Disability and…Podcast Episode 8: Disability and…Curation

**Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online Podcast, Disability And… bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month Aidan Moesby speaks to Jennifer Gilbert about Disability and Curation.**

**This podcast contains some strong language.**

**Intro music**

Aidan: I'm Aidan Moesby, I'm a Disability Arts Online Associate Artist, and I'm interested in curating. So today I've got Jennifer Gilbert in the studio, and we're going to talk about curating within a disability context.

Jennifer G: Hi, I'm Jennifer and I set up the Jennifer Lauren Gallery and I'm also a freelance producer and curator working across the UK and overseas.

Aidan: It's great to have Jennifer here, and I'm interested in how she works as a gallarist, but within a freelance context. And also as a curator within a freelance context, as well, because most of those opportunities are within institutions and it's quite difficult to work as a curator on a freelance basis.

Jennifer G: Mm-hmm (affirmative) definitely.

Aidan: So I think if we can just start off by having a conversation about, what is curating?

Jennifer G: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aidan: And what are the different elements of it, if we can unpack that a bit. So what does curating mean to you?

Jennifer G: Well I was thinking a lot about this when you sent me these questions over, and I think curating is about storytelling, and creating a narrative, and leading people on a journey through that... in whatever way you're putting it out there. And I think when I googled what the term curator meant, it said it's defined as, "The keeper or custodian of a museum or other collection." And that curation is, "The action of process, selection, organizing, and looking after the items in the collection or exhibition."

Jennifer G: And I think that when people think of a curator, if they don't know too much about it they just think it's someone just putting work on the walls, and thinking about where it goes. And I don't think they think about everything else behind it that goes into curating an exhibition.

Aidan: Yeah, just choosing some pictures and hanging them up.

Jennifer G: Yeah, just simple as that. So everyone thinks it's quite an easy job, but they're not thinking about the fact of all the research that's gone into that. The fact that they might have to write an essay for a catalogue. They might have to think about the labels, the interpretation, being able to set a narrative, thinking about how it is physically, and also the digital side of it as well. So it's a much wider job than what's actually thought about as being a curator.

Aidan: So if we can go back to your storytelling.

Jennifer G: Yes.

Aidan: Who's telling the story, and who are you telling it to?

Jennifer G: Well you want to make sure that you're telling it to as wide an audience as possible that might come through the doors of the exhibition. So you want it to be as accessible as possible. But also you want to get the facts correct on behalf of the artist.

Jennifer G: And if the artist is still alive, you want to make sure that they're happy with the way that you're portraying their story, or you're portraying the narrative of their work. Because you don't want to annoy them.

Aidan: And what would happen if you annoyed them?

Jennifer G: What would happen if you annoyed them?

Aidan: Yeah.

Jennifer G: Well, who knows? You might get some very bad press. They might blacklist you. They might pull out of the exhibition. You know, you want to do right by the artist, and you want to listen to their voice, and what they want to come across. And I think for curators that's really important, that you're listening to the other person, but putting it out there in a way that's accessible to all audiences to take something away from the exhibition.

Aidan: So it's quite interesting that you think it's about storytelling, because I think it's about conversations.

Jennifer G: Oh yeah.

Aidan: So when I think about curating, the definition that comes to mind is ‘cura’ (Latin) take care of.

Jennifer G: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aidan: So that's quite a reductionist kind of definition. But also for me, as a curator, it's about facilitating conversations.

Jennifer G: I would definitely agree with that.

Aidan: And I think some of those conversations are... So there's definitely the artist in there, the audience, the institution, and the work.

Jennifer G: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aidan: And so somehow it's about managing the conversations between all four of those elements, what is that conversation, and how do you encourage each of those elements to speak to each other?

Jennifer G: The fact is that if people go into an exhibition, you want them to have a conversation and you want them to think about the work. And you want them to maybe talk to somebody they're with about how they see the work. And often it's opposing things that come out of it. And I think if you've done that in an exhibition and you've got people to think, I think that's a really important aspect of what you're trying to achieve.

Jennifer G: You don't just want someone to go in, walk around and be like, "Oh yeah, la la la", and then walk out and not have taken anything. If they've then gone away and had a conversation with someone, or whilst they were there had a conversation with someone, tweeted about it, or done something, I feel like you've achieved some of what you were trying to achieve from that.

Aidan: So some of that is about taking that conversation out of the-

Jennifer G: Oh definitely, yeah. That's definitely important, in my mind. That it doesn't just stay there and that people do go out and have these conversations and put it out there. Not just with their friends, but put it out there on the internet to see what other people think as well, and hear how they've portrayed the exhibition, and what they've taken from it.

Aidan: Shall we take a look at each of those component parts? About, like, what do you think about the role of the curator, the role of the institution, and the artist, and the work itself, within curating? And within how people experience art.

Jennifer G: I feel like it is a whole institution thing, when it comes down to an exhibition. And it has to go from top level down to front of house staff. And I feel like everyone should be on board and know what's going on, kind of thing, and not be kept in the dark. Because I think in too many institutions the information stays at the top level, and it's never passed down to the other staff.

Jennifer G: And the other staff, even front of house staff and volunteers are often the ones that are communicating with the public, and are front-facing. And I think sometimes when you go in, and then if they don't really know what's going on, it's a bit like... okay, clearly no conversations happen here. I find that a little worrying, and I find it almost quite sad, that the institution doesn't want to pass any knowledge on to the rest of the staff to make it a whole experience for the audience member that's coming in.

Aidan: And then what do you think about the voice of the actual art?

Jennifer G: You mean if you put your own text next to it, and you're not allowing it to speak for itself, do you mean that?

Aidan: Yeah, or not even necessarily by putting some text next to it. Just by perhaps showing it badly. Or in the wrong context, that it's a work that maybe doesn't fit in with the rest of the body of work.

Jennifer G: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. I think if you show it in the wrong context, and yeah, it's got no text next to it, then that's never good.

Jennifer G: I think things have to be displayed to a certain quality for people to value it. And I think, especially within the disability arts world, there's too many things that are put out there not at the right level of quality. And I think if the institution, or the people that are putting it out there, even if they don't have the budget for it, if it's put out there and it doesn't have the right quality to it, and it's not framed in a really beautiful way, it feels like that institution hasn't valued that work.

Jennifer G: And then from the audiences coming in it's almost like, "Well why should I value that if they haven't valued it?" And I think how you display the things definitely changes the audience's attitude to that piece of work. And I remember when I was working at Pallant House Gallery in Chichester, has a very traditional modern British audience. But we often did Outside In exhibitions there.

Jennifer G: And Outside In is an organization that supports artists facing barriers to the art world. And because they were high quality exhibitions hung the same way as a Peter Blake exhibition would be, it kind of challenged the audiences that went there, who were modern British audiences, to look at the work of disabled artists in a new light. And to think, "Well if Pallant House thinks that this is exceptional work, I need to try and alter my mindset and see why they think it's a really special piece of work, and why I should be appreciating it in the way that I would appreciate any other artwork."

Aidan: And why do you think that traditionally work by disabled artists, or disability arts, is perceived as having lesser quality?

Jennifer G: I think from across the years, a lot of it is down to budgets, and the very limited budget that disability art organizations often have. So they don't necessarily have the right money to put things out there in a way they might want to put it out there. But they still want to put it out there for people to see. So things might be pinned to the walls. They might be Blu Tacked up, because at the end of the day they still want audiences to see the artwork made by the people they're working with.

Aidan: I think this is part of the problem, is the fact the, you know, want to get that work out there, but actually the institution isn't valuing it. And so we're being fed a very poor diet of art made by people with disabilities. So that's what we've come to associate it with.

Jennifer G: I know, and it doesn't seem to have been challenged much over the years, either. And I think-

Aidan: Why do you think there isn't a critique going on about the quality of disabled work, or-

Jennifer G: I would love to know why there isn't a critique. I ask this question all the time, and I find it-

Aidan: I keep asking it as well. There's just I never find anybody to answer it.

Jennifer G: I find it really frustrating that arts critics very rarely cover work that features work by disabled artists, or outsider artists, or things. And going back to Pallant House again, when we had exhibitions there, there would be one exhibition in the main space, so it might have been Peter Blake, or Scottish painters. And then Outside In would be in the other main space.

Jennifer G: And when arts critics came down to review the very big artist, they were invited to come in to the other artist, and then never would, and would leave without seeing it. And for me that's really frustrating, because they weren't even giving it a chance. And it's automatically like as soon as they heard the word... you know, it's work by disabled people, they automatically stopped and was just like, "No. That's not my cup of tea."

Jennifer G: And it's like, "Well why isn't that your cup of tea?" And I was never there to have those conversations, because I was never part of that tour that they were getting. This country seems to be so far behind other places. So in America there's lots of critics, art critics, that are writing about disability arts, and about outsider art. And putting it out there in like The New York Times, and The Washington Post, you know, it's getting the recognition it deserves.

Jennifer G: And even if some of it might be negative, it's still being critiqued. Which is ultimately what disabled artists want. They don't want to be you know, "This is all amazing," and, "Isn't this wonderful?" They want to be treated the same as any other artist.

Jennifer G: And so even if negative things come out, I think that's important for these artists to be able to move forward, to work on things that might have been flagged. And why is America doing that? And why are people like Jerry Saltz championing this work, whereas in England we don't have a champion of this work who's up there, seen as a big art critic? And I think that really needs to start to be challenged more.

Jennifer G: Yeah, I think one of the issues we face, from talking to an art critic recently that came to one of my exhibitions, is that they're unsure how to write about it, because they're worried that they're going to use the wrong terminology when talking about the disabled artist, or something relevant to them. And they don't want to be penalized for using the wrong language.

Jennifer G: So often they would rather not write anything at all, and stay on the right side of things, rather than write something that comes back to haunt them and be a really negative thing, when they think they were trying to do something good through covering it in the first place.

Aidan: So if we go back to thinking about what curating is, and what is it in relation to disability? And whose responsibility for access, do you think?

Jennifer G: Well it's not just the curator's responsibility for access, at all, when it comes down to exhibitions and institutions. Because it should be the whole organization that's supportive of the access, and adapting things, and making it accessible to a wider group of people.

Jennifer G: And so it's everything from, you know... it's not just ramps. It's about having the correct restroom facilities. It's about having sliding ticket-scale prices. It's about having the right lighting, having things displayed at the correct height, so that it's more suitable for wheelchair users. It's about having accessible information on websites, so that if someone wants to visit who's in a wheelchair, they can easily find this information without having to search and delve, or make a phone call.

Aidan: So you mentioned about hanging the work.

Jennifer G: Yeah.

Aidan: So there's a lot of conventions in the art world, and they have just been done forever. So if we're hanging a work, who are we hanging it for?

Jennifer G: Yeah, I mean I think everything you do is not going to meet everyone's, every single access requirement that everyone has. But lots of organizations these days have a disability group, that meet and discusses things around how the exhibition should look, the heights of things, and that sort of thing. And a kind of general consensus comes about through that.

Jennifer G: I mean you definitely have to listen to the artist's voice about how they would like their work displayed. But it's about a two-way conversation. So you need to have the conversations with them saying, "Well if we did that, then have you thought about this? And have you thought about this?"

Jennifer G: And it's a back-and-forth conversation with the artist just to make them aware of your thoughts about, if they want something really high, how that will affect other people viewing the work. And you bringing your knowledge from working in that sector to the artist, so that they can hear that. Because they might not have thought about that. They've just thought, "In my mind I visualize it like this, but I haven't really thought about anybody else in this situation, just me."

Jennifer G: So it's about that two-way dialogue, and about bringing to attention some things that they might not have even thought about before. But ultimately it's also about, in certain institutions, it is about challenging things that have been there forever. And challenging how they do things.

Jennifer G: And I know that if a staff member has been there for a very long time as well, they get very stuck in their ways. And it’s very difficult to challenge them, to change that, and for them to listen to what you're saying. And that's a very lengthy process of a long period of time breaking down their very strict rules about, "It has to look like this because it's always looked like this."

Aidan: Yeah. Then how do you get people to listen?

Jennifer G: Well through a long period of time. But also through bringing in other people, so that it's not just you saying it. Or other statistics that you've read, or-

Aidan: And people hate being told what to do.

Jennifer G: Oh people do hate being told what to do, but-

Aidan: Especially if they've always done something like this, and you're wanting to get them do it like that.

Jennifer G: Yeah, and this was definitely the case from previous roles where I've worked with big institutions, about challenging the hierarchy of people. So it's about challenging the director, and the curator that's been there forever.

Jennifer G: And being like, "You know it doesn't always have to be like that. And we would like it like this, because of X, Y, and Z. And actually we don't want to work with you unless something starts to break down and you start to listen to what we're saying, because what we're saying is actually really important. And if we're showcasing the work of disabled artists, and we want their voice to be heard, no you can't change all their text into your jargony text. We want the artist's voice to come through in their own language, not through your very institutionalized language. And we want it hung like this. And yes that goes against everything you've ever done, but let's try something different for a change."

Aidan: Isn't that just scary though?

Jennifer G: Terrifying. And I think for curators and people higher up in galleries, they are very nervous about change.

And I remember when you, Aidan, did this Interrogating the Invisibility last year. And you had Jess from the Mac in Birmingham on your panel. And she was talking about the nervousness of curators taking that leap.

Jennifer G: I've wrote down what she said actually, so I wouldn't forget. So she said, "They're nervous about taking that leap, but they're also nervous about working with disabled artists. Around the fact that they don't know what extra support they're going to need, and again the thing around using the right terminology."

Jennifer G: And so if you go in there and say, "We can provide X, Y, and Z. We can do disability equality training with all your staff. We can do all these different things, for you to start breaking down your barriers." I think it's important that these steps are now being taken in organizations.

Jennifer G: And I think it was important that you had that conversation, and bought together different curators and artists into that mix for them to say, "I'm going to be completely honest, and it is a nervous thing." Or you know, "My reputation is on the line if I do this thing."

Aidan: I would much prefer people to have their heart in the right place, and not say the right word.

Jennifer G: Completely.

Aidan: Than to say all the PC, all the right-on phrases, but actually not really care. And that there's no kind of genuineness, or integrity about that.

Musical interlude.

Aidan: I'm just thinking of the experience that I had on a residency. And there was 10 disabled artists.

Jennifer G: Yeah.

Aidan: 10 different sets of needs. Who's access? How does an organization that's hosting that manage that in the best possible way?

Jennifer G: Well, I mean everyone would have to explain what their access requirements are, and their access needs. But ultimately you're not going to be able to meet everybody's needs all at the same time. So as long as you're doing things to meet the majority of people's needs, and then when you're explaining what's going to happen, as long as you say exactly what's going on, so people can feel whether that's appropriate for them to go to that particular thing or not. As long as you've given them that information clearly to begin with, it's then up to that person whether they decide whether it's suitable for them to go in that particular thing that's happening at that point in time.

Aidan: I think that sense of agency's really important, isn't it. And also that kind of sharing the knowledge, and being able to make an informed choice.

Jennifer G: Yeah, it is leaving the artist to make their own informed decision. You don't want to be like, "Well I've done everything possible here, and it's going to meet everybody's needs." Because everything is not going to ever meet everyone's needs. But as long as you've put enough things in place to meet the majority of people's needs, and you've explained you know, "Unfortunately you might not be able to come to this, because there's no way I can do such-and-such to meet that need. But it's your decision whether you want to come or not."

Jennifer G: As long as you've made it clear and put it out there, so everyone's aware of what's happening, I think that's the most important thing.

Aidan: Yeah, and I think as long as you're having those conversations, and keeping those conversations open.

Jennifer G: Definitely, definitely. And ultimately, for these organizations that are putting on these residencies and things, they will learn so much from having these residencies, and learn so many things they can put in place for the future. Not just for disabled artists, but they should be thinking about these things for artists in general. And for making different allowances for whoever might come through the door. Allowances should be made for everybody.

Aidan: So what responsibility do you think commissioners have?

Jennifer G: So I think, massively, commissioning bodies need to be thinking about the money that they're putting into things. And the fact whether access has been thought about or not. Because, such a high percentage of the population has some form of a disability that this can't be anything that's overlooked any more.

Aidan: And again, that percentage will be increasing, because we're living longer, we have more complex needs.

Jennifer G: The problem is that if an artist needs to build in access costs... I had a meeting with the Arts Council recently, with an artist that I'm working with. And he's deaf. So I was explaining that he needs BSL, he needs a note-taker so that he can go back over things with support. And all the Arts Council were saying was, "Can you just keep the access as low as possible, though?"

Jennifer G: And I was like, "But you can see here in this meeting that we've got a BSL interpreter. It really can't be that low, because he really needs BSL for, you know, pretty much everything he does, because sign language is his first language, They don't want to pay out that money, was the vibe that I was getting. And I felt really uncomfortable in that meeting, because I was like, "You say that you want to provide more support for more disabled artists, any yet you're stopping them applying for the thing that is allowing them to move forward in their career as an artist." And that makes no sense to me, whatsoever.

Aidan: Thinking about performance in a wider sense. That performance has really made massive strides in access, and in the quality of disabled work, or disabled-led companies. To the state where it's selling out mainstream theatres, to mainstream audiences. And there's absolutely no stigma.

Aidan: It appears that the stigma of disability performance, disability theatre, dance, is evaporating as we speak. But not so for visual arts.

Jennifer G: For visual arts. I would agree with that, and, yeah, the theatre side of things has massively moved forward. And the fact that there were shows in Edinburgh that were relaxed performances, that made them more accessible to people. But visual arts just seems to be stuck and not really moving forward, or moving forward at the slowest pace possible.

Jennifer G: And that is really frustrating. And I think it's great in the performance side of things, you've got people like Jess Thom that are really championing it. And I think about visual arts, and I think there are different people championing it, but not to the same scale. Or it's not being heard at the same level as it is in theatre. And what do we need to do now to push that forward? To make the visual arts wake up and pay attention to this?

Jennifer G: And a lot of it is about the fact that it's just not on people's radar. It's just not on curator's radars from big institutions. If they're not seeing it in spaces where they go to, and if they're not seeing it in big newspaper articles, because they've got so much going on, it's not there for them. They're not seeing it in people's programming, they're not seeing it in spaces, so basically it doesn't exist.

Aidan: And also it's, I think, to go back to theatre. Unless my life is reflected back to me on the stage, what relevance does it have to me? And I think that's a similar thing for audiences as well, of work made by disabled artists.

Jennifer G: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think though when people go to see disabled artists perform, people like Candoco, the dance company, are absolutely incredible. And they've been seen on really high platforms now. So they were on Strictly Come Dancing on the BBC, which is massive for a disability arts group to be doing that.

Aidan: Absolutely.

Jennifer G: And it was incredible performance. And they're getting the recognition that they actually deserve. And when is visual arts going to get the recognition that it deserves? When are curators going to take some time out to go and visit disability art studios? To go and talk to disabled artists.

Aidan: Absolutely.

Jennifer G: When is that going to happen? And I went to a meeting in Manchester not very long ago, to do with a Haywood touring show. And as often happens, they'd programmed to go to several different places, but they were traditional artists studios. They were the big institutions.

Jennifer G: So I piped up and I was like, "Well are you going to go and visit a disability arts studio down the road as well?" And they were like, "Oh we haven't got time on this visit to do that." And you're like, "But will you do it on another visit?" And they're like, "Oh, we'll see."

Jennifer G: And it's like, "You should..." when you go and visit a city, if you're trying to find new artwork, you shouldn't just stick to the mainstream, you know, this artist's studio, this artist's studio. I feel like they should be looking at the whole artists' network in Manchester, and everybody, so that they've got a well-rounded view of everybody.

Aidan: But also because a lot of artists with disabilities haven't been to art school. They don't have the same support structure, they don't have that network. They don't have the same profile, they may not even have a studio.

Aidan: So how do you get past those gatekeepers, those curators? How do you actually get a curator to say you know, "Here I am. Please come and look at my work." And yeah, you know...

Jennifer G: Well you can't, because most of them, because of their disability, would find that the most difficult thing to do. And their anxiety might stop them doing it. They don't like busy places, so they won't go and network at private views, because there's too many people there.

Jennifer G: So this is why the gatekeepers, the curators, need to change how they're working, and need to change... You know, diversify the things they're programming in their spaces, and go out and see a broader range of people that are out there?

Musical interlude.

Jennifer G: The disability arts movement, and the outsider field, are such important parts of art history. And why are big institutions not including it in their collections? Why is it being ignored?

Jennifer G: Is it because it's this other? Is it because it's disabled people? Do they feel that their audiences won't like that? Will it affect their reputation if they show that? I mean there's a multitude of questions that could be asked, but ultimately they're just not included.

Aidan: No.

Jennifer G: And you know...

Aidan: And they're seen as lesser.

Jennifer G: Seen as lesser. Because they've not been to art school. Because they haven't got these qualifications. "Oh what have you done?" "I've done a residency in this, I've been here, I've shown here. What have you done?" "Oh well I work out of this studio here, and I make this work, and I've shown it in the local community centre down the road." Why is that not as important as having your work in these other spaces?

Jennifer G: And George Vasey?

Aidan: Yeah.

Jennifer G: ... was part of your event at the MAC last year. Basically he said, "Do you have to have your work shown in the Tate for you to be validated as an artist? Like does having your work shown in the Tate mean that you are any better than someone that has their work shown in a lesser space?"

Jennifer G: And I think that's a really important point to make. Do you have to be showing it here, or can you show it here and it still have the same importance? And what does the Tate do that this other venue doesn't do, other than it being a massive institution? Why is that more important than you showing here?

Jennifer G: And especially for artists with disabilities, and artists with learning disabilities, just to show their work in the first place anywhere, for them is a really important moment in their life. And they can bring their friends to see it, their family to see it. And for them that's like a recognition. "I've been recognized. I've had my work shown on the wall in this space."

Aidan: But it doesn't have to be down the corridor towards the toilet, does it?

Jennifer G: And it shouldn't be there.

Aidan: Well no, but it usually is.

Jennifer G: It usually is. Downstairs, round the corner, on the back wall. Which is wrong-

Aidan: Oh, yeah, I heard there was something like that showing, but I'll just ask a colleague.

Jennifer G: Yeah, yeah. So people don't tend to know about it. But you kind of have to look at it in two ways. Yes that's very wrong that it's being shown in these spaces. But if you look at it sometimes from the artist whose work's being show, and for their wellbeing, and for their confidence, that is a massive confidence boost. That someone has liked their work enough to hang it somewhere. On the wall. No matter what that is, they have a proud moment to say, "Actually that's my work hanging there."

Jennifer G: "Yes that's really important, and I acknowledge that that's really important for you. But my main drive, and my passion in life, is that it's shown in the right way, and that value has been placed on that. And no, it's not next to the toilet, it's in the main gallery. It's in a really beautiful space, hanging with the right light on it, in a beautiful frame, so that everyone can appreciate the incredibleness of your work."

Jennifer G: But you can't take away from the fact that it's important for the artist to show their work in the first place.

Aidan: Yeah, absolutely. That goes back to the value that you were talking about earlier. But also it's about how we value people. And we don't value disabled people in society.

Jennifer G: Especially if it's being stuck down round there, yeah.

Aidan: So we don't value disabled people in society, so why should we value their work?

Jennifer G: That is very true.

Aidan: So we've got to change... Which is a complete societal, structural problem as well. Not just the issues of the mainstream art institutions.

Jennifer G: Well I think that is starting to change more now, and I think people are making enough noise to start paying more attention to disabled people, and their artwork.

Musical interlude.

Aidan: I think you've got a really interesting practice, and a really interesting approach. And, you know, you're doing it by yourself. And I came to your last exhibition in London.

Jennifer G: About three Japanese potters, that are self taught?

Aidan: Yeah, and that was in a really nice gallery, a really nice space. It was a really well curated exhibition. That was the first time I'd seen one of your exhibitions. And I was thinking, how did you become a curator? And then what was that leap to becoming a gallerist? How does that all work? Particularly because you don't have a gallery.

Jennifer G: Well I don't have a gallery, no. So I set it up in May 2017. And at the moment I support around 17 disabled or self-taught artists from around the world.

Jennifer G: And I set it up on the back of working for different organizations supporting disabled artists to get their work out there. In mainstream settings and allowing them to have a voice. And that's something that I'm really passionate about, because I often think so many people are overlooked that really deserve to be recognized, and deserve to get their moment, kind of thing.

Aidan: So you say you support 17 artists. What does that mean?

Jennifer G: And so on my website each artist has their own profile with a biography that I've checked with the artist. Or if the artist is non-verbal and unable to check it I work with their family, and the institutions, to check that everything is okay with everyone that's involved.

Jennifer G: I do pop-up exhibitions, or art fairs. So whenever I plan to do something, I run the idea past the artist, or the studio or institution, to check that they're happy with what I'm planning to do.

Jennifer G: So I'm trying to put it out there, whenever I do my exhibitions I see it as a contemporary art show. I choose spaces that are mostly, on the whole, accessible. I choose language that is accessible. I do everything so that it's open to as wide an audience as possible. But for it to be seen as an art show and not as, "Look at me, aren't I great that I'm putting on this work?" Because ultimately the artists that I work with, I think, are incredibly talented and I want more people to see their work.

Jennifer G: One of the artists I work with was in the Venice Bienalle. He had his work at Frieze Art Fair this year. So he's now getting recognition within the contemporary art world, which is so important. And more things like that need to happen. In England, not just in America, or in Europe. And it's my drive in life to see this happen.

Aidan: And that really comes across, when you come to a show, and when you look at the website, or when you talk to you, about where that drive is heading. Undeterred.

Jennifer G: I will keep going, and keep chatting to people, until something starts to change. Because as I said earlier, it's the voice of the artist, and it's so often ignored, and so often overlooked if someone has a disability. And it's so morally wrong, and it makes me quite angry, that I try really hard to...

Jennifer G: Where possible, if an artist can give a talk, I'd like them to give a talk about their work, so that people will listen to them. Because through past experience I think the art historian, the artist saying things in their own words is far more important than anything I could ever say. And them doing it in their own way is far more important to me for people to listen to that person.

Aidan: And I'm just thinking back to how you do it on a totally self-funded... you know, it's like, why aren't these institutions who have massive buildings, budgets, people, not getting it right?

Jennifer G: Well, quite. But it is about changing their mind set, and changing things that have been ingrained for so long into these institutions. And I think because I've worked with disabled people, like one-to-one, and I've done personal support work as well, I've come at it from all angles.

Jennifer G: So I've worked directly with disabled people, I've done art with them, I've hung their art. I feel like I have a very well-rounded view of disabled people and being able to support them and support their needs. And maybe more people need to go out into the community and do these things.

Aidan: But I imagine some people, perhaps, when they're listening to you are thinking about, going to a studio. And it's like, well that's not glamor, but Frieze-

Jennifer G: The Frieze is very glamorous.

Aidan: You know, and it's like-

Jennifer G: I felt really out of place there.

Aidan: And it's like, you know, maybe more people are attracted to the Frieze side of things than the coal face of going to an art studio with disabled people.

Jennifer G: Yeah, probably. Yeah, but then that's where they'll learn more. You're not going to learn at Frieze, at all.

Aidan: Absolutely.

Jennifer G: You're going to learn going to the grassroots level. And another thing that I wrote down, when I was thinking about these questions, so Jess Thom, again, said recently that two thirds of the general population feel uncomfortable talking to a disabled person. That is a shocking statistic.

Jennifer G: And this is perhaps why people aren't going into these institutions and these art centers supporting disabled artists, because they're too afraid of the unknown and they're too afraid of what might happen to them. Venture Arts had a guy from Manchester Finest go in to see them a few weeks ago. And he's just released an article on his blog this week, about how incredible the experience was for him. Going into Venture Arts, seeing their work, chatting to the artist. And he was like, "More of this needs to happen."

Jennifer G: And I'm hoping through that article being out there, in Manchester, maybe more of the institutions might pick up on this article. And maybe they'll start to pay more attention to these art studios that are doing incredible work that more often than not goes overlooked.

Jennifer G: Or if they are picked up by a mainstream gallery or something, it's going in, it's ticking a box for that gallery for that year, "We've worked with disabled people, tick."

Aidan: Absolutely, yes.

Jennifer G: And then it's like you go in you do a project, and then you come out and there's no relationship built. And that happens far too often.

Aidan: Yep.

Jennifer G: And some organizations I know won't do that. They'll only get involved with situations if they know it's going to be a long-term thing, and they know they're going to have a long-term relationship, because they don't want to be that statistic. They don't want to be that tick-box. They want a meaningful relationship where that institution really appreciates and wants to work with that organization to build a long lasting relationship.

Aidan: And that's where real change comes from, is through that. So we can have those more honest, open conversations, because we've built up some kind of trust and respect. Yeah.

Jennifer G: I don't think they realize the effect that has on that disability group, or some of the people within that group.

Aidan: Absolutely, yeah. It just reinforces that rejection.

Jennifer G: Because they feel isolated again, and they feel rejected. And because some of them might have felt rejected most of their life, you're just adding to the pain they might already feel. And I think bigger organizations don't take that into consideration. They're just, like you said, thinking, "Oh yes, I've got this money, I'll do this wonderful project. Isn't it wonderful that we've got this group in? Okay, see you later, lovely to meet you."

Jennifer G: Also, they're not thinking about the fact that that disability arts group has then got to pick up the pieces and put some passion and love back into that group again. And make them feel wanted again. That's terrible.

Aidan: What are the important conversations that we should be having right now? And what isn't-

Jennifer G: Why isn't there disability artwork in mainstream galleries? Or outsider artwork?

Aidan: And what isn't being said? So yeah, why is there no mainstream galleries?

Jennifer G: Why is there no mainstream galleries showcasing big shows of this work currently in this country. Why is it not on curators' radars? Why are critics not talking about it? I'd love to get a bunch of art critics in a room, together, with a bunch of disabled artists, and just openly say to them, "What issue do you have in writing about this work? And here's a bunch of people, and let's bat some ideas off each other. And maybe let's us tell you about this world, and why it's so great, and why you should be writing about it." And then see where it goes from there. I'd love to do that.

Aidan: it's not just the mainstream critics, but where are the disability critics?

Jennifer G: Well, yeah.

Aidan: You know, where are our own critics?

Jennifer G: Yeah. And I think what people tend to forget is when art critics write about these shows and it gets featured in The Guardian, The Financial Times, wherever it goes. That is ultimately what audiences are looking at a lot of the time in the art world. And they are going to be going to those shows that they see advertised, and they see reviews of.

Jennifer G: And I think that critics are then forgetting that if you don't write about these things, no-one's going to know they exist. They're only going to know that, you know, this Tate Britain show's on, this show's here, this show's at The Haywood. Because those are the only shows that people are reading about in the places where they look to find information about bigger shows to go and visit around the country. So, if they're never being covered, they're never going to be visited by a bigger audience of people.

Aidan: Because no-one knows about them apart from family and friends.

Jennifer G: Because no-one knows it's even on. And unless you go onto ArtRabbit or something where you can list it for free, disability organizations don't have thousands of pounds to spend on magazine advertisements, newspaper advertisements, you rely on free listings. Like me, I rely on free listings, word of mouth, social media.

Jennifer G: And if you're Tate Britain you can pay £10,000 to have an article in Art Monthly. I can't pay £10,000.

Aidan: No?

Jennifer G: And most disability arts organizations can't pay £10,000. That's ridiculous. So you're never going to be hitting these audiences that you'd really love to come and see your show, unless people are writing about it, however they write about it, in a place where people are going to see it advertised.

Aidan: Because the only bad publicity is no publicity.

Jennifer G: Exactly. And even when you tell people that, you know, "I work with some disabled artists, and I run this myself, and I'm doing this. You know, I've got very low budgets for things." And they're like, so one of them, London Standard or something, just to do a tweet, £300.

Aidan: Wow.

Jennifer G: Just to tweet about the exhibition.

Aidan: One tweet.

Jennifer G: And I was like, "£300! No I don't think I have £300 for you to send one tweet out for that." And they're like, "Oh, well bear us in mind for next time." I'm never going to have £300 to do one tweet. Ever.

Aidan: I'll do one for a fiver for you.

Jennifer G: I know. It's just... it baffles me. There's so much money in the art world, and people are only getting ahead if you've got the money. And I think that's what frustrates me. That's why these big organizations and bigger shows get all this press, because they can afford to put it out there in these different avenues.

Jennifer G: And people working in disability arts fields, even if you've got funding for it, your funding is not going to allow for that. It's going to allow for a bit of a push on Facebook, or a bit of this, and a bit of that, getting something on Disability Arts Online, and paying for them to push it in different ways.

Jennifer G: Your funding allows for that. It doesn't allow for these ridiculous things that reach big audiences, because... just because.

Aidan: But that's-

Jennifer G: Why should you have to pay £300 for a tweet? It takes a second. I can send you the text, the 140 characters to tweet, and a picture. All you've got to do is copy and paste. And that's just cost me £300. Wow. Insane.

Aidan: So, what's next for you then, Jennifer?

Jennifer G: For me? Well, I've got a few art fairs coming up. Again, crossing over outsider and contemporary art again.

Aidan: Where are they?

Jennifer G: So one in Paris in October, which is the Outsider Art Fair. So I'm taking around six artists' work with me there. And then in January I'll be going to New York, to another art fair. And then a contemporary art fair in Paris in March. And then early next year, I'm planning a big black and white show of around 40 artists' work, from artists all over the world. And it's looking to be pretty special. And it will be on for about two weeks in London.

Aidan: Wow. Watch this space.

Jennifer G: Look out, watch this space. There's some very interesting work going to be in it. It's going to be pretty exciting

Aidan: So what's the website where we can see your work?

Jennifer G: So it's jeniferlaurengallery.com. And I'm doing a series at the moment on my social media, interviewing collectors of this outsider art field, to find out why they collect this work, which is very interesting.

Aidan: so I just had the pleasure of talking to Jennifer Lauren. Thank you very much.

Jennifer G: That's quite all right, Aidan.