

Unfolding Towards Inclusion Disability as Creative Method in Arts Based Research

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ABSTRACT

This essay moves, thinks, and wanders through an artistic research process that emerged during a study alongside intellectually disabled middle and high school students. Authors gesture towards their unfolding dynamics as the essay asks how art matters as an analytic within/through/around the process, and what implications this may have for blurring “set” identity markers and boundaries, such as time, space, and authorship. Together, the artworks and written text weave threads of analysis that resist closure.

KEYWORDS

inclusive education, intellectual disability, diffractive methodology, disability as method

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Introduction(s)

This essay moves, thinks, and wanders through a research process that emerged during a year-long study alongside intellectually disabled middle and high school students.¹ Together, we engaged in various forms of artistic making. Before wandering further, we introduce ourselves. My name is Maria. I identify as a white, neuroqueer woman with a disability who makes art. My name is Srikala (Kala). I am a nondisabled researcher of Asian origin who pursues inquiries in inclusive education.

We met as Maria began her doctoral studies in education, with Kala as her academic advisor. We shared interests in arts-based ways of knowing, disability, and embodied inquiry. Drawing on the writings of feminist scholars who have revitalized materiality within experience and questioned the representationalist belief in the power of words to mirror preexisting phenomena (e.g., Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2017; Coole & Frost, 2010) and the artistic medium of collage, Kala initiated a research inquiry, asking: *What aspects of their experiences in school matter to students with intellectual disabilities?* As Maria joined as a research assistant, we began an evolving collaboration, navigating layered dynamics throughout as graduate student/professor, “artist”/“non-artist”, novice researcher/experienced social scientist, et cetera.

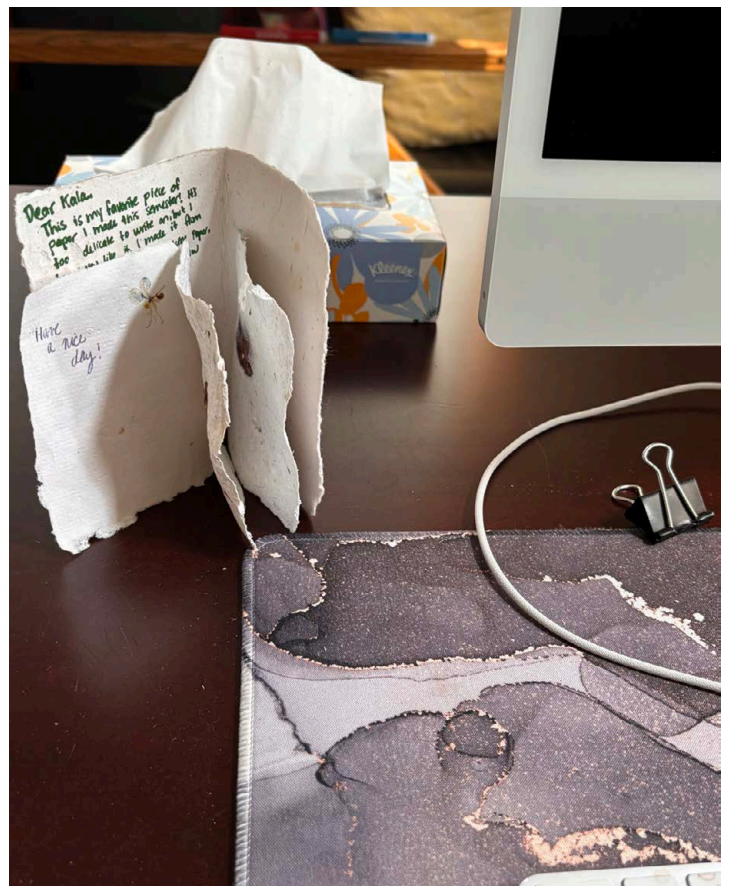


Figure 1. *Notes on Paper.* A picture of Kala’s desk with notes written on paper made by Maria. One note reads: “Dear Kala, This is my favorite piece of paper I made this semester! It’s too delicate to write on, but I...”. Another is embedded with a violet flower. The third says: “have a nice day!”

Conceptual Framework

Our introduction gestures towards our processes because this essay asks how art *matters* as an analytic within/through/around the research process, and what implications this may have for blurring “set” identity markers, such as time, space, and authorship. This is to say that matter becomes not a static “substance” (Barad, 2007, p. 151) but rather a *process* that is continually and performatively “intra-acted” through material relations. This invites inquiring perhaps away from what art “means” or represents towards “matters of practices/doings/actions” (Barad, 2003, p. 802). In other words, the *act* of creation becomes the site of inquiry rather than solely the creation itself.

Thinking with art as an ongoing material practice rather than a fixed product, or the result of something, might also shift how we come to understand various phenomena that are involved within the artistic process, such as communication and access. Such a shift becomes important in the context of research around art and autism, much of which has largely emphasized art’s therapeutic applications or its functions as an alternative communication method for non-speaking students (Bernier et al., 2022; Bitan & Regev, 2022; Schweizer et al., 2017).

While therapeutic uses significantly aid in including students with autism who previously did not have access via speech-only pathways, we wonder about the potential of art beyond representation of student “voice”, and beyond using art as a means to arrive at a certain goal. *What does it mean to create art*—art that wanders, repeats, flails with chaos, rather than representing a certain reality or holding meaning?

Throughout our research, we engaged in various acts of creation, such as collage, hand papermaking, and watercolor painting. Here, we share various forms this making took, noticing how in and through these creations, a research method emerged- what scholar Arseli Dokumaci (2018) calls “disability as method”. This framing takes up disability not as something to be accommodated or represented, but rather as a site of creative knowledge that helps form artistic research practice.

Through these acts of creation, we were moving and feeling with the embodied affordances of our research participants, noticing how art can creatively intervene with and disrupt the privileging of certain normative framings of experience.



Figure 2. *Creating Art.* An embroidered portrait of Maria and Kala, stitched with leftover materials from the research. Though this finished piece emerged and was later gifted to Kala, the process of creating pulled Maria into inquiries about art and its processes.

Together, the artworks and text in this essay weave threads of analysis that resist closure. We invite readers to engage in the work not as a finished product, but as an ongoing process. Because it blurs boundaries, refusing matter and art as passive, it also instigates an entangling of identity and process. “Disability” becomes something not simply relegated to the subjects of our study, something that can be observed or inquired about via art, but instead becomes a continuous unfolding which encompasses the practices and acts of creation with which they engage. Method, practice, and identity, then, are not discrete components. They are entangled, constantly reshaping each other.

In this sense, this piece may at times feel wandering, unstructured, or unfinished. While we aim to guide readers through our research design, inquiry, method, analysis, and findings, we also notice how each of these pieces continuously informs the others. Data, then, is not captured, fixed, or still (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2006), but the affordances that reveal themselves as method are affective and relational— enabled through sensory encounters that are felt and ongoing, rather than concrete “things”, identities, or actions.

Re-turning

Because this essay does not treat the written word as the primary form of knowledge, we offer visuals to help us think. We share a much-cited quote about an earthworm by Karen Barad, placed alongside a photo of process. Our essay takes up this method throughout: placing various modalities in relation, allowing them to move and turn, to take on and release meaning depending on who, what, or when engages with them, and the many ways they might play, wander, or transform:

We might imagine re-turning as a multiplicity of processes, such as the kinds earthworms revel in while helping to make compost or otherwise being busy at work and at play: *turning the soil over and over—ingesting and excreting it, tunneling through it, burrowing, all means of aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life into it.* (Barad, 2014, p. 168, emphasis added)



Figure 3. *Re-Turning Pulp.* A photo of a paper being soaked next to a vat of pulp swirling with gold specks being swooshed by hands.

When I (Maria) read this earthly example of re-turning, I could not stop thinking about what it would be like to be an earthworm. I was teaching a papermaking workshop, which involves turning your hands in wet, mushy pulp, and we pondered this question: *What do worms do?* As we re-turned pulp in our hands, we thought about worms, soil, compost, tunnels, air, life, death. We observed our paper, emerging from processes of turning our recycled pulp, filled with flowers, cotton, abaca, sensations, and time.

Barad (2014) explains that re-turning is not “reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again- iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities...” (p. 169). As someone who often finds myself sitting at a vat of pulp, turning and re-turning, I find much value in these words.

Who benefits more? The artist, the water swooshing against the vat? The pulp smashing and slithering through the papermaker’s fingers? Can they really be disentangled from each other, or from the final piece of paper? Can they be separated in space or time?

Method and Matter: The Role of Art

These initial swooshings bring us towards/around/through an idea that, for us, art *becomes* the matter through which research is possible (Barad, 2007, p. 3). Re-turning pulp and layerings of collage do not provide us with illustrations of our findings, but these practices shape our inquiry. Can *findings* then really be parsed out from our inquiry? Is the inquiry even “ours” to claim?

Thus, we offer Barad’s earthworm to think/feel our way into a different understanding of art, not as a mirror to experience but as a medium that reshapes and is shaped by experience itself. Art holds immense potential to tell stories, bridge connections, and create worlds. Rather than using art, however, to represent students’ “voices”, we interrogate art as inseparable from thinking and feeling, moving with analysis, and materializing meaning.

Taking up art in this processual way, we draw on philosopher Erin Manning’s (2016) concept of “artfulness” as a way of knowing. We focus on an unfolding practice that emerged during our study as a possibility of disability as a method of creative research practice. As we engage in creation with student research participants, embodied affordances begin to emerge, transforming and (un)shaping our art, “opening it up and breathing new life into it” (Barad, 2014, p. 168).

Disability as Method

Art lends itself to creatively intervening with time. Dokumaci (2018) introduces “disability as method” as a way of using disabled ways of knowing as the basis of how research can be done, moving beyond understanding disability as a subject of study, and using it to form the creative method itself. So, rather than adjusting standard research protocols to accommodate disability, disability instigates practice. It asks how disability-specific practices, such as access or accommodation features, can generate new ways of knowing in the world. We detail “disability as method” in this section in order to situate how disability and creative practice intertwined themselves throughout our study, continuously (re)forming what art came to be and do.

Understanding accessibility as a “creative process” (Dokumaci, 2018, para. 1) through the making of an ethnographic research-creation video, Dokumaci uses disability to interfere with normative notions of time. Working with blind participants, Dokumaci employs the technique of using a disability-specific accommodation – Audio Description (AD) – a feature that allows blind people to access filmic media. AD is typically a distinct, additive option in a filmic experience offered via headphones, so that it does not interrupt the normative media experience. It consists of a voiced description of what is visually happening. To successfully employ AD during the research process instead of after, Dokumaci uses artistic processes to manipulate space and time, explaining that:

In its traditional use AD is often squeezed into dialogue gaps and *forced to fit* into sighted time... By adopting disability as method, I seek to reverse this order and let AD be a time for itself. (Dokumaci, 2018, para. 12, emphasis added)

So, through this reversal, Dokumaci challenges the time that compresses AD that we typically experience films in. Using a formal editing technique of “stop-time” where the film significantly delays and stops, allowing for the AD to take its time and describe the scenes, Dokumaci facilitates new spaces and gaps for a disabled “crip-time,” and what she calls a “blind intervention into media making itself” (2018, para. 1). This “blind intervention,” which is informed by the experiences and knowledges of the blind research participants, is an example of disability as method.

Using stop-time as crip-time, Dokumaci aims to expose for viewers what she calls the “habitus of ableism... what gets erased in the ordinariness of the everyday, in the ephemerality of doing” (2018, para. 9). In exposing the habitus, Dokumaci also reveals what she terms “activist affordances.” She defines them as creative, describing them as: “the labor of having to continuously make up for what the environment does not readily provide, that is, the need to develop a series of *creative workarounds*” (2017, p. 404, emphasis added). The blind interventions in the video— this is to say, the use of stop-time, reveal many of these artful affordances that are performed by the disabled people in the

study. Affordances include performances such as using a cane to test a spot on the snowy sidewalk, feet moving together with support in slush, walking down stairs of a busy metro station, carefully holding the support rail. The artful editing through stop-time and the extended, compulsory AD grants viewers, sighted and non-sighted, access into the habitus of ableism.

Our Research Context and The Research Sessions

To invite student imaginings of school and learning, we planned a series of art sessions, each developed around a focal question about school. Moving with art as an “activator” (Manning, 2016, p. 46) we aimed to understand how their imaginings of school might deepen our own understandings of “inclusion,” activating it towards emergent forms.

We recruited two groups of students who traveled with their caregivers to our campus in New York City to participate in sessions for two and a half hours on Saturdays. Each group participated in eight sessions, between October 2023 and June 2024. Students’ relationships to artmaking varied greatly- the study was posted as “Saturday Art Sessions”, so an interest in art was assumed, but previous experience engaging with art was not, nor was it required. The only criteria for participation were that students bring a label of Intellectual Disability, attend a public school in New York City, and that they were at least partially included within mainstream classrooms. This helped us launch an inquiry into wonderings about inclusion and school via creative means.



Figure 4. *Favorite Things about School.* Photo of a student book with collages of various elements including: dried leaves and flowers brought from home, tickets, pencils, erasers, a purple crayon, a pencil sharpener. Other student drawings are pasted in. Highlighter and orange watercolor outlines some collage.



Figure 5. A Messy Table. A picture of two books on a table during a session. One is open and unfolding, the other closed with a painted orange dinosaur. Materials are strewn about- glue, rolled and torn up paper, signs that say “Yes!” and “No!”

A Fluid and Felt Research Design

Our sessions were in constant movement, changing spaces, rearranging environments, and responding to ongoing frictions. This movement stemmed largely from demands of organizing a university-based research project alongside our evolving relationships with bodies, space, and time. Sometimes, for example, a student might come early, rushing in as we set up and drank coffee, with a loud, “HERE’S HENRY!” and a hug.² Or, a student could arrive hours late, tired and hungry, with their Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device not working, lurching us back from our closing “Together Time” to our opening “Hello!”. If we had to move locations, a family might get lost, wandering around campus until we found them. Sometimes, due to weather, schedule conflicts, or the current political conditions, a family would cancel. Absences, like presences, were felt.

We saw our environment as fluid, as always “becoming with”. Yet, we designed it to invite artfulness and consent, arranging space, materials, and bodies for art “as a way” (Manning, 2016, p. 47) and a movement. We asked how our environment could invite process, rather than prioritize individualized forms. We *felt* the movement, the shifting, and it mattered. An example of this can be seen in our use of collage materials. As students created in response to questions about school, we began to collect an overwhelming amount of art. Some were treasured, saved, and favorited by participants. Some were accidentally torn, squished, or dropped on the floor. Sometimes, we took photos and replicated pieces. In subsequent sessions, photo replicas of yellow school buses, stick figures, or a large red watercolor circle, for instance, would reappear in the collage materials. As students collaged, their work began to include and transform images made by others. These shared processes and visual echoes helped decenter the idea of art as a *thing* created by a singular artist. Instead, they invited us to “dwell on the process itself” (Manning, 2016, p. 47) and attend to the artwork as always becoming.

Taking up art as a movement brought us away from arts-based research approaches that aim to facilitate representation of “authentic” student voice—something that can be taken from a finished piece (via, for example, methods such as photo-elicitation or narrative interviews, where the pictures or words represent a student’s feelings about something). Instead, we felt drawn towards a practice that would not so easily be captured. In this way, the “work runs itself” (Manning, 2016, p. 59), animating and contributing to an ecology that we would be continuously a part of.

Artful Accordion Books

To facilitate this enactment of artfulness, we introduced the accordion book, a conceptual and artistic structure guided by Arzu Mistry and her long-standing facilitation of The Accordion Book Project (Mistry & Elkin, n.d.). The accordion book lends well to non-representational practices. It has no fixed beginning or end and can be approached from any direction. It allows for “flaps” and “extensions” to be added from the top, bottom, left, or right and it can take any size. The maker of the book can choose whatever paper feels best and can change it throughout. And the book as a structure can contain multitudes – we utilized the books as a holding structure for collage, watercolor painting, stenciling, and more. The physical structure of the accordion aligned well with the fluid nature we desired for our sessions.



Figure 6. *Student Accordion Book. A photo of a book folded sharply upwards. On a fold is a bold watercolor composed of dark blues, purples, golds. It has collaged tissue paper, a pocket full of materials, paintings and hidden treasures.*

Students constructed their books over the sessions, adding materials, colors, textures, and pages according to their own emerging processes. The books resisted a formal, normative “book” structure as they gradually absorbed the embodied process of each student. We noticed how the books began to take up their “own momentum” (Manning, 2016, p. 59) and acted as “aesthetic space[s]” that pulled students in (Mistry, 2017). So, rather than art becoming something that the student produced, the art itself acted as an embodied force. What emerged were not representations of schooling, but rather “spacetime-matterings” (Dolphijn & Van Der Tuin, 2012, p. 68) that evoked school.

While the books served as holding structures for various artistic mediums, they also functioned as something more. The relationship between the potentiality of the books and the embodied forces of the students helped the books to become a possibility that extended beyond their fixed artistic properties (Mistry, 2017, para. 11). As the books and students collided to evoke spacetime-matterings of school, the embodied evocations with the books served as an activating force to help us move away from language-based methodological

procedures. Such procedures would not only have been exclusionary to the student population we were inquiring with, but would also have reinforced ableist assumptions of school. We did not want to privilege talk or words. This is not to say that talk was not employed, but it was not the primary method of inquiry. Words became one method of many, folding in out of our processes, as “disability as a method of creative practice” (Dokumaci, 2018) revealed and turned our inquiries.



Figure 7. Another Student Accordion Book. A photo of a book composed of different papers with painting, drawing, and other types of making. Things peek out, such as an emoji that is colored orange, with the handwritten words: “HOME FEELS LIKE JOY”. There is a hand drawn heart with stick figures and finger paints, handmade paper, collaged fabric, and other things peeking out.

Together Time: Inquiry and Analysis as Emerging

At some point during each session, students and researchers participated in collaborative artmaking on large pieces of paper, gently guided by prompting around school. We call this *Together Time*. After our first *Together Time*, the wetness of paint, the mix of colors, and the collision of images affected Maria, who suggested that we keep the paper. Amid these happenings, artful analysis began to emerge. As we continued, Maria continued to feel drawn in by the colors, swirls, and sensations provoked by and around school. She took photos of the art, isolated it, and animated it into videos. This is to say, rather than coding specific items or conscious noticings, she tuned into “affective intensities” (Massumi, 1995)—sensations that move beyond, in-between, and around

coherent, logical feeling. Through these intensities, an inquiry began to take shape around a simultaneously (un)forming question: How can art matter for disability as a method for creative research?

Analysis that draws us in, or analysis as *emerging* rather than being imposed on the data, may feel, look, or sound different than a reflective process, which seeks to see research participants' (the subjects') voices *reflected* in the finished, aesthetic art product (the object). A reflective analysis may aim to use art as data to facilitate a representation of student voice. *Diffraction* artistic research, which is what these long sheets of paper, with blobs of wet paint, colors, and a flying bee drew Maria into, may be messier (Barad, 2007, 2014). It treats art not as a site of representation, but as a site of interference patterns, where meaning emerges through relations.



Figure 8. *Together Time.* A photo of a long sheet of paper with various markings, made by students and researchers. It has blobs of paint, a stick figure, a bee, clouds, a rainbow, a smiley face.

Rather than extracting meaning from students' works towards a pre-set inquiry, diffraction seeks to read *through and with their* matterings, thinking/feeling for how difference emerges in relation to other environments, art, and bodies. Holding close (and releasing) this practice of re-turning, analysis becomes not a return to the same, to the stable, or to the known, but a *movement-with* difference as it continuously unfolds. Through arts-based research that is diffractive, what emerges is not a singular product or a fixed conclusion, but possibilities that could be shaped by woven, tangled, and disappearing threads. This would de-center art as a product and the person as the maker, instead bringing forth more openings and possibilities that stretch across and through space and time (Bozalek & Murriss, 2021). It also upsets the

linear relationship between inquiry and analysis. Rather than assuming that a question leads to an answer, diffraction might mess up this notion, tunneling through inquiry like the earthworm, only to regurgitate an analysis that turns up a different inquiry. Inquiry and analysis, like worm and dirt, water and vat, artist and art, cannot necessarily be separated, or have one entirely affect the other— they are constantly moving with and through each other.

A Diffractive Mapping

“Outside” of our research, we continued to work in our own books. Many artists and scholars maintain personal art or writing practices separate from “academic” endeavors, thus conceptualizing firm boundaries between certain practices and knowings. As we engaged in this “personal” work of mapping, however, we noticed how our books did not maintain rigid boundaries of self, nor did they do the work of “reflecting” that one might typically associate with a journal or a sketchbook. Instead, layers emerged, unfolding into maps that blurred boundaries.

For example, the space of Maria’s Grandmother’s kitchen, pressing acorns on paper while she cooked muddled with the smell of chamomile tea, lavender, and the little bumps of French knot embroidery stitches. Stitches ran on top of scribbled notes about diffraction patterns and borderlands, fading into blobs of paint created in her first year of doctoral studies, merging with a sun print of a sand dollar, made at her Grandmother’s dwelling after she passed. A page unfolding from another revealed a drawing of a cat embellished with white pen, scribbled by a former student in her classroom. A folded page of paper untucked to reveal a line drawing that her sister made of her imaginary friend, Fred.



Figure 9. A “Personal” Book. A photo of Maria’s feet at a table with her book opened to a map of student tracings, words about diffraction and elsewhere, and paint. There are remains of a sunprint, a drawing of two cats. There are hearts, scribbles, and squiggles and an embroidery hoop working on a mostly finished violet, a cup of tea, and a pen.

As our books unfold, turn, and wander through mediums, stories, time, and space, different patterns draw us in that call into question the boundaries we may have understood as firm. For example, Maria is prompted to offer new materials for artmaking: a white pen and one of her Grandmother's linen napkins as a continuation emerging from one pattern in her diffractive map. At another session, she added dried lavender to our papermaking materials.

Art that emerges through a diffractive process might not be said to belong to anyone, and the object being produced might not be said to be the art, because binaries become murky (Barad, 2014, p. 168). Subject/object, art/artist, creation/spectator become hard to distinguish. Kerry Power (2020) writes that “the objective is not to reach a determined path but rather, to tune into how materials work together and repel each other” (p. 75). This blurriness brings us back/forward/around to the “structure” of our books and the implications for analyzing our artistic data.



Figure 10. Another “Personal” Book. A photo of Kala’s book. The cover is covered in white fabric with a red “k” stenciled on top, accompanied by a lace border and fabric with polka dots. The book unfolds to reveal paper with pockets and various collaged materials, including tissue paper and fibers.

Sensory Maps

The books are mapping something. But what is a map? Classrooms and bodies within them are often conceptualized as stable, static entities that are knowable, measurable, and able to be mapped *onto*. For example, “inclusion” is often understood as a place-based concept wherein students with certain diagnoses are made to “fit” within predesigned educational spaces (Artiles et al. 2006; Slee, 2008; Naraian, 2016). This assumes a kind of cartographic certainty: the terrain is fixed, and the bodies moving within it are deviations to be accommodated or controlled (Brousseau, 2021).

An embodied approach to mapmaking (see Massumi, 2011; Paperson, 2014) might challenge this framework, however, understanding classroom spaces and bodies as not still. They are constantly seizing, shifting, stinging, flailing, and resisting capture. Taking up this approach, we understood our books not only as artist books that pushed back against book structures, but also as conceptual maps that defied linear notions of time and space. And, as an artful form, the accordion book extended beyond its physical pages, and conceptually kept working, engulfing us in analysis. Taken as such, Maria’s book, which during

the project, was drawn, pasted, colored, and played with by student participants, could also be considered “data”: a book co-authored with students.

Though we grounded our sessions in the physical structure of a tactile book, which students later displayed and took home, the book itself was no longer contained by that form alone. Following Jackson and Mazzei (2013), we came to understand our books as “between-books[s]”: not “made out of points,” or even the very paper that originally gave them shape (p. 1). Rather, the between-book is a performative book that is “inseparable from [its] relations” (p. 12). It belongs to no one and no thing – not even to its own structure. In our turn to process, the Together Time paper, in this sense, was not adjacent to or outside of the book, but rather, *part of it*, forming part of its becoming, and part of its in-between. For analysis, then, the student books were not all that mattered.



Figure 11. *Book with Student Drawings.* A photo of Maria’s book, with contributions from students including drawings of faces, a cat, and faeries. There are fibers which Maria pasted in, using them to touch and feel with students, and a pasted photo replica of a student heart.

Maria re-turned and played with the art gathered from Together Time, approaching it not as static data to be coded, but as something alive that moves with and through her. She treats her bodymind as an integral part of the research process, whereby she “attempt[s] to read this data from [her] own bod[y] as researcher,” (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 267) rather than understand herself as a neutral, outside observer. Her experience with each paper is different, bringing up sensations, colors, aches, sighs. For all, she assigned herself a process: take photos of all artwork, isolate them, and animate them into videos. Importantly, this video process, like the Together Time paper, is not something new, apart from, or outside of the physical books. It is a continuous

part of the ever-coming between-book. And, mapping is not something we are doing to the art. It is something the art does to, with, and through us. And, because art is not separate from our process, disability also becomes enfolded into and entangled with art itself. Holding close the concept of the between-book, which extends beyond the physical structure of the books themselves, we think in the next section with the entangled relationship between disability and art.

Disability as Method: Encountering “Invisible” Affordances

As we engage with this process of taking photos, isolating, and animating, we come to notice how we are engaging with this framework of disability as method, moving and feeling with the embodied affordances of our participants. We apply various editing techniques to our videos, noticing how the artistic manipulation of media can creatively intervene with and disrupt the privileging of the ocularcentric, textocentric (Conquergood, 2002), and disembodied in experience.³

As we work, creating alongside the affordances that the participants bring to our study, we notice that the videos are not necessarily drawn to imaginative actions that achieve a goal within a shrinking environment (Dokumaci, 2023). Rather, they tune into affordances that are perhaps less visible. They engage with tracings, such as the feeling that arises in Maria’s chest and flutters around when a student dumps an entire bottle of glitter glue on a piece of paper with intense concentration and declares “SPACE!”, as he carefully manipulates his artist tools.

Here is an affordance that reveals itself not as a creative adaptation, but as an affective encounter – a moment felt. So, it is “not a confrontation with a ‘thing’ but a relation that is sensed, rather than understood” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p. 4). The “zigzag” (p. 15) of the between-book enables this “refusal of method” and instead invites a sort of “tuning in” to sensations and glimmers that affect time and space, though such encounters might not appear to “accomplish” anything in the traditional sense of how we might think about school.

Rather, such encounters move through a sensory dimension where perceptual engagement is about experiencing the intensity of a moment before it can be named or before it “means” anything. In mapping these encounters through the artful, analysis becomes something different than forcing a change in perspective. A change in perspective still implies distance or a stance of observation. Instead, by inhabiting the relational field, the art moves towards what Manning (2016) calls a “collective ethos” (p. 60), refusing a firm separateness between observer and observed.

Figure 12. *What Does School Feel Like?* A video (video: <http://www.bit.ly/whatdoesschoolfeel-like>) created from a session about: *What does school feel like?*

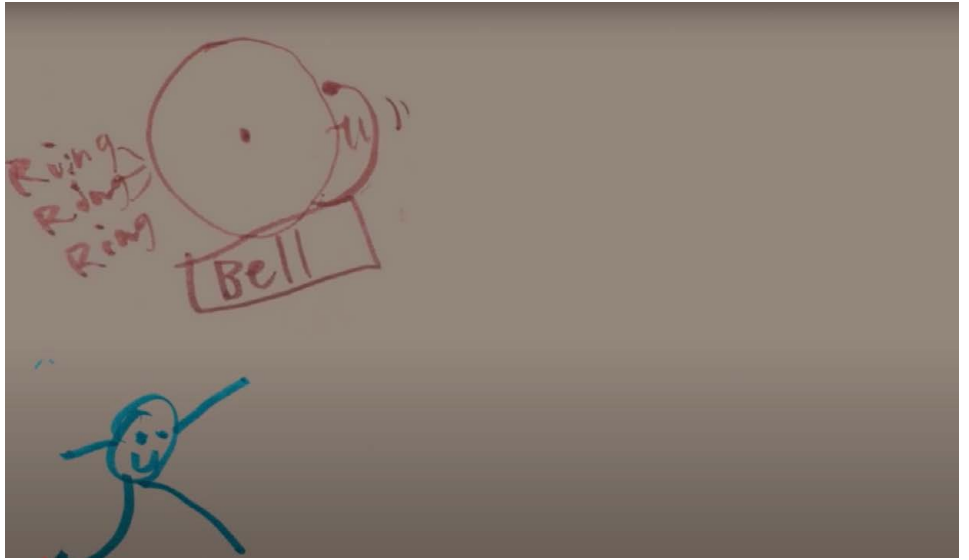


Figure 13. *Favorite Things.* A video (video: <https://bit.ly/favoritethingsinschool>) created from a session about “*Our Favorite Things.*”



Figure 14. *Feelings and Colors.* A video (video: <https://bit.ly/feelingsinschool>) created from a session about “*feelings and colors.*”





Figure 15. *Book Doings*. A video (video: <https://bit.ly/feelingwithbooks>) created from a session about “book doings”.

Findings

We turned to art as an activator, and what it activated cannot possibly be put into words. As the videos were played on large screens during our research sessions, shown again at an exhibition for the public, or played on the privacy of our own screens as we re-turned “data”, they bent, altered, and moved time. These changes were informed by the tracings of feelings, perceptions, and movements shared by intellectually disabled students who contributed their matters about school.

To acknowledge that *feeling* and *sensation* inform ways of coming to know open interactional spaces to micro-events that register phenomena which might otherwise be overlooked. For example, the dots on the cover of the “SPACE!” book do not signify anything, yet they bear tracings of how Lorenzo, the student who crafted them, feels about home. They serve as an invitation to imagine these students differently. We think this gestures towards a pedagogy that is attuned to the embodied knowings offered by students with intellectual disabilities— knowings that wander, bounce, stagger, and giggle.

Our final art “products” also invited us into questioning around authorship and perspective. Though each book and video was made by a certain artist, they came to be through a complex, folded series of processes, histories, and materials. This communicates to us that art insists on a continuous entanglement of identity, form, and time. This matters greatly in our conceptualizations of disability. As we create art with intellectually disabled students, it becomes impossible to separate *ourselves* from *them* and their processes. This invites significant re-workings of how “inclusion” could be actualized. We recognize that it may not only reside in the straightforward (though difficult) task of designing accessible environments for learning. Instead, it may emerge as something that is constantly zigzagging and changing as it comes into ongoing relation with other bodies. It is unfolding.



Figure 16. *Space Home.*

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Endnotes

1. We put out a call seeking students with the label of “intellectual disability” (ID). Almost 90% of the students whose families responded also brought the label of “autism.” Regardless of whether the student had been formally labeled as having an ID, all families responded to our call, prompting us to question the conflation between these two.

While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) distinguishes between “intellectual disability” and “autism” as two separate eligibility categories, the everyday practices and attitudes within schools often blur this distinction (20 U.S.C. § 1401[3]). Because we were interested in how such conflations arise we expanded our study to include students with “autism”.

While a full interrogation of the linkage between autism and ID is beyond the scope of this essay, we briefly examine potential conceptual underpinnings of the categories, particularly the notion of “intelligence” and how “autism” is often framed as its opposite. In Morton Ann Gernsbacher’s work with Melanie Yergeau (2019), they debunk the widespread belief that autistic people inherently lack a Theory of Mind (ToM), the presumed ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others.

Their study highlights how many ToM assessments are flawed, relying on speech-based, neurotypical norms of communication. Such tests often presume a Cartesian split between mind and body. By this logic, autistic people, particularly nonspeaking people, are seen as failing to recognize others’ minds. This flawed reasoning contributes to the frequent ascription of ID to autistic people, reinforcing ableist assumptions about what intelligence looks, sounds, and feels like.

2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. As we work, we notice that we cannot completely isolate “disability”, which Dokumaci emphasizes in her theorization of affordance- disabled (human) bodies do not have the capacity to *make* affordances. Rather, affordances come into being through the relationships of environment and bodies. We give two examples of this conundrum.

Together Time is collaborative. So, its art is co-produced by many people, gestures, materials. At first, Maria attempted to sort out the art made by students from art made by researchers. However, this became an impossible task. A red circle made by Bruno (a student) for example, was guided by her gentle mirroring, his mother’s insistent nudging, Ronita’s (a researcher) encouraging questions, and Spencer’s (another student) hand touching him as he worked nearby. As we re-watched the recordings, we noticed that what often appeared to be single art pieces or single “happenings” were really choreographies of intra-actions. So, it would be difficult to make a claim of “student” images.

Often as Maria edited, trying to extract images to animate them, they could not be effectively taken from their paper background. The editing software repeatedly failed to isolate figures, producing the message: “A subject could not be found.” Though she eventually achieved abstraction through manual editing, the error reminds us that these images were not simply abstractable as art pieces. They came to be through their environments.

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