiencing particular moments of vulnerability. It must be understood by non-autistic people that comfort with unmasking for any individual is indeed often contextual, and can also vary over time. There may be no such thing as 'coming out' uniformly. Ableist responses are endemic, but can also arise unexpectedly, so that we are often on our guard, and yet can be caught off it. We can be triggered at any moment by hostile attitudes and/or ignorance. Such micro-aggressions can bleed into historic trauma affecting mental health and the ability to function.

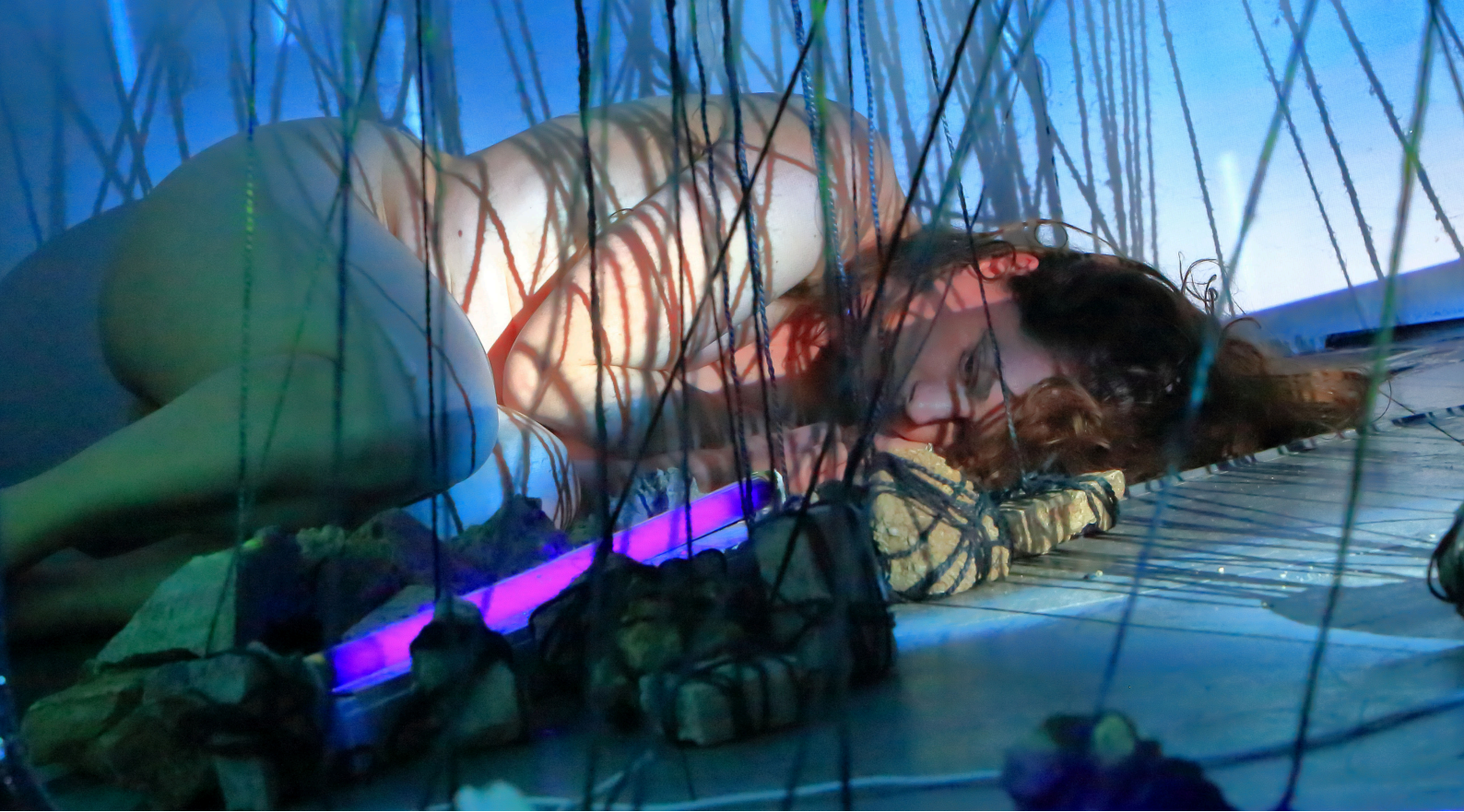
The complexities of this dynamic for autistic people can be legion, as pockets of internalised ableism (negativity towards their autism) can also accrue. There is a vital role for our autism positive mentoring support in unpicking aspects of learned self-doubt which can also affect creative practice, impact on mental health, and relationships.

In terms of marketing, we found it helped to change the focus of our publicity onto Sonia's autistic leadership, which took the pressure off individual artists. We also found it more egalitarian (not less) to focus on the work instead (and the quality of it), rather than flag waving about the diversity within the project. *We chose when we needed to be more autism specific.*

We found that maintaining control of visibility where it is attached to opportunity is vital for the wellbeing of autistic artists.

⁷ We understand masking to be a privilege within our population, as not all autistics can mask.

"Those of us who could have learned to mask, which is a survival mechanism, using observation and imitation to camouflage our difference. The effect of this in the short term is social survival (going under the radar of bullies, and avoiding humiliation and derision), but in the longer term we can experience serious identity confusion though masking. The pressure to mask can lead to a fragmentation of that all-important sense of self, which I believe all humans need to live happy and fulfilled lives." <https://soniaboue.wordpress.com/2019/07/13/congruence-in-the-making-how-to-live-autistically-in-a-socially-hostile-world/>



Naomi Morris' *Falling Through 2*, performance at the NUNO opening

Two became one

Iterative work takes a leap of faith for participants which can lead to innovative practice. In the case of NUNO the final formation of the two networks as one cohesive group exceeded Sonia's vision - because it was unknown (and perhaps unknowable until reached). By creating a unifying theme (NUNO) and by bringing everyone (quite literally) into the same room we generated the optimum inclusion possible.

Taking the spotlight away from difference and directing our project lights to the quality of our work was also vital to this shift.

With hindsight, showing as one was obviously the most logical formation possible, but our two extremely diverse artist networks shared only one thing in common when we began, namely their project lead.

NUNO provides a compelling argument for joint project work which can be lead though a collaborative team effort across neurological types. Non-autistic people who take that leap of faith with us into autistic spaces earn our trust and become model allies.



Patrick Goodall's installation Sleep of Reason, 2019

Quality

"It would make an excellent touring exhibition and I hope that the Art Council will consider sponsoring you further on your joint journey of discovery."

"We all continued to talk about what we saw and heard for the rest of the day and in the end the visit to Jeff Koons was junked..."

"What an amazing exhibition you have put together. So rich and resonant. Each piece has so many layers, touching the personal and the universal."

" NUNO is a feast of an exhibition and needs a good couple of hours, maybe more, of attention. I stayed all afternoon and gorged myself..."

"Your project is rich in meaning so it would be a pity if the learning was not fully explored and shared/disseminated."



Flowers from Sonja Zelić's garden at the NUNO opening

Summary

Leadership

Having a leader who shared their communication style was a 'game changer' for the autistic artists on NUNO. It takes autistic insight to provide suitable adaptations.

Yet without the collaboration of non-autistic mentors, and partners, this project wouldn't have been possible. Genuine collaboration is therefore vital for such project work.

Ableism

There are significant and harmful gaps in public perception about autism, but we lack professional supported opportunities that are not dependent on our personal visibility.

NUNO demonstrated a need in the sector for supported opportunities that aren't dependent on autistic artists' visibility. This practice can be inequitable and harmful. We've highlighted a major safeguarding issue for the arts sector.

Relationships

Relationships mattered in enabling autistic artists on our project. Historic ableism - the pervasive lack of welcome for our neurological type in our normative society - makes relational work more important. This runs counter to generally held stereotypes about autistic people.

NUNO model

Many aspects of our model can be adapted to other settings.

Our adaptations were beneficial to all regardless of neurological status. Prioritising access, clear communication and relationships enabled us to achieve excellence.



Hugh Pryor's sculptural installation Lung Tonic, 2019

NUNO art sector take outs

- Investment is urgently needed in autistic leadership. Autistic artists need autistic project leads, and we need sector support to self-lead our own projects.
- The sector also needs autistic professionals for authentic sector learning about our needs, and we require genuine non-autistic allies to step up and play a vital role in supporting us. We need to build secure trust-based relationships across neurologies within the sector to counter the effects of ableism effectively.
- Specific support is needed for autistic leaders to be enabled to lead. More research and understanding is required to address the difficulty of autistic leaders in meeting their own needs while accommodating a highly diverse range of need in others.

- Autistic artists need supported opportunities which are not always dependent on visibility. The sector needs to understand more about safeguarding the mental health and wellbeing of autistic artists in the face of societal stigma and historic trauma.
- Responsive and relational approaches are required to engender trust and create genuinely accessible opportunities based on an authentic understanding of need. Trust in the working environment and secure relationships can be vital to creating genuine and ethical 'harms free' accessibility for autistic artists.
- Improving access for autistic artists can significantly benefit artists of all neurological types. Designing for autism within a project allows for individual need to be prioritised for all. We found that quality follows access.
- 'Neurodivergent' is a catch-all term and the current 'buzz-word' adopted in the sector, which also conveniently offers protection for artists who may be subject to harmful levels of stigma. However, specificity is lost and important areas of challenge may be missed when creating opportunity for autistic artists. This is a conundrum which currently allows autistic artists to fall between the industry's gaps in understanding. More work is needed to address stigma towards autism and to enable the sector to tune in to specific professional needs.

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WEBworks Mentors: Sonia Boué, Miranda Millward and Sarah Mossop, with additional mentoring by Katherine May.

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