FACT LIVERPOOL

RESOLUTION

Journal #2

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Introduction: *Resolution* – Art, Justice, and the Practice of Listening

Nicola Triscott

THE SYSTEM AND ITS DISCONNECTS

During forty years as a probation officer in Liverpool, Rosie came to recognise something critical about the people she assisted. Although they had made choices that had brought them into the justice system, she realised that their life options were often so limited that, as she put it, they might only have had one option. In the first episode of FACT's *Resolution* podcast series (FACT Liverpool, 2024a), Rosie shares this insight, highlighting something that's known within the system but often overlooked in public discourse and policymaking: that behind every prison case is a human story shaped by limited possibilities (FACT Liverpool, 2024b). In the same podcast, Dave discusses his time as a prison officer in HMP Altcourse. Over twenty-seven years, he has experienced first-hand the deep disconnects in the prison system. When he's asked if the system is broken, his response is blunt: 'Is it broken? I'd say, yeah. Is it going to remain broken? I'd say, yeah, for the foreseeable future' (FACT Liverpool, 2024b).

Voices like those of Rosie and Dave underline the crisis that Andrew Neilson, Director of Campaigns at the Howard League for Penal Reform, has spent years examining. During his visit to FACT's exhibition of Melanie Crean's *A Machine to Unmake You (M2UY)* in May 2024, which he describes in this journal, Neilson recognised in the artworks a different way of understanding justice than the usual discourse of punishment and reform. Crean's exhibition was part of FACT's *Resolution* programme, which continued the art organisation's extended history of work with the justice system. *Resolution* attempted to go beyond the usual therapeutic models of art in prisons and instead work through what the FACT Learning team describes as 'active reflection and experimentation', which aims to centre the knowledge that comes from lived experience.

Supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation over seven years (2018–25), the programme moved from focusing on veterans' experiences into a broader exploration of how art can influence attitudes and decision-making across the justice system (FACT Liverpool, 2025a). FACT's *Radical Ancestry* inquiry and artistic programme, spanning 2021 to 2023, has been a wide-ranging collective cultural exploration into how we construct our personal identities and sense of belonging through our understandings of ancestry and the things we inherit and pass on. We invited artists and curators to participate through research-based residencies, commissions and participatory projects, culminating in a rich series of artworks, exhibitions, events and various public-facing activities. The programme emphasised creating inclusive platforms, amplifying voices from diverse and marginalised backgrounds, and aimed to evoke thoughtful and affective responses from its audiences.

SEEKING MEANING

Resolution sits within ongoing debates about the social relevance of art, particularly the much-debated field of socially engaged practice. As Vid Simoniti argues in his contribution to this journal, arts and culture institutions today operate in 'a world focused on impact'. Artistic projects increasingly need to demonstrate measurable social outcomes. Simoniti suggests that this focus on quantifiable impact risks overlooking what we really want from meaningful artistic engagement.

Those elusive artistic values, such as understanding others' lives, self-discovery, or capturing moments of beauty and possibility, are things that 'impact' metrics can't possibly measure.

Resolution presents the idea that socially relevant art should emphasise creating meaning over simple impact. This philosophical stance has shaped every aspect of the programme, from artist selection to evaluation methods, prioritising the irreducible complexity of human experience over simplistic measures of impact. Through the programme, the FACT Learning team developed a method that defined participants as 'producers of knowledge, fostering a collaborative effort between artists, imprisoned individuals and their families, professionals in the justice system, and criminology researchers. This approach used creative storytelling, speculative design, and the creative use of technology and performance as avenues for exploration and learning' (FACT Liverpool, 2025a).

At the heart of *Resolution*'s methodology was what the Learning team describes in their text as a practice of listening – not 'listening to answer', but 'listening for the purpose of listening'. As the team discusses, this form of listening underpinned everything else: 'Without receptivity, how could you possibly know what to give back? How could you offer anything meaningful in return?'

Dr Emma Murray, during her eleven-year role as Criminologist in Residence at FACT, also introduced a pioneering embedded research approach. Murray describes this approach as one of 'epistemic trespass' – the crossing of knowledge boundaries in ways that deeply alter both the researcher and the research environment. Her sustained presence has enabled meaningful collaboration and demonstrated her willingness to have her central assumptions and expert authority challenged.

The ethical framework that emerged through *Resolution* is different from traditional university research protocols. As Murray notes, academic ethics often 'prioritise risk mitigation and institutional liability over participant empowerment', which can create barriers to authentic collaboration. Instead, the team developed what they call a 'Duty of Care', defined as their responsibility to partners, collaborators, artists and participants when developing art projects that will be presented to broad audiences. This approach represents what Murray calls ethical capacity: a personal, fluid framework centred in relationships that prioritise participant choice and empowerment through ongoing care and attention.

THE FOUR ARTISTIC COMMISSIONS

COMMISION 1: MELANIE CREAN – *A MACHINE TO UNMAKE YOU* (2019–24)

Working with imprisoned veterans at HMP Altcourse over an extended period (which was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic), artist Melanie Crean co-created a profound meditation on military identity, trauma, and the mythology of heroism. Through collaborative workshops, Crean and her participants identified and examined a concept they found problematic.

The veterans saw their lives as aligning with that seen in author Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, a mythological structure that promises transformation and mastery, but this archetypal story pattern fails to take into account the trauma involved in military service (FACT Liverpool, 2025b). The participants' own words led to the central insight of the project: that their intensive military training seemed to them like a machine designed to make them into soldiers. They realised there was no equivalent machine to 'unmake them' as they attempted to reintegrate into civilian life (FACT Liverpool, 2025b). This lack of support for transition and healing became the conceptual core of Crean's work.

Crean's approach went beyond traditional models of socially engaged arts by directly involving decision-makers in the creative process. She organised workshops that brought together people who are rarely found in the same room: prison officers and policymakers alongside imprisoned veterans and former participants pursuing new lives through higher education. These remarkable gatherings led to moments of productive disruption, in which power and lived experience intersected, sparking conversations and insights that the system alone could not have generated (FACT Liverpool, 2025a).

Crean's project produced a varied set of outputs: a series of silent video performances and a sound work filmed and recorded at HMP Altcourse reflecting on ideas of time, labour, mutual help and the hero's journey (shown as part of the FACT exhibition, *On the Other Side*), and a publication containing interviews with veterans and justice researchers and writings by the participants. As Neilson remarks, these works avoid the clichéd visual language of imprisonment, instead creating what he describes as a 'profound meditation on time'.

One member of the prison staff's response captures the transformative impact of the exhibition: 'I looked at these sessions and sat there, and I'm thinking, where does this all come together? How is it going to work? And then I remember, and I'll never, ever forget, when I went to the gallery and I saw it, I just filled up. You know, it was like – it brought it all together for me' (FACT Liverpool, 2025a).

COMMISION 2: KATRINA PALMER – *SENTENCES* (2022–24)

Katrina Palmer's practice, which combines writing with an expanded approach to sculpture and is often focused on marginalisation and absence, found a powerful resonance within the prison setting. Working with inmates and staff across HMP Altcourse, HMP Buckley Hall and HMP Askham Grange, Palmer produced *Sentences*, a book of collected writings that reflect on freedom, created through collaborative writing workshops.

Palmer invited participants to consider the blank page as a space to imagine alternative freedoms and possibilities, using three prompts: 'the space of the page', 'the door' and 'tomorrow'. These apparently simple starting points opened avenues for creative exploration. Participants began by writing on their own before sharing and collaborating. Through this process, the group reflected on their understanding of storytelling, where writing fiction can offer relative freedom.

The resulting book is a material manifestation of the process of collective imagination and care. The Learning team noted: 'Every single person said how beautiful Katrina's book is', which they understand as recognising the dignity of those who contributed. Palmer shared her work with participants through additional sessions at the prisons and by distributing the books. On receiving the book, one recipient remarked: 'This is fantastic and quite moving; what has been written lifts my spirits on a tough prison day' (FACT Liverpool, 2025a).

For the *On the Other Side* exhibition, Palmer's installation offered contemplation on confinement and possibility. A small bookcase, similar to those found in prison libraries, displayed copies of the book alongside an apparently lifeless magpie, secured behind glass. The magpie, often considered a symbol of bad luck due to its associations with theft and flight, seemed trapped alongside the book. The installation posed the question: 'How might ideas of existence change when arising from a liberatory space of reflection and exchange, shared across all types of lived experiences and expertise, rather than under the conditions of punishment and power?' (FACT Liverpool, 2025b).

COMMISSION 3: AIN BAILEY – *FOUR* (2023–24)

DJ, composer and artist Ain Bailey's project explored how sound and music can be mediums for intergenerational sharing and care. Working with imprisoned men and their families at HMP Buckley Hall in Rochdale, Bailey drew on the concept of 'sonic autobiographies' to lead collaborative sessions in which participants suggested, listened to and discussed music and sounds that held significance for them, sharing memories through this activity. This process became the foundation of the artwork, the men using different sounds and sharing moments to build from their musical memories to create their own compositions (FACT Liverpool, 2025b).

Bailey's gallery installation, *FOUR*, centred on the soundscape of compositions. For it she transformed FACT's exhibition space into a visitor centre, reflecting her observations of prison life and the architecture of the institution. Images discussed in the group sessions – a family pet, the Liverpool and Everton football club emblems, and Alder Hey Children's Hospital – appeared in the wallpaper design for the space. Excerpts from conversations between participants and their families lined the corridor leading into the installation, inviting visitors to examine these personal connections.

Participants' reactions to seeing their work displayed in the gallery reveal the project's significant impact. One participant remarks in a podcast discussion with Bailey, 'Yeah, explains a lot, doesn't it? Obviously, we haven't read everything or been there, but what we've seen is good. Yeah, there was that feeling of a family walking in on a visit, for sure.' Another says, 'I was blown away with it. To be honest with you, when I first saw it, I wasn't expecting anything like that.' A third participant observes, 'I thought we'd just have a little square corner and a couple of headphones ... But I think the actual setup is appropriate to the music, to the sounds that are coming out. ... It expresses itself from the minute you walk into it' (FACT Liverpool, 2024c).

COMMISSION 4: AMARTEY GOLDING – *SILENT KNIGHT* (2023–25)

In the final commission, artist Amartey Golding worked with men at HMP Altcourse over a series of sessions spanning many months. Between them, they created a 200-kilogram chainmail sculpture to embody their shared stories. As the latest work in Golding's *Chainmail* series (2015–ongoing), *Silent Knight* emerged from the artist's enduring fascination with chainmail, as both a material and a metaphor. The collaborative process at HMP Altcourse focused on the painstaking construction of individual chainmail rings, which Golding and the participants worked on while sitting together, sharing conversations and stories. In his studio, Golding and his team then integrated the participants' work into the sculpture, decorating it with chainmail recreations of symbols the men had drawn that had meaning to them.

The resulting work, *Silent Knight*, is the largest suit in Golding's *Chainmail* series, weighing over 200 kilo grams and constructed from more than 165,300 rings. The men's understanding of the project's significance profoundly shapes its meaning. They chose the chainmail project from two options presented to them by Golding. As Golding recounts in an interview with Murray (in this volume), one participant observed, 'I want to do the chainmail because then they won't be able to take it away. Our input will be there forever. It'll never be able to be taken away.'

Another participant, after an hour of concentrated work, suggested it should be called 'the suit of time' because 'we're all doing our time and contributing our time to this'. These insights encapsulate the work's central themes: permanence, collaboration, and time as the most precious resource.

Despite facing considerable institutional challenges but with the committed support of prison staff, the team was able to present the finished work within the prison. An installation of the suit in the visitor centre allowed at least some participants (many had left the prison, reflecting the ever-changing nature of prison populations) to see their creation in its completed form before it was shown to the public.

In the darkened gallery installation, the massive illuminated armoured cloak holds your attention – its form is reminiscent of a quilted duvet, clutched tight at the head, supported by the legs of those who hold it up. The people are represented by their shoes, which are visible under the cloak's edges. The suit faces two rows of church pews. An accompanying soundscape uses well-known songs, slowed or distorted, to conjure 'a place for reflection – a space of both judgement and salvation'.

NEW WAYS OF WORKING

Resolution introduced several methodological innovations that distinguish it from other socially engaged art or academic research. The concept of 'corridor criminology', suggested by Murray, describes the programme's dedication to informal learning. Instead of leading formal sessions or directing structured conversations, Murray was present in FACT's everyday spaces, enabling impromptu discussions and organic questioning.

A significant development occurred early in Melanie Crean's commission, when she suggested involving decision-makers directly in the project, not just inviting them to view the finished artworks. Murray was initially hesitant: 'Would busy professionals actually attend? What would they think of being asked to participate in creative workshops rather than simply attend a polished presentation?' But they did attend, and their presence had an enormous impact. Murray saw how senior professionals actively engaged with the complexities of prison experiences through the collaborative workshops, with understanding emerging not from debates or formal analysis but through the experience of creating together.

Resolution centred on its collective approach, which involved not only FACT staff but also the artists, participants, prison staff and other collaborators, who became essential to the process through sustained engagement. This approach requires 'letting go' of expertise, control, and predetermined outcomes to make room for genuine listening and collaboration. Through the collaborative process, FACT discovered that 'a shared language in practice facilitates an agreement on principles and ethics'. The process demonstrated how 'prolonged engagement in each other's worlds fosters trust' (FACT Liverpool, 2025a).

Importantly, this methodology redefines the artist's role within collaborative practice. Crean found that meaningful collaboration involves acknowledging that 'when you ask a participant to think about a possible future, and they come up with these amazing ideas of what should happen, if you are like me and you have the ability and the freedom to leave that building and leverage resources, then you have an accountability to try and make those ideas happen' (FACT Liverpool, 2024b). This embeds a responsibility for action within the collaborative process itself, changing artists into accountable partners working to achieve collective solutions. The institutional learning revealed the 'potency of poetics and art, not solely as storytelling tools, but also as influential social agents'.

MAKING IT PUBLIC

Resolution's public-facing exhibitions created opportunities to share the collaborative works with wider audiences. The *On the Other Side* exhibition (1 March–9 June 2024) featured works by Melanie Crean and Katrina Palmer (created through *Resolution*) and a complementary artwork by Pilvi Takala, addressing the impact of systems of power on individuals and communities. It received critical acclaim, with reviewers praising the way it 'successfully circumvents a polarising spectacle by focusing on process and dialogue' (Hughes, 2024).

Crean's contribution highlighted the men's individual journeys, their resilience in reimagining the possibilities for their own stories, and their collective support for one another. Video installations showed the silent performances filmed at HMP Altcourse in collaboration with the participants – variations on clocks exploring concepts such as time, the body, labour, and mutual aid among the men.

Palmer displayed her publication *Sentences* in a small installation, as well as leaving copies around the foyer for people to pick up and read.

FOUR (19 April–21 June 2024) presented Bailey's audio work within an installation, with the gallery redesigned to reflect her experience of the prison visitor centre. The exhibition created an immersive environment where sound, space and visual elements combined to explore 'how sound can be used as a collective experience to form personal connections and spark memories'.

Silent Knight (23 May–10 August 2025) displayed the monumental suit of chainmail, created by Golding and his collaborators, as a gallery installation that Golding describes as a space 'that echoed maybe like a chapel, a place for salvation, but also like a courtroom where you're being judged'. The image of a knight in shining armour, a symbol that's deeply embedded in the British subconscious, is reimagined by Golding as a way of reflecting on the tools some men use to navigate modern pressures and systems that preside over them.

The reach of *Resolution*'s work extended beyond the gallery through the strategic distribution of publications and resources. Melanie Crean's publication *A Machine to Unmake You* has reached nearly 200 people who work in the justice system and in policy or related campaign organisations, while Katrina Palmer's publication *Sentences* has been distributed to 140 contacts, including all participants in the artwork and those working in prisons and the justice system, as well as to prison libraries nationwide.

Audio guides, narrated by artists and project participants, provided an immersive experience for gallery visitors. Reading lists and learning resources supported each project. The commitment to sharing methodologies and outcomes extended to expert audiences such as criminologists and government representatives. The team has presented at conferences including the Howard League for Penal Reform National Criminology Conference 2022 (FACT Liverpool, 2025a).

The programme's influence on decision-makers was evident through events such as the February 2022 online discussion, 'How can artworks influence decision-makers?', hosted by Emma Murray with Melanie Crean and Anita Dockley from the Howard League.

READING THIS COLLECTION

This journal gathers together a variety of perspectives on *Resolution*, each providing crucial insights into the programme's innovations and implications. The collection makes room for multiple voices and interpretations that mirror the collaborative essence of the project itself.

In 'Changing Time', Andrew Neilson offers the perspective of an experienced prison reform campaigner encountering *Resolution* during a time of political crisis. His analysis of Crean's *A Machine to Unmake You* delivers both personal reflection and a strategic evaluation of art's potential to reshape policy thinking.

Neilson's observations about the exhibition's visual language and its temporal intricacies illustrate how artistic approaches can reveal aspects of imprisonment that conventional reform discourse find difficult to address.

Emma Murray's 'Criminologist in Residence, Signing Off' provides unparalleled insight into the embedded research model central to *Resolution*'s methodology. In her reflection on over a decade of collaboration, she charts her path from conventional academic methods towards a fruitful disruption of disciplinary boundaries. Murray's account of learning 'aesthetic ways of knowing' and developing 'ethical capacity' provides transferable insights for other researchers interested in genuine collaboration across institutional barriers.

The Learning team's 'When We Became Listeners' explores the way of working that underpinned all their work. By identifying listening as the cornerstone of collaboration, their analysis of key learning moments offers practical guidance for others attempting similar projects. They describe a critical shift from regarding participants as subjects to understanding them as collaborators, each with their own expertise rooted in their lived experience. Crucially, they found that meaningful impact arises through 'spending time with each other to understand different sides of the same story' rather than through formal programming structures.

The interview between Emma Murray and Amartey Golding reveals both the artistic process behind *Silent Knight* and the broader challenges facing artists. Golding's candid discussion of economic pressures and sustainability challenges as an artist provides vital context for understanding what is needed to support this work. His insights into time, community and material meaning reveal the depth of engagement possible when artists and participants receive adequate support.

Vid Simoniti's 'What Does Art Do, and For Whom?' provides essential theoretical framing, situating *Resolution* within broader discussions about socially engaged art and evaluating cultural value. Writing as 'a viewer rather than a collaborator', Simoniti analyses how the programme navigates tensions between impact and meaning-making, offering a framework for understanding why conventional metrics often miss what is most valuable about this work. His analysis of projects, particularly Bailey's *FOUR*, demonstrates how artistic engagement can create opportunities for meaning-making that resist easy categorisation.

These combined perspectives construct a complex picture of *Resolution*'s accomplishments and continuing challenges. They provide insight into both practical methodologies and theoretical advances, while also giving honest assessments of what this work requires and what it can – and cannot – achieve.

BEYOND THE PROGRAMME

After seven years of dedicated engagement, *Resolution* has not only achieved tangible successes but has also raised ongoing questions about the power of art to reshape understanding within justice systems. The programme has created what Murray refers to as 'spaces where different ways of knowing can coexist – where lived experience sits at the centre' (FACT Liverpool, 2025a).

Perhaps *Resolution*'s most significant impact is not found in a single piece of art or a measurable result, but in demonstrating the transformative potential of sustained collaborative engagement. Through acts of collective creation, participants discovered fresh forms of expression and recognition. Audiences to the exhibitions and events became engaged in vital questions of justice, time and human dignity, rather than staying passive spectators of a rarely questioned system. Policymakers and justice professionals, through collaborative workshops, were confronted with lived realities that are often reduced to reports and numbers. This prompted actionable responses, such as Crean's pilot compassionate curriculum initiative, which is tailored to the higher educational needs of formerly imprisoned people.[1]

The process allowed the artists to think about their practice as part of a long-term project, further developing ideas and relationships. Crean integrated decision-makers into her creative process, while Golding explored collective creation through making chainmail.

Yet these changes arose from unique conditions, raising critical questions about their sustainability and transferability. The Learning team's comment, 'Once you start listening, you cannot stop listening', captures both triumph and dilemma. *Resolution* has developed methods and relationships that endure beyond the formal end of the programme, but as Golding explains, addressing the economic realities that confront deep collaboration is essential. Artists face growing economic challenges, and the significant support received from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation is difficult to match in today's arts funding landscape. These funding and resourcing issues raise vital questions about how cultural institutions can balance the intensive resource demands of meaningful collaborative work with other programming responsibilities and financial constraints.

Despite these hurdles, *Resolution*'s innovations provide valuable insights for other cultural organisations. FACT's resources and public platform provided the opportunity and responsibility for these projects to reach a wider audience beyond the justice system. By integrating the programme into FACT's main gallery spaces, rather than limiting it to community outreach, FACT showed that prioritising voices that are typically absent from art discourse can be both artistically rigorous and engaging for the public. This commitment to showcasing such work 'in the centre of the cathedral', as the Learning team notes, offers a model for other organisations, even if they cannot replicate the same scale or intensity.

The programme's methodologies continue to spread beyond their original setting. FACT has applied lessons from *Resolution* to a participatory arts project within the NHS, partnering with the Clatterbridge Cancer Centre Liverpool's Teenage and Young Adult Unit. Here, young people work with artist Nina Davies to reflect on care systems.

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1 The ideas for this pilot programme emerged directly from Melanie Crean's *A Machine to Unmake You* project. Led by the artist and working in collaboration with the Criminal Justice Conversations programme at Liverpool John Moores University, a group of academics started thinking about a curriculum responding to needs identified by incarcerated ex-service personnel during the workshops (FACT Liverpool, 2025a). This idea is currently being developed as one of the projects in the UK Research and Innovation – funded Future Leaders Fellowship project, Imagining Possible Futures – Activating Lived Experience in Criminal Justice, UKRI grant MR/Y017110/1.

At the same time, FACT is getting academic recognition for *Resolution*, supported by publications and the ongoing UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)[2] project, Imagining Possible Futures. This project maintains collaborations between FACT, Murray and Crean, suggesting that while challenges exist in the justice system, collaborative art provides a window into imagining possible futures.

As Simoniti argues, the real value of this project might lie not in solving systemic problems directly, but in creating opportunities for diverse communities to make meaning together, across their differences. *Resolution* shows that when institutions are truly committed to listening to others from across the boundaries that divide us, new and unexpected opportunities for understanding can emerge.

Nicola Triscott is the Director/CEO of FACT Liverpool.

2 UKRI is the national funding agency for science and research in the UK. It provides investment and support to researchers and businesses.

Image: Melanie Crean, *A Machine to Unmake You (M2UY)* (2019–2024). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

Image: Katrina Palmer, *Sentences* (2023). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

Image: Ain Bailey, *FOUR* (2024). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

Image: Amartey Golding, *Chainmail 4: Silent Knight* (2025). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

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What Does Art Do, and For Whom? The Social Relevance of Art

Vid Simoniti

FACT's *Resolution* programme is the latest instalment in a fifteen-year series of artistic projects working with people in the UK prison system. For *Resolution* (2018–25), four artists created works that engage with imprisoned people, their families and prison staff, in formats ranging from realistic to poetic, and across media that include installations, artist books, soundscapes and more. The works of *Resolution* are better described elsewhere in this journal issue; in this text, I approach them as a viewer rather than a collaborator, and take them as a starting point for a discussion of how we might understand the social impact of the arts more broadly.

I consider the way in which artistic and academic cultures have emphasised measurable outcomes, or social 'impact' (section I); I review the debate around socially engaged art (section II); and in section III I return to *Resolution* through the suggestion I think the project invites: namely, that the creation of meaning (rather than simply of impact) is what we should expect from socially relevant arts.

I: THE ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Cultural and academic institutions today inhabit a world focused on impact. UK university departments must report to the Research Excellence Framework every seven years, demonstrating their societal 'impact', which now accounts for 25% of a university's total score. Here, subjects like classics or literature are judged against the same metric of social usefulness as engineering or cancer research (REF Impact, 2024). The Arts Council's Let's Create strategy (part of its 2020–2030 strategy) also includes key performance indicators for measuring impact across its three stated outcomes: Creative People, Cultural Communities, and a Creative and Cultural Country (Arts Council England, 2024). Resisting the paradigms of the ivory tower and *l'art pour l'art*, the proof for the social value of the arts and humanities always seems to spiral back to the metaphor of a comet striking the Earth: impact.

The matrix of belief behind this measuring of usefulness may appear to be motivated by a kind of consumerist logic: money goes in, so something should come out, and we should know *how much* of that other thing is coming out. The desire to quantify impact, however, is not a straightforward consequence of the neoliberal or even the capitalist system as such. After all, there is no monetary return on investment here, but rather a quantification of something unquantifiable: social value. Instead, the consumerist paradigm seems to have crept into the very idea of what society is for (Clarke, Smith and Newman, 2007). Governments need statistics to demonstrate their value for money to the electorate: this generates the need for metrics at the level of funding bodies, and the need to measure impact thereby trickles down to where we might least expect it – *individual* academic or artistic projects. Largely, we in the cultural and academic sectors have learned to play along. But there has been some encouraging pushback recently: for example, the Meaningful Measurement initiative by the Old Fire Station, a small arts charity in Oxford. While this initiative recognises that objective reporting may be unavoidable to distribute resources fairly, it also emphasises that quantifying impact can warp how we understand creativity itself (Old Fire Station, 2025).

Perhaps, though, we might want to go even further, to resist any kind of measuring of the impact of the arts and culture sectors. It seems to me that we could base our resistance on two broad grounds. First, where the social impact of the arts seems intuitively the greatest, measuring impact seems most elusive. For example, if you think of the vast change in social attitudes over the past half century, it seems clear that liberal attitudes in the arts preceded those in society more broadly. It's likely that the arts also helped to *shape* those attitudes: for example, it would be hard to tell a story about changing attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community without invoking, somewhere along the way, Oscar Wilde, or James Baldwin, or Ellen DeGeneres. Yet, ascribing impact to any *individual* cultural figure or even artwork would be impossible: the sheer complexity of interactions between the arts, public opinion, activism and other factors is too great to capture (Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes, 2006).

Second, once we translate 'social impact' into a specific variable – a change in public opinion or an improvement in welfare – we quickly realise that, as valuable as these things are, they do not in fact represent what we expect from the arts as individual recipients. I, at least, rarely read a good novel and expect to become a little more included in society, or a little healthier, as a result. So why should we expect the arts to achieve something like that at scale? Those more slippery artistic values – an understanding of what life is like for other people, a deeper sense of our own lives, a sense of beauty, of fate, of hope – are never what 'impact' attempts to measure.

II: SOCIALLY RELEVANT ART: IMPACT OR MEANING?

Debates around impact at the level of funding bodies have an interesting parallel in debates about art practice, in particular around the genre known as 'socially engaged art'. While the term is well known within the arts, let us recap its meaning briefly here: this is a type of project-based art, originating in the 1970s but gaining wider recognition in the 1990s, which closely resembles non-art forms of social organising, often aiming to engage parts of society perceived as neglected or deprived. There are many sub-categories of such art, known by a variety of names, such as 'community-based art', 'social practice', 'useful art', etc. (Kester, 2004; Thompson, 2012). Some socially engaged artists emphasise concrete outcomes – such as Tania Bruguera in her manifesto for Arte Útil (Useful Art), where she argues that such art should always aim for a 'clearly beneficial result' (Bruguera, 2012) – while others may be happier to leave it open whether their work should result in concrete change. Due to the project-based nature of artists working with participants in prison, a casual observer might, at least initially, categorise FACT's *Resolution* as somewhere in the orbit of socially engaged art.

The aspiration of art to not only reflect but also participate in social change is, of course, a long-cherished dream of both avant-gardist and socially reforming artists, from Jacques-Louis David to Käthe Kollwitz, from Charles Dickens to George Orwell, from Suzanne Lacy to Ruangrupa. But what does it mean for art to be socially relevant? If artists become too much like organisers or social workers, what makes them still uniquely artists? Much ink has been spilled on socially engaged art, in part because the genre throws such foundational questions into sharp relief.

Perhaps one neat, quick way to sum up the possible positions one might take can be represented by this table.

	Authorship *(artist creates an artwork for audience)*	Participatory *(co-creation between artist and participants)*
Meaning *(understanding, thought, experience, beauty...)*	*(1)* Authored meaning-generating art	*(3)* Participatory meaning-generating art
Impact *(improved welfare, galvanised activism, organised resistance, measurable social progress...)*	*(2)* Tendentious (persuasive, propagandistic) art	*(4)* Socially engaged (useful) art

The different types of socially relevant art can be identified by asking two questions. First, what is the *type of value* to society that the artwork is producing? Is it the production of meaning (this might include a social message, understanding, thought, experience, beauty) or is it a more concrete and measurable *impact* (for instance, improved welfare, galvanised activism, social progress of some kind)? These two options are represented by the rows in the table. Second, what is the *mode of engagement* through which the artwork achieves its intended value? Is it through *authorship* (that is, the traditional route by which an artist or perhaps a group of artists creates a work that an audience receives), or is it through *participatory art* (that is, some form of co-creation of an artwork between an artist and participants)? Of course, these questions are abstractions, but they should let us see more clearly some of the categories that are unhelpfully conflated in current discourse. They produce four quite different types of art, and four quite different expectations of social relevance.

In Box 1 of the table, we have authored meaning-generating art, which is how most people probably think about the social relevance of the arts. When we interact with films, art exhibitions, novels, songs or video games we interact with an authored product, which we receive as a non-authoring audience. And what we look for in these works may, at its broadest, be described as 'meaning': for instance, a narrative that helps us make sense of ourselves and of the world; an interesting experience that renders life richer; a heightened understanding of something; perhaps even beauty; perhaps a kind of open-ended message we can discuss with other viewers. This art is relevant to society through the discourse it creates: the themes, questions and messages it offers to the audiences who engage with it. For instance, Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* (2000–03), Paula Rego's painting *The Family* (1988) and Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) all impart a meaningful vision of some part of social reality – the position of women in Iran, family relations, the history of slavery – even if their ambition is not, primarily, to effect social change.

By contrast, in Box 2 are the more explicitly 'political' works. These *try to enact* some social change, but still from within the confines of an authored work, in which the artist and the audience are quite separate entities. Protest songs, murals, the informational-activist works of the collective Forensic Architecture, or consciousness-raising documentaries such as the climate change film *Chasing Ice* (2012) all have *concrete political goals*: to galvanise protest, to inform people, to sway public opinion, and thereby to improve society in some tangible way. This second group, you might say, aims for impact; the first group aims for meaning.

This broad division between art-autonomous 'meaning' (understanding, experience, open-endedness, discussion, vision) in Box 1 and 'tendency' (commitment, call to action, impact) in Box 2 has been the subject of art criticism for several hundred years: it is the division between these two poles that has led to discussions about the difference between art and propaganda, and about the level to which artists should seek to participate in social change. However, as early as Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay 'The Author as Producer', another idea was taking root: that the *engagé* author should merge more closely with the audience, eliminate the distinction between author and public and create art alongside the proletariat (Benjamin, 1999). For Benjamin, the model for this 'operating writer' was the Soviet playwright Sergei Tretyakov who created his plays alongside the factory workers, though there is some irony in the fact that he was killed in Stalin's purges just three years after Benjamin's essay was written. We can detect echoes of Benjamin's model in the work of today's socially engaged artists such as Tania Bruguera or Suzanne Lacy: the call for erasing the division between artists and participants. However, the kind of value that is produced by participatory art can also split off into two options: meaning and impact. On the one hand, 'pure' socially engaged art aims for actual change (impact) in participants' lives: this is the clear aim of practices like Bruguera's (Box 4). Meanwhile, Box 3 is where we might place contemporary artists who practise participation and interactivity but whose aim is the more open-ended creation of meaningful experiences, rather than immediate social change. Tino Sehgal or Rirkrit Tiravanija's work is often cited as typical of this category, and is sometimes called by the label coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud, 2002).

The push-and-pull between these four boxes has, like a kind of magnetic tension, structured much of the debate in the art world of the 2000s and 2010s – debate that continues today. The meaning-focused practices (Boxes 1 and 3) are praised for focusing on artistic quality, but are attacked for being elitist, ineffectual, or complicit with the system. Tendentious work (Box 2) is accused of sacrificing quality for mere message, whereas socially engaged art (Box 4) seems to merge so completely with social work that its identity as art becomes questionable. Individual artists often find their own way to navigate between these positions, but the clear articulation of the value of art may remain difficult for a society in crisis, in which public funding of the arts and humanities continues to be under pressure.

III: SOCIALLY RELEVANT ART: FOR WHOM?

The two questions animating the thinking about social relevance above – 'What is the aim of art?' and 'Through what mode does art achieve this aim?' – have been recently displaced by the question '*Who* makes the art?' Viewing cultural production primarily through the social identity of the artists, or through their geopolitical position, mirrors the recent emphasis on positionality in social justice discourse; on the other hand, the focus on author identity has been critiqued for producing tokenism or requiring identity performance (Childress, Nayyar and Gibson, 2024). Here, I wish to raise a different question: 'For whom is the art being made?'

The desire of the arts and humanities sectors to reach people traditionally underserved by public arts funding is increasingly written into mission statements – for the Arts Council, for instance, this includes 'those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, D/deaf or disabled people, and those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds' (Arts Council England, 2025). I will not comment on the specifics of the UK situation here, but merely wish to introduce another binary for the above schematic representation of the arts' social relevance: between art produced for, let us say, 'art insiders' (audiences already within cultural institutions' reach) and 'art outsiders' (underserved or excluded audiences, however defined). That binary, we notice, cuts across the distinctions we introduced earlier.

BLUE = Art insiders GREY = Art outsiders	Traditional *(artist creates an artwork for audience)*	Participatory *(co-creation between artist and participants)*
Meaning *(understanding, thought, experience, beauty...)*	*(1)* Authored meaning-generating art	*(3)* Participatory meaning-generating art
Impact *(improved welfare, galvanised activism, organised resistance, measurable social progress...)*	*(2)* Tendentious (persuasive, propagandistic) art	*(4)* Socially engaged (useful) art

Here, our four questions about art's social relevance can come apart and produce a matrix of possibilities. Whether an artist is 'socially engaged' (Box 4) or, say, writing an opera (Box 1), they can attempt to reach audiences that are traditionally underrepresented in that part of the art world. An opera can successfully engage non-operagoers (outsiders), and a socially engaged artwork can be performed purely by art-world insiders (insiders).

It may very well happen that a Bruguera-type artist might organise a workshop for the 'community', but only art-world insiders turn up; meanwhile, even a form as 'elitist' as opera may (with a good strategy in place) successfully reach non-elite audiences. So, an artwork does not have to be 'socially engaged' in its format (Box 4) to attempt to break out of the echo chamber of the art world. An artist who works with complex structures of meaning, or metaphor, or symbolic registers, may likewise be doing something valuable by bringing new (or underrepresented, or excluded) audiences into their practice.

However, the very question of who is an 'insider' and who an 'outsider' depends on the context. There are, of course, many 'outsiders' to the contemporary art world – both underserved communities and people who are simply not interested in this kind of art. But it would be extremely presumptuous to suppose that these so-called outsiders do not have access to other meaning-generating cultural practices, whether that's going to karaoke bars or reading nineteenth-century novels, watching a TV series or participating in a religious practice. So, any artist attempting to reach 'outsiders' (that is, new audiences or new participants) has a kind of collaborative project on their hands: they are finding common ground, and they are thereby already engaged in an experimental project of translation and mutual understanding.

Returning to the art projects in FACT's *Resolution* series (purely as a viewer of the finished works in the gallery, rather than as a participant), it strikes me that their social relevance often lies in this kind of joint meaning-making. DJ, composer and artist Ain Bailey, for example, worked with imprisoned men and their families at HMP Buckley Hall in Rochdale. The resulting sound work and installation (*FOUR*, 2024) were inspired by the musical memories the participants shared with Bailey in the group sessions. When you listen to the interview with the project participants, they reflect on the musical structure of the work, how it connects to their memories, and how it speaks to the relationship they have to music (FACT, 2025). In other words, here is an opportunity to make sense of their lives, to see them transformed into some meaningful form. I do not mean this in a grandiloquent, 'life-changing' way, but simply in the way that we all tend to approach art that we 'vibe' with, that we get something from: we read meaning into it.

In other words, to explain the social relevance of an art project such as this one, we do not have to resort to some measurable 'impact' claim (Boxes 2 and 4). If FACT's *Resolution* project achieved some measurable social impact (such as lowering reoffending rates or improving mental health), then that is excellent. But what seems to me the primary concern animating these artworks is something else – the sort of thing we all want from art: an opportunity to generate meaning from complex intentional structures. It is evident from the interview with Bailey's participants that at first they were unsure what to expect, but that this is what they got out of the project in the end (as did, at a greater distance, visitors to the exhibition, like me). And that is valuable to the participants, though not perhaps in a way that can be measured using numbers. In discussing the social relevance of the arts, then, we may want to think less about impact, and more about how, and for whom, opportunities to create meaning are available.

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Journal #2
RESOLUTION

Changing Time: On Art, Advocacy and Social Policy

Andrew Neilson

Campaigning in the field of prison reform can sometimes be a punishing experience, in more ways than one. It's an area that is particularly vulnerable to political populism, and in the UK Parliament both the main parties indulge in punitive rhetoric and announcements that seem to fly in the face of evidence-led policy. That's a large reason why the prison population has doubled over three decades, and why the prison system in England and Wales has been running out of space, with a record number of people in prison in 2024.

I've worked in the area for seventeen years and progress has traditionally been sparse and piecemeal. For every step forward, there are often two steps back. My employer, the Howard League for Penal Reform, is the oldest prison reform organisation in the world. We were founded in 1866 by admirers of the eighteenth-century figure of John Howard – the very first prison reformer. The Howard League has many historic achievements, including being at the forefront of campaigns to stop capital and corporal punishment in the UK, but when it comes to imprisonment, there are few bright spots indeed.

When I visited the exhibition of *A Machine to Unmake You* in May 2024, it was exactly a week after the then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, had announced a general election. The situation in our overcrowded and failing prisons was very grave, and the election meant that whoever won the election in July would be left with a prison capacity crisis to solve. So I headed up to Liverpool with some trepidation, not least because it was unclear what would happen next.

I mention this to provide some context to my reflections, not simply because I want to consider the potential of art projects like *A Machine to Unmake You* to influence decision-making in social policy. The Howard League has worked with FACT in the past to consider the intersection between art and advocacy – for example, in the co-production of a board game[1] that explored the lived experience of people on probation. I had a particular interest in the ex-military aspect of *A Machine to Unmake You*, as some years ago I directed a Howard League inquiry into the issue of former armed service personnel in prison.

Colleagues at the Howard League and I were involved at various points in interactions with artist Melanie Crean,[2] as she developed the project over several years. In very early 2020, I was due to attend a session with the men at Altcourse prison but unfortunately had to cancel due to a bereavement. A colleague of mine, Rob Preece, who attended in my stead, thought the session was extraordinary in the way it got people living in prison, people working in prison and people working to reform the prison system around the same table to examine themselves and each other. Rob found himself deep in conversation with people whose experience of prison was entwined with their experience of the military, good and bad. Their discussions inspired designs and messages that would reappear later in the project.

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1 The author is referring to *Probationary: The Game of Life on Licence* (2017) by artist Hwa Young Jung and a group of men who are on probation. https://www.fact.co.uk/artwork/probationary-the-game-of-life-on-licence

2 Melanie Crean is the artist who led on the project Neilson refers to in this article, *A Machine to Unmake You*.

When I visited the exhibition, I was also inhabiting the role of an art-goer, and my own involvement in earlier stages of the project did not provide me with much insight into what to expect. I was struck by the power of the visual experience and the profound meditation on time – 'doing time' being a colloquial phrase for those serving a prison sentence. All the video pieces revolve around this theme and the most prominent of these, involving seven men standing on plastic chairs facing a prison fence and looking away from the viewer, kept me fascinated for a lengthy period. As the men pass along to the next chair in the row and shuffle along to the viewer's left, the swathes of abstracted footage that blur and elongate the figures speaks both to how a sense of time must warp during a custodial sentence and also to the way imprisonment itself dehumanises individuals within the institution. I revisited the exhibition several times during the day, not least because this video piece is looped to run across seven hours. The chairs the men used are physically in the exhibition space, and can be sat on to watch the film; this implicates the viewer in an unsettling way.

The visual art was also powerfully complemented by the audio stories of the men involved in *A Machine to Unmake You*, in the *Hero Journey* piece. Refreshingly, these moving stories are not about the men's experiences of imprisonment but are stories of their origins: of childhood, or of their (often traumatic) time in the military. The piece dignifies its participants and avoids drawing simplistic conclusions between their origin stories and their eventual destinations of their custodial sentences.

For me, one of the most exciting things about this exhibition was the way it avoided leaning into the visual language of imprisonment. I was asked to review an art exhibition some years ago at the closed Victorian prison in Reading (immortalised in Oscar Wilde's poem 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'), which featured pieces by artists such as Nan Goldin and Steve McQueen, and my one misgiving about the exhibition was the way in which the art was deliberately presented to exploit the prison space – including the display of art within cells and on wing landings. While the theme of voyeurism was explored in Nan Goldin's piece, the uneasy spectacle of well-heeled visitors inspecting artwork in a building that had such a long history of hosting human misery was hard to shake. It is easy to fetishise the prison aesthetic, as many popular art forms do, and this is something *A Machine to Unmake You* steadfastly manages to avoid.

An artistically brave decision like this raises the question of how effective such an approach would be at influencing the development of social policy. On one level, policymakers and practitioners in an overcrowded, failing prison system live and work in the concrete, not the abstract; with instrumental means, not metaphor; without the time to consider what the institutions they work for do to the individuals they confine. But that is why taking people out of the environment they work in, to present them with these issues in a novel way that works against the quotidian reality of the system (it is not only prisoners who are institutionalised), seems valuable. Of course, not everyone will respond positively to the exhibition, but even a negative reaction stirs something that loosens the cement in the mental walls both staff and prisoners construct around themselves.

As for decision-makers higher up, such as politicians, the picture is perhaps more mixed. Some recent research around penal policymaking has suggested that the politicians responsible for managing the justice system are all too aware of the injustices it contains, and of the need for change. Unfortunately, they often feel constrained by public opinion and a hostile media that deploys some of the principles of the branding materials developed as part of *A Machine to Unmake You* to brutal effect. The subversive intent behind the project's use of branding is an important act of resistance – but one that also acknowledges the scale of the challenge.

That said, not long after I visited the exhibition, the UK held its general election and a Labour government was swept to power. In his first televised press conference, the new Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, announced that the prison system was 'broken'. Since then, steps have been taken to reduce the number of people being incarcerated. It was a powerful moment, and hope in the prison reform sector is now higher than it has been for many years. While the immediate crisis of prison capacity has to a degree forced the new government's hand, such a break in direction relies on many acts of resistance, however small, to create the space for change.

I'd like to finish with the most powerful image in *A Machine to Unmake You*, which appears towards the end of the exhibition book and is reproduced from the film of the participants in HMP Altcourse moving along their chairs. The seven men have been largely abstracted by the footage's visual effects, but one man's head – bowed, almost penitent – appears clearly. The bodies of the other men are distorted in such a way that they resemble wings unfurling on either side of their colleague. It is the arresting image of a winged figure ready to make a hero's journey and transcend the punishing environment that is all around him.

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Image: Melanie Crean, *A Machine to Unmake You (M2UY)* (2019–2024). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

Image: Melanie Crean, *A Machine to Unmake You (M2UY)* (2019–2024). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

Image: Melanie Crean, *A Machine to Unmake You (M2UY)* (2019–2024). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

Journal #2

RESOLUTION

When We Became Listeners

Lucía Arias, Rachel Mason,
Ashleigh Sands and Neil Winterburn

As explained in the introduction to the journal, *Resolution* is a participatory arts and research programme within the justice system that has run from 2018 to 2025. It has been structured through four main art projects, each led by an artist, with participants and collaborators at HMP Altcourse, HMP Buckley Hall and HMP Askham Grange. Many other collaborators have joined us for public events and publications.

We would like to start by thanking all these people for their time, openness and engagement throughout the programme. It would not have been possible without the artists, our collaborators and the participants, who have shared their knowledge and engaged with the programme to create these works.

In participatory arts, individual and shared learning moments merge. This article has been written jointly by FACT's Learning team. If you want to know more about the artists' and the other collaborators' experiences, you can explore the resources we have on FACT's website:

1. Publications *M2UY* and *Sentences*
2. Audio tour and conversation with participants
3. *Resolution Podcast* and Interview with Amartey Golding

We will be presenting a longer version of this article in spring 2026 in a publication as part of the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) project, Imagining Possible Futures.[1]

We have tried to write this article many times in different ways. Dr Emma Murray, our Criminologist in Residence and honorary member of the team, interviewed the four members of the Learning team separately in March 2024. This was the first time we had tried to summarise our experience and reflections.

The evaluation of *Resolution* with artists, participants and stakeholders finished while we closed the last *Resolution* exhibition (10 August 2025). Listening to collaborators and participants' voices brought a few things into focus, so we asked Emma for a second round of interviews.

In this article we are going to focus on one aspect of collaborative and socially situated art practices: listening. We share our understanding of listening, then discuss where listening sits in our everyday work and why we think listening underpins everything else. All the quotes in this article (unless we specify with a person's name) are by the FACT Learning team, presented as one collective voice. These are quotes from our conversations with Emma and from other reflective moments. In an article about listening, we felt it was important to keep some of the texture and live-ness of those conversations. The rest of the text is us trying to make sense of these quotes.

1 UKRI is a funding agency in the UK that provides investment and support to researchers and businesses. *Imagining Possible Futures - Activating Lived Experience in Criminal Justice*, UKRI grant MR/Y017110/1.

WHY FOCUS ON LISTENING?

In the first team conversation we had before writing this article, Emma provided a list of words for each of us to choose from to represent *Resolution*. We chose 'art production', 'collaboration', 'experimental', 'space', 'trust' and 'time'. During the discussion that followed, we highlighted listening as the foundation for collaboration.

As well as recognising listening as the foundation of this programme, we want to give credit to artist Ain Bailey, whose project *FOUR* grounded the importance of listening as an active practice within this context. Within her project, *"the listening could be the workshop and listening is the practice. It felt really different and changing".* Listening and working with the four artists informed our own practice. It also influenced our invitations to the other artists, and how we presented the programme to them.

Let's start by what we mean by listening in this context. It is authentic communication, being attentive to the unexpected, and generating shared meanings. It happens in relation to others and it takes the context into account.

"What is listening? Listening means you must receive before you can respond. To give an appropriate response, you first have to understand what's being said. It doesn't matter what you're listening to – a person, the world around you… Without receptivity, how could you possibly know what to give back? How could you offer anything meaningful in return?"

We had a shared sense of the kind of listening that felt meaningful to us: *'listening for the purpose of listening rather than listening to answer'.*

We wanted to dig deeper into this so we reached out to Zebra Collective, who over the years have become a close collaborator. Our understanding has been enriched by the practical approaches they shared with us: you acknowledge what the other person tells you, then you try to affirm what the other person says before responding. When you word your questions, you aim to put the focus on the strengths of the person you are talking to.

THE JOURNEY OF BECOMING LISTENERS

We are going to share our journey through three key learning moments. These are pivotal experiences that shifted our understanding – moments of sudden clarity when something clicked, transformative revelations of something important or unexpected, or experiences that felt either emotional or personal.

Through reflective conversations, we began to understand the lasting impact these key learning moments had on us. This approach honours both our personal journey and the universal patterns of deep listening.

NOT KNOWING A SPACE.

You can just feel it in your body because you know you can walk out.

These reflections come from entering the prison as people who have been invited in, and who get to leave and go home at the end of the day. There were no fixed rules for how to bring yourself into that space. When we were supporting artist Melanie Crean working with a group of veterans at HMP Altcourse, the unfamiliarity created an awareness of our position of privilege:

"I've got absolutely no experience of what it is like to be in that space. And the comparison between that and being in spaces where I'm familiar, experienced, it's like it made me so aware of my privilege and the power you can hold over people as an educator. Much more so in a prison. You can just feel it in your body because you know you can walk out. You know you never have to deal with this stuff. That feels like a real 'shut up and listen' moment."

Ain Bailey's project included additional family visits for the men. In the prison visitor centre, the men and their families spent time connecting with each other through music. This quote reflects a physical shift that occurs when sharing these spaces:

"My first time in the prison on a family day. I guess there is something about recognising yourself within that room – and listening. Listening in an embodied way that you can't help but feel. There's definitely a physical change or shift that you go through."

This physical awareness connected to a different approach to ethical thinking. It felt important to turn down what we knew and focus more on being present to what was happening.

"I didn't feel like we had a fixed idea of 'this is how we do ethics in prisons'. For me, it was as much about trying to find ways to just be present with artists and participants without ... I don't know … bringing too much of what we think we know about how this should work. That feels quite different to how I normally think of ethics."

When you acknowledge you don't know a space, you have to look around.

COLLECTIVE – BEING WITH OTHERS.

It's a team that you trust and feel safe in wholeheartedly.

Through the programme, everyone emphasised the importance of working together. This is what we mean when we talk about a collective: the artists leading the art projects, and everyone else helping to make these projects happen.

There are four people in the Learning team, and we talk to each other a lot. This has helped us attune our listening muscles and, more importantly, trust each other over the past few years. However, the Learning team is rarely just the Learning team. Artists, collaborators and participants become key parts and 'honorary members' of the team as we spend time together.

This is the case with Emma, our Criminologist in Residence. Emma brought a broad understanding of the justice system, allowing us to add an extra perspective and slowly grow a more complex understanding of each project and where it sits within the programme. Emma shares:

"Being truly embedded as part of FACT's Learning team, rather than just visiting or consulting, led to a genuine feeling of belonging, being part of the team. The team became my teachers and mentors, showing me that some knowledge can only be held in the body and shared through making. This wasn't academic tourism; it was about becoming part of something bigger than research. Through this partnership, I learned that true collaboration requires intellectual surrender and the willingness to have your certainties challenged. When we create spaces where different ways of knowing can coexist – where lived experience sits at the centre – entirely new possibilities for understanding justice emerge. Being part of this team for over a decade has been more than a methodology; it's become an ethical stance that continues to shape everything I do as a researcher."

As Emma says, over the years working together, she has become part of the team. During difficult moments, she brought her expertise, becoming a live translator and a catalyst for our learning. This is one of the key aspects of working across sectors: it is by listening that you understand your position and what is going on around you.

The prison staff have become other key collaborators. Their positions look very different to ours on paper, but because of their commitment to the project, we think of them as the 'inbetweeners' in that space:

"I found it the most profound to meet the prison staff we worked closely with. The inbetweeners in that space, the mediators of everything. I think a lot of the time their role goes unseen. I was intentionally pushing for their role to be recognised because we listened to them, but they also listened to us. What it revealed is that there was no 'other' for me… It made me believe not so much in the power of art, but it made me believe in the power of spending time with each other to understand different sides of the same story."

We created a reciprocal space, based on respect, continuously showing up for each other. Together, we unpack the work the artist is trying to create with the participants. At the centre, alongside the participants, we have the artist, without whom none of this would happen.

Here, Melanie Crean shares her own experience of the collective:

"The relational work done by the Learning team with local partners was critical, something I call 'the ground game', which laid the foundation for all the projects that followed. This required the team to establish and maintain relationships with prison staff and justice sector workers across the country over a period of years. It allowed the artists to enter into these relationships, to be in community with both the team and staff, and to extend that community to the project participants. Socially engaged art projects have to work this way: from a trusted community, you can build poetry, but generally not the other way around."

We can't talk about the collective without talking about the rest of the team at FACT; the artwork would not be seen without them.

"We've collaborated with thoughtful exhibition curators and producers, ethically minded communications and marketing colleagues, and a considerate Visitor Services team. All these people have an impact on our practice. It's only by working together and listening to each other that we can shape how a project is experienced by the public. These collaborations are co-creative: they demonstrate how porous and interconnected this work is."

CARVING OUT TIME.
The time that's going forward and the time that it took to get here.

In our experience, listening and time are inseparable. Navigating the challenge of the Covid-19 crisis meant that *Resolution* lasted twice as long as it was originally planned to. Strangely, this gave us time and created a different way to listen.

"When I joined the team, it was during COVID. So basically, my role at that time was to check in and see how everybody was, because there was not much else to do. I think that really, for me anyway, as the new person coming into a project that had already been ongoing, it really gave me time to get to know, even though it was through email, the humans, the people. And without too much production and pressure. It was a really, really odd time, but at the same time, it really gave me a chance to listen to what was going on, what the people were sharing, what situations people were finding themselves in, how people were."

Returning to the human connection – something fundamental to any participatory project – we focus on allowing everyone involved to find their own role in the project. This means creating spaces in which participants are comfortable to share their stories, and a 'protected' space for the artist to work with those stories in ways that explore and showcase the dignity of everyone involved in the project.

But time sometimes goes 'against production'. There are timelines that cannot be altered and decisions that need to be made. We argue for a different type of production, one in which the institution listens to the individuals working within it and prioritises what's best for the projects:

"We found different points where we agreed on creating moments to listen or to stop. It's very difficult because the art production doesn't allow you to do it. With the justice system, this space is different. As well as asking an artist to put on an exhibition, they have the responsibility of representing these participants – they deserve these moments."

This need for time isn't exclusive to this learning team. Reflecting on the programme, time is something that comes up again and again in the non-negotiables – time together, time to build trust, time to reflect. When you're carving time within the production, timelines are required for showing artwork in an arts institution, but you need space to listen and think together:

"For me, coming in however many years into this existing programme, knowing the time that it took to get here and the time that is going forward. To just be in the middle of all of that, with everyone, I feel really lucky."

CONCLUSION

These three key learning moments all speak to letting go and the opportunities this creates to listen. Not knowing a space means letting go of presuming that you are the expert and instead listening to the space around you. Being in a collective means letting go of doing it all on your own and supports really listening to others. Carving time sets the framework in which to listen.

Within this framework, when so many decisions have to be made, how do you navigate them?

"We had to make so many decisions between the facilitation phase of the work and it being shown in the gallery. My response was to think human-centred. Everyone has the right to be treated with dignity – so that's what we focused on."

As well as making space for listening, not knowing things allowed us to look to the artists and their practices for direction.

What does listening look like in the artwork?

"There's an element of dignification with beauty. By beauty, I don't mean pretty or slick. I mean beauty, aesthetics. The reason I say that is because every single person said how beautiful Katrina's[2] book is. I was like, well, that's dignity. It's not that they got a nice thing, but there's the beauty, the aesthetics, and that is a way of dignifying someone's personhood or voice."

So, how has this programme, and becoming better listeners, changed us as practitioners?

"I think it changed how I understand participatory arts and the time you need to give to these projects. It has changed how I see the position of these programmes in galleries – they need to be in the centre, not peripheral. But the real shift was deeper than placement: once you start listening, you cannot stop listening."

The FACT Learning team are Lucía Arias, Rachel Mason, Ashleigh Sands and Neil Winterburn.

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2 Artist Katrina Palmer created the book *Sentences* in collaboration with imprisoned people at HMP Altcourse, HMP Buckley Hall and HMP Askham Grange.

Image: Katrina Palmer, *Sentences* (2023). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

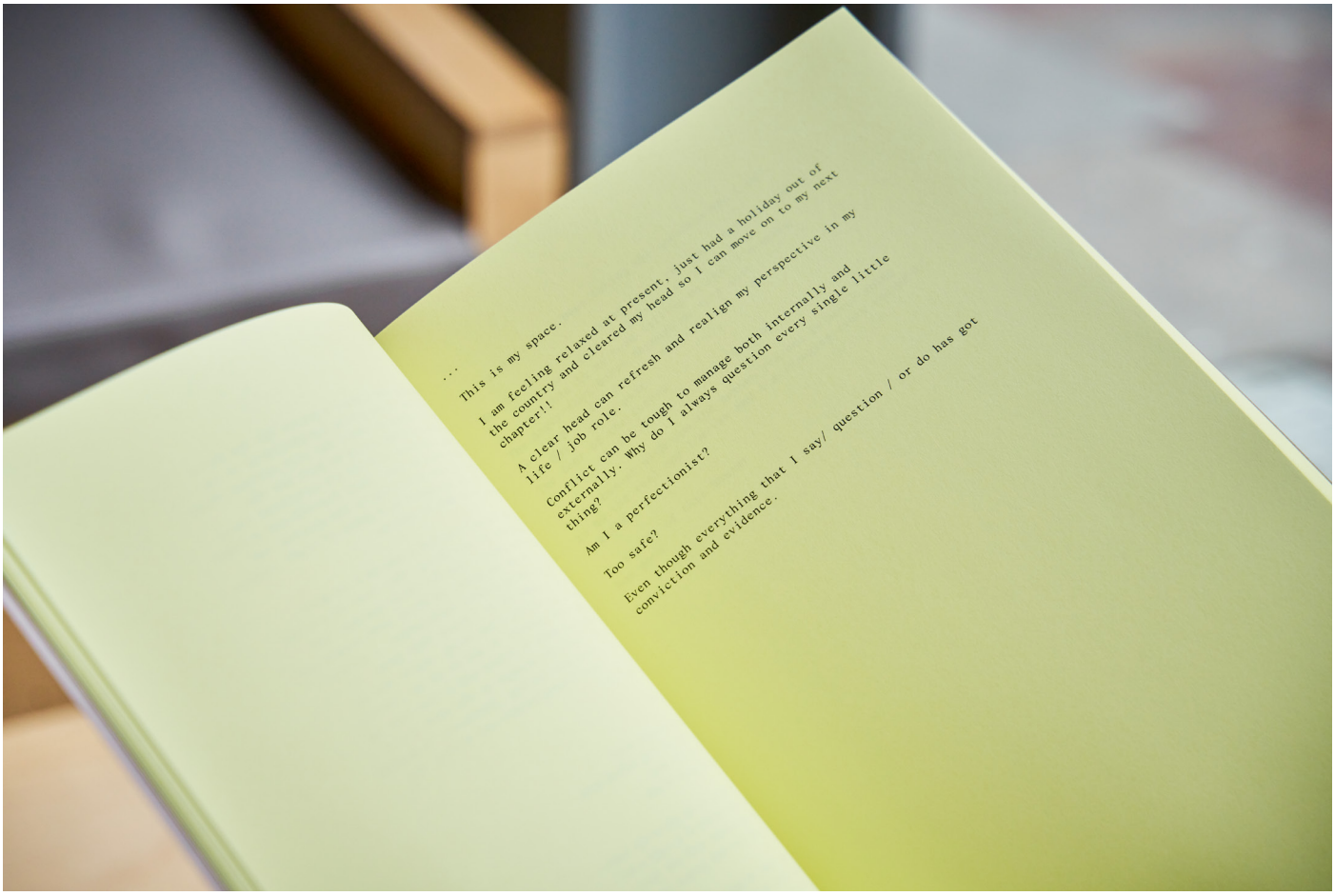

Image: Katrina Palmer, *Sentences* (2023). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

Image: Ain Bailey, *FOUR* (2024). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

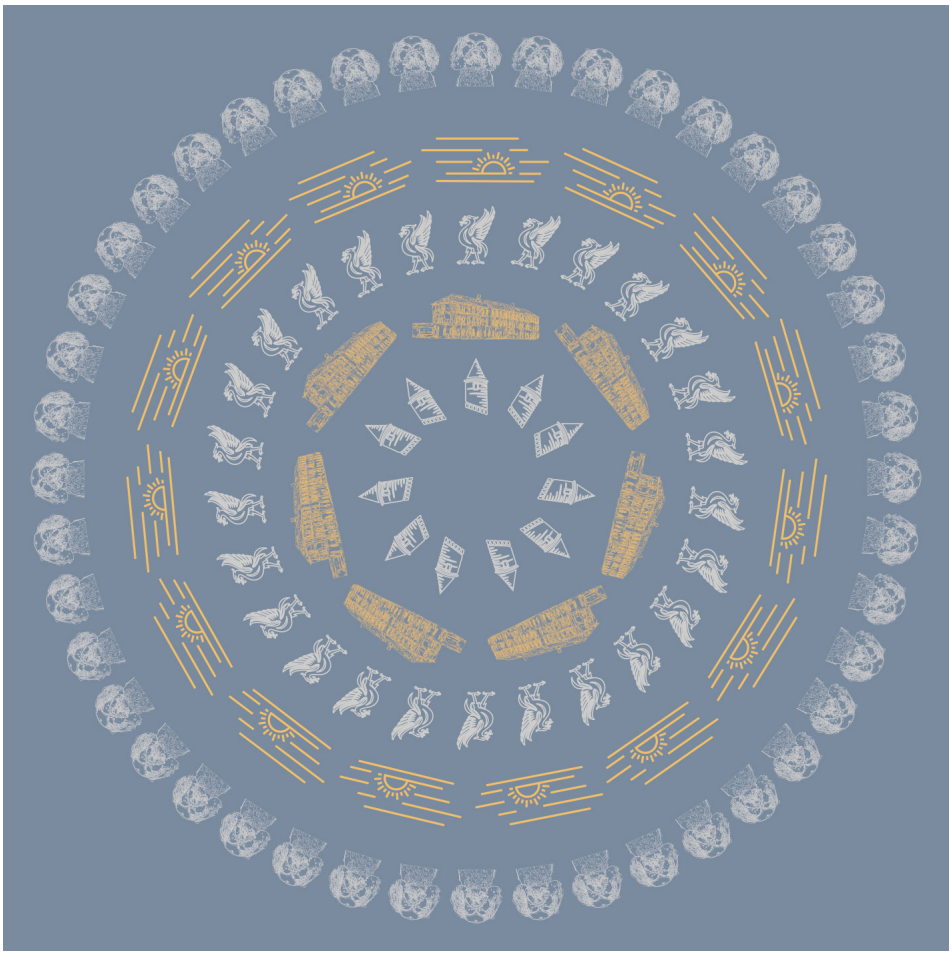

Image: Ain Bailey, *FOUR* (2024). Wallpaper design by Ain Bailey and Bamidele Awoyemi.

Here is some suggested reading and further information about how we understand listening:

Back, L. (2007) *The Art of Listening.* Podcast. Uncommon Sense - Listening, with Les Back

Hooks, B. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700280

Berg, I. K. and de Shazer, S. (1993) *'Making Numbers Talk: Language in Therapy'*. In Friedman, S. (ed.) *The New Language of Change: Constructive Collaboration in Psychotherapy*. New York: Guilford Press, pp. 5–24. https://sfwork.com/resources/interaction/06Berg_de-shazer.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwilp4CXuL-PAxWwTkEAHaVEKgUQFnoECBoQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3VkOwXz2a2uVwRTsdIDx0A

Elliot, C. (2020) *'Why Listening is the Most Important Skill in SFBT (Solution Focus Based Therapy)'.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vae3zg3Bfbg

Journal #2

RESOLUTION

Criminologist in Residence, Signing Off

Dr Emma Murray

After eleven years in research collaboration at FACT Liverpool, Dr Emma Murray reflects on a transformative journey that challenged the academic practice she arrived with and allowed her to understand collaborative knowledge creation in new ways. This final reflection marks the conclusion of a long-term, unique partnership between social science and the arts.

ON REFLECTION: INTRODUCTION

Some journeys transform us so gradually that we only realise how far we have travelled when we turn and look back. Such was the nature of my long-term role as a Criminologist in Residence with the Learning team at FACT Liverpool. What began in 2014 as a critical friend role with what was then the Communities team was not intended to last eleven years. Yet, each time we planned to bring our collaboration to a close, new questions and opportunities emerged – each lesson learned opened another door, each shared insight suggested fresh possibilities to explore together. What I had assumed would be a brief, conventional engagement gradually evolved, through an organic process of mutual discovery, into a long-term embedded researcher position. By its conclusion, my time at FACT had changed my understanding of research completely.

With the benefit of hindsight, I understand my time at FACT through the lens of epistemic trespass and how the deliberate crossing of knowledge boundaries fundamentally alters both the trespasser and the territory traversed. What emerged in this liminal space – where different ways of knowing come together, overlap, and potentially transform each other – was the recognition that genuine collaboration necessitates a form of intellectual surrender. Or, put another way, this form of collaboration is underpinned by a willingness to have one's epistemological frameworks challenged, one's foundational assumptions destabilised, and one's expert authority questioned.

I acknowledge that not all learning from this partnership can, or should be, transplanted directly into other contexts, and that certain understandings belong to this specific project, to gallery settings, to the particular affordances of artistic practice, and to the institutional flexibility that FACT provided. Still, as I write from this vantage point, this article serves simultaneously as a personal memoir and a meditation on the possibilities that emerge when we permit ourselves to be undone by encounters with different epistemological traditions. And, as I continue my work as a social scientist beyond the gallery, I will reflect on what those experiences mean to me.

ON THE BEGINNING: A RECKONING FOR EXPERTISE

The first four years at FACT were, I now realise, an extended audition. In those early days, I was surprised that my interest in FACT's work with communities was met with suspicion. Was I going to claim the insights as my own? This wariness was entirely justified. At this time, I was completing my PhD and was entirely taken in by the traditional model that positioned me as an emerging expert, conversations with participants as 'data', and the institution as the legitimate site of knowledge production. That said, my work has always been concerned with narrative forms of expression, representation and power – particularly with centring the voices of justice-affected people as both a disruptive force and a productive tool for illuminating institutional forms of power. What I hadn't yet considered was my own position of power within that space.

But something more was happening at FACT. Something that echoed broader shifts in anti-extractive research practices, driven by decades of community work, decolonising methodologies, participatory action research, and (even more) critical methodological scholarship that exposed the violence of traditional research relationships. And so, in collaboration, I became aware of reciprocal forms of knowledge creation.

At the time, I remember feeling as though this collaboration would dismantle my work before I had a chance to establish it. Now, however, I understand that this was a unique opportunity for me to move far enough outside academic contexts to gain perspective on how academic knowledge typically positions itself relative to other forms of knowing. Instead of academic knowledge sitting at the centre with other forms of knowing arranged around it as supplementary or illustrative, lived experience moved to the centre and I, with my academic expertise, became one voice among many. This went beyond finding more inclusive ways to do research. Repositioning myself and my knowledge questioned the entire framework I had been operating within; I had to learn to see academic knowledge as one resource among many in the collective work of understanding justice. On a personal level, this manifested in a gradual realisation that I had been approaching criminology from a position of privilege that I hadn't appreciated or acknowledged before starting this work.

ON CURATING CRIMINOLOGY: BRINGING CRIMINOLOGY TO FACT

My next task was to 'curate criminology' or, put another way, to think of how to bring criminology into this distinctive gallery context. I find curation a useful metaphor because, like contemporary curators who facilitate conversations between artworks, artists and audiences to produce new forms of understanding, I needed to carefully consider which elements of criminology would resonate meaningfully in this environment. Curation is about creating conditions in which the relationship between artworks, artists and audiences can produce new insights and possibilities for engagement. I asked myself, 'Which fields of criminology does it make sense to share in this context? And what might be "helpful"? More critically, how might the discipline's more radical and transformative traditions align with the values of socially engaged and participatory art?'

Initially, my thinking followed familiar academic patterns as my questioning of myself and the space continued. 'How could I make criminological knowledge accessible and relevant to this new audience?' But as the work developed, we began to recognise that this approach was simply replicating traditional academic engagement models that follow a service logic, and that our questions all assumed a fundamental separation between disciplines – maintaining their distinct identities – while occasionally borrowing from each other. Our work suggested a different possibility. Rather than disciplines serving each other, we began to ask, 'How can we share audiences? How can we share stakeholders? How can we share ways of knowing?' This shift in questioning opened up entirely new possibilities for collaboration.

Resolution embedded our thinking and collaborative ambitions into a multi-year art and research programme in which art was not instrumentalised to illustrate criminological concepts, and criminology was not there to validate artistic practice in justice settings.

Rather, together, we created spaces where different forms of knowledge could coexist and inform each other. Rather than translating between disciplines, we worked together to create a shared language.

ON PRESENCE: BEYOND ACADEMIC TOURISM TO VOLUNTARY CITIZEN

Resolution was based on a fundamental principle that proved pivotal. It was that *I had to be there*. Not popping in at key moments or attending scheduled meetings, but actually present in the ongoing work. This challenged one of academia's most cherished privileges, which is the ability to dip in and out of communities while maintaining a distance. I couldn't conduct this work through periodic consultation; it demanded my sustained, embedded presence over years.

The practical implications of this commitment were significant. While FACT secured funding for the artistic elements of *Resolution*, my research role was not funded. At first this distinction seemed like a limitation, but it proved to be profoundly liberating. Because my involvement wasn't controlled by conventional research funding, I wasn't constrained by predetermined research questions, rigid timelines, or university-mandated deliverables. My role could respond to what emerged rather than forcing experiences into pre-existing frameworks.

This flexibility came at a personal cost. Sustaining this voluntary collaborative engagement for eleven years required enormous amounts of time and energy. Yet this commitment to an unfunded presence created possibilities that simply wouldn't have existed within conventional academic funding structures. *Resolution*'s extended timeline, freed from these constraints, allowed for the kind of deep, patient work that meaningful collaboration requires. The difference cannot be overstated. Relationships take time to develop beyond professional courtesy. Trust must be earned gradually through consistent showing up, not just showing up when it's convenient or strategically valuable. The luxury of a sustained, voluntary presence is the time it takes to form a genuine partnership.

ON GIVING: CRIMINOLOGY IN THE CORRIDOR AND THAT LITTLE BLACK BOOK

In being present at FACT, criminology was often seen and done in the corridor. It was a form of giving to the space. I wasn't leading projects, but instead was there for the informal exchanges that happen when people encounter each other between planned activities. The corridors where we had conversations became some of the most generative spaces of our collaboration, and spaces where questions could emerge organically and understanding could develop without the pressure of predetermined outcomes. Crucially, this 'corridor' work wasn't primarily about commissioned artists or artworks; it was a space for informal learning that surrounded those more visible projects. Instead of expertise, I offered availability for impromptu conversations. Instead of authority, I provided context when questions arose, and helped to make connections between ideas and audiences. Instead of speaking, I listened.

Through listening, I was able to fully understand who else we might invite into the space. I often described myself as a 'little black book' at the start of the project (or 'the person who might know who to contact when unexpected questions emerged'). But gradually, the team at FACT developed their own networks and fluency in issues of justice. They began to have their own corridor conversations, sharing resources and insights without needing academic intermediation. My presence became less essential to these informal exchanges, which was exactly as it should be. This reflects, for me at least, one of the key insights from our collaboration: the most significant learning often happens in unstructured moments, and sustainable engagement requires creating conditions where these corridor conversations can take place when you are not there.

ON ETHICS: NEGOTIATING REGULATIONS WITH RELATIONSHIPS

My time at FACT also taught me lessons about the limitations of academic ethical frameworks. University research ethics, governed by institutional review boards and rigid protocols, often prioritise risk mitigation and institutional liability over participant empowerment. These frameworks, while well intentioned, create barriers to the kind of meaningful collaboration and public engagement that participatory arts practices require, and in doing so, they can actually diminish participants' agency rather than protect it. My learning from gallery-based practice revealed entirely different ethical assumptions.

For example, in socially engaged art, participants are often named and credited as collaborators rather than anonymised as research subjects. Gallery contexts assume that people might want recognition, visibility and agency over their own representation. This shift from protection to recognition reflects a fundamentally different ethical orientation, and one that centres participant choice and empowerment.

Through our ongoing collaboration, we learned to develop what I came to understand as a form of ethical capacity that was personal, fluid, and grounded in relationships, while at the same time it acknowledged my own academic regulations. The crucial insight was that ethical capacity requires developing collaborative processes that allow people to make informed choices about their own representation, supported by ongoing care and attention to how these choices might evolve over time. This ethical literacy demanded constant communication, mutual accountability, and the recognition that ethical practice is an ongoing relationship rather than a one-time consent form.

ON COMPLEXITY: AN APPRENTICESHIP IN AESTHETICS

One of the most significant aspects of our collaboration was my unexpected apprenticeship in aesthetic ways of knowing. I arrived at FACT already versed in critical forms of social science and visual analysis, and thought I was familiar with approaches that questioned dominant narratives and attended to the politics of representation. My academic training had taught me to be suspicious of claims to objectivity and to value different forms of evidence. But in bearing witness to new ways to work with people affected by justice, the Learning team and the artists I have been fortunate enough to work with became my teachers in entirely different modes of understanding.

This apprenticeship began in the workshops, where I saw how stories shared through collaborative making processes carry knowledge that simply cannot be captured in academic prose, however critical or visually literate that prose might be. Working with the Learning team and commissioned artists taught me that the emotional, sensory and relational dimensions of experience constitute knowledge in their own right, and that knowledge exists independently of critical analysis or visual interpretation.

Like any apprentice, I was initially clumsy with these new tools. I kept trying to translate embodied understandings back into familiar academic categories, even critical ones. My mentors, patiently and persistently, taught me to sit with different kinds of knowledge, to value complexity over clarity, to understand that some knowledge can only be held in the body and shared through making. I developed capacities I hadn't known I lacked, particularly to value questions over answers.

ON PLACE: BEFORE OR BEYOND THE GALLERY

I wasn't the only one who learned about aesthetics in this way. One of my roles at FACT involved inviting decision-makers from the justice system to engage with the artworks. Initially, we thought of this as something that would happen 'beyond the gallery' and after exhibitions, and we had designed *Resolution* around this endpoint model of engagement. But during the first commission with artist Melanie Crean, another fundamental shift occurred. Rather than inviting key stakeholders to view the finished art, Melanie suggested bringing them into the production process itself. I was hesitant. Would they actually come, 'before the gallery'? What would they think of being asked to participate in creative workshops rather than simply attend a polished presentation? How should such an invitation even be framed?

Yet they came, and the experience was profound. We realised that decision-makers in the justice system typically encounter the testimonies of people affected by that system only after academics have broken people's lives down into neat themes and digestible conclusions. This direct participation in creative practice was entirely different. Watching senior professionals learn about the full complexity of prison realities through collaborative workshops is something I will never forget. I began to understand that people's understanding shifted not through arguments, data or critical analysis, but through what I can only describe as the irreducible specificity of shared creative practice. This moment in the project changed not just how we all worked together and with stakeholders, but also shaped what became possible through the work itself.

ON ENDINGS: THE THINGS I CAN'T LEAVE BEHIND

After eleven years, the residency at FACT has ended, and as I emerge from what felt like an immersive rabbit hole, I am interested in similar work that has been happening across many other spaces in criminology and beyond. What was distinctive about our work wasn't the collaborative approaches we took, but the model of sustained academic presence in a gallery context and the long-term embedding of a criminologist within an arts organisation, working across disciplinary boundaries for more than a decade.

This kind of extended, voluntary, embedded engagement between academia and cultural institutions remains (to my knowledge) relatively rare, particularly in the critical social sciences. I make no claim that our approaches were unique or pioneering, but this way of working offered a distinctive space for learning about collaborative practice that I would not have found elsewhere.

My comfortable certainties of scholarship have been replaced by more complex questions about how knowledge emerges, how expertise is repositioned, and what ethical practice might mean in university-based research. I no longer aspire to be an expert in the traditional sense. Instead, I am learning to become a facilitator, and aspire to be someone who creates conditions for meaningful conversations and collaborative inquiry. This requires a different skill set entirely: deep listening without predetermined agendas, creating spaces where different forms of knowledge can coexist, and being comfortable with uncertainty.

Being FACT's Criminologist in Residence has fundamentally shaped my work and values, and has become central to the values and the collaborative approach I will take in my new role at the Social Sciences Research Lab at Anglia Ruskin University. Lessons learned through this sustained engagement have also informed my practice as Co-Investigator on the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship project, Imagining Possible Futures – Activating Lived Experience in Criminal Justice,[1] where I work with Dr Gill Buck. My ongoing collaboration through this project with the Learning team at FACT and Melanie Crean demonstrate the enduring influence of this model of embedded, cross-disciplinary practice.

In the end, my learning was more than methodological; it was an opportunity to develop an ethical stance and to measure success not just in terms of what we produce, but in terms of who we become in the process.

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1 UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), Future Leaders Fellowship. UKRI is a funding agency in the UK that provides investment and support to researchers and businesses. *Imagining Possible Futures – Activating Lived Experience in Criminal Justice*, UKRI grant MR/Y017110/1. https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/developing-people-and-skills/future-leaders-fellowships/

Journal #2
RESOLUTION

Interview with Amartey Golding

Dr Emma Murray

In this conversation, artist Amartey Golding speaks to Emma Murray, Criminologist in Residence at FACT, about *Chainmail 4: Silent Knight*. As *Resolution* draws to a close, Golding's latest piece offers a moment of reflection on the transformative potential of creative practice within systems of justice and punishment. Here, Golding explores the artistic and social dimensions of his work, and shares his ambitions to create space for experiences that are too often missing in the cultural sector and in society at large.

EM: Amartey, thank you for joining me today. We're here at the opening of your exhibition, *Chainmail 4: Silent Knight*. Before we dive into the work itself, I'd love to hear about what the invitation to be part of *Resolution* has meant to you.

AG: I think, first of all, I feel really honoured, because if you're a bookend, if you're the first or the last, there's something about that which is nice. It's like, I've got the full stop and the project that everyone's going to be reflecting on when they think about all the projects in *Resolution*. There were seven years of work and all the emotions that the Learning team have gone through, and all the ups and downs. I knew there was going to be a lot of processing before I even made anything for the closing, which is nice. There was a little bit of pressure on that at one point, because it's like, wow, you got to do it justice. But I think what's quite nice about the way I work is that it's quite visceral and it's all about the experience in the room, just sitting down and letting your belly resonate with stuff. I think the exhibition is going to allow a lot of emotions to come up, hopefully, to just allow people to process the whole journey.

Coming into the project, it's interesting because prisons in general are something that everyone knows of, but nobody knows, because they're hidden. It's like the shadow work of the country, and obviously we know on a personal level and a societal level that they don't work. I've been to prisons before for my family, and so I think maybe I felt I was a bit more confident about being in a space like that. But the first day I went in there was so emotional. I didn't expect to feel as affected by it as I was, because usually when you go to visit family, you go to a specific part of the prison, and then you go away. But to actually go to the bits that people can't usually leave, and you know you're leaving people behind, in a way, it felt a lot more … what's the word? It felt a lot more explicit there. Yeah, it really impacted me. I think one of the big feelings as well, apart from the emotion, was just the realisation that this happens. We just lock people away. And this is stuff you think you know. But when you see it, the visceral is so much more important than just conceptually understanding that these things happen.

EM: Thank you for sharing that with me. That first visit sounds difficult, so I appreciate how you explained the impact it had. It must have taken a lot to go back. Did the space change for you over time?

AG: No, it stayed the same for me, and this work was made over two years. So, when I started, all of my thoughts were about the prison, but actually, the more time I spent there, the more time I spent talking to the guys, spending time and just being with them – do you know what I mean? – I realised the prison is becoming less and less important. It's the smallest element of the issues that are happening. And so, it became less and less about the prison until it came full circle to humans, emotions, our needs, our separation. It felt more and more urgent as well. The wider it got, the more urgent it felt.

EM: Yes, and the exhibition definitely confronts us with urgency. The experiences you share here – of separation, in particular – are so culturally entrenched that it isn't until we spend time speaking to people who are living in prison that we can really hold a mirror to some of those. Thank you for explaining that as you have: coming full circle to humanity is so important in your work, so we will definitely come back to that.

Amartey, as well as marking the end of *Resolution*, *Silent Knight* is also the latest piece in your *Chainmail* series – I believe this is *Chainmail 4*?

AG: Yeah.

EM: You have a multidisciplinary practice and work across a range of mediums, including drawing, printmaking, sculpture, film, chainmail and wig-making. Could you tell me what inspired this body of work, and what meaning it holds for you personally, and for the men who made it with you?

AG: The first thing to say is that I love the material of chainmail. As a kid growing up, I loved Robin Hood, I loved *Kingdom of Heaven*, even *Monty Python*. I loved Arthur and legends as a kid. And a lot of young boys my age, maybe they're into different things now, but you'd go to a place, and you'd get your plastic sword, and you'd have your armour. It was just an exciting thing. And so, a few years ago, maybe a decade ago now, I had an idea to explore chainmail as a material. My first idea was to create a high-fashion collection of pieces made of chainmail, but they'd be so heavy that the models wouldn't be able to make it back from the runway. For me, that was an interesting starting point – the weight of it was interesting to me.

I had this idea for six months. You know when you have an idea and you mean to get round to it, but life's just happening, right? And so, I got a new sketchbook, and I was ready to do some sketches. Then, as I'm sketching, my godson calls me, and he tells me that two of his friends have been stabbed to death and he asks if he can come and stay with me. If he'd called me at any other time, I'd be like, okay, we'll process it together. But there's me drawing chainmail and thinking about it as an old material. How can you make it? And then if these two kids were wearing it, maybe they'd still be alive. It brought a whole different weight, ironically. It brought a whole different weight to that – just to the material and what I was doing.

Then I started making suits of armour for people close to me, out of a need to protect, but also to be able to process the personal situations they were going through, because it takes so long to make a suit of armour. It becomes almost an offering, because someone has to be important enough for me to spend a year or two – each piece takes me that, roughly – making that for someone to wear in order to protect them. Again, because it takes so long, you have a lot of time to think about them and their circumstances, and to think about chainmail and what it represents. It's something that fascinates you. It glistens. You want to touch it. You want to stroke it. It draws you in the same way that a lot of the things that we do to comfort ourselves draw us. The points of connection that we all share.

I wanted to do a project with the men in prison that was part of a series because I wanted them to be able to contribute to a wider conversation and connect them with other people, other communities, and have input from them in conversations that had already been happening, rather than creating something that was just for them, that didn't connect their voices to any wider conversation. I had two projects or two series that did that. So, *Chainmail* and *Whose Anthem*, which is a comedy show where we had a live band and a comedian. And with the audience, we create new national albums for England. So, the audience basically creates and directs everything – from the genre, style, tone, lyrics, everything – to create a national album. Through that, you learn about that community's values.

I assumed that the men would go for the *Anthems*, but I went to offer them both just to see. We sat down with a few guys, and I talked to them about these two projects and asked them what they'd like. They really loved the chainmail and decided on the chainmail. I bought a little bit of chainmail for them to feel and see, and one of the guys just cradled it the whole time, for the two hours. It's got a weight. It's a presence. There's that comfort – and that's the big thing. And one of the guys said something that was so lovely, he said, 'Yeah, I want to do the chainmail because then they won't be able to take it away. Our input will be there forever. It'll never be able to be taken away'.

EM: It sounds like that first conversation with the men was super important, and it's beautiful to hear how the men chose the project and why, and what the material meant to them. Thank you. You spoke about chainmail as an offering to those you care about, and it was striking to me that for the men it was important that they made something that couldn't be taken away. There is a nice link here to another theme in your work that I know is important to you, and that's the idea of time. Time seems to be woven into every link of this chainmail, both literally and metaphorically. The painstaking process of creating each ring, linking it to the next, mirrors something profound about the experience of serving time. The men you're working with are navigating their own relationship with time: the time they're serving, the time spent away from loved ones, but also this different kind of time – creative time, collaborative time with you and each other. I'd love it if you could tell me more about that.

AG: I think what was the most profound about this was just spending time and chatting, and the amount of stuff that just comes up. Because time, yeah, time's a big part of this anyway. The amount of time it takes to make a suit is inherent. It's so important to the offering, ultimately, because when I make a suit, it's like an offering to the idea or the person, and a sign of their importance.

You needed serious money for these suits of armour. They would have whole villages that were set up just to make these, and they would take ages to make. The armour wasn't just practical. It was a symbol of your importance and your worth. Ultimately, for me, this is a way to show the importance and the worth of people.

Each link is made before it's woven in. When you look at the piece, you can see each link, and you know that that's a serious part of my life that I'll never get back, which I've put towards this person or idea or community or whatever. It's something that you'll never get back. It's the most important thing I think you can get. It's ironic as well that you're working with people who have had that time taken away from them. It's an offering to show that I take this seriously. I'm here, and I'm giving my all to try and do this. Anyone who knows me, during working on this, I'm very simple in that sense. That's my focus, and I'm doing it, and I'm going to the ends of the Earth to try and make this as best I can to show some respect to the people I made it with. What I like about chainmail is that you can see each link, and they're clear. You can imagine how long it would take to make one link. Then as soon as you start going out, it overwhelms you, like, whoa, okay, so that much time. It becomes incomprehensible.

But the other element is the time of the audience. I do all of that, but the time is also the time that the audience spends with it. The music is slow; it creates an environment. I do my best to be able to earn your time. There's an honesty about how much time people spend with it. Again, going back to the visceral, it lands more when people are able to touch it. In this show, everyone can touch the chainmail.

EM: Really?

AG: Oh, absolutely. You have to be able to feel it. When they touch it and they start to feel it, they feel the weight. You get more in tune with the materiality of it and how long it might have taken me. Again, for me, that's such an important part of people understanding the importance of it, and also showing respect to the audience and to the subject. Again, because time is such a precious resource, people aren't going to be there long unless they are drawn to it on a really deep level. What I like about it is the craftsmanship as well. I think that's quite liberating for me as an artist, because sometimes you get stuck in the conceptual and theoretical instead of actually just being able to make an object that people can appreciate. They might not like the object. But you can value the time, not just the time that the person has spent on it. So hopefully that answers your question.

EM: Thank you, Amartey, yes, it does. I imagine there was something for the men, in the time they got to be together while at the same time they were apart from loved ones.

AG: Yeah. One of the guys actually said, after he had spent an hour or so working on it, he said, 'You know what? It should be called the suit of time because we're all doing our time and contributing our time to this.' It was a real profound moment for everyone.

EM: I can imagine, and it's a really powerful way to think about the relational aspects of your work. I know that your work addresses multiple relationships – from the deeply personal connections between the men you've collaborated with, to their relationships with families and communities, all the way up to their relationship with the state and the justice system itself. And, as you have said, there is something powerful about how chainmail, as a material, speaks to protection and defence, but also constraint – it can shield but it can also bind. I wondered, how do you see the work making visible or making sense of these power dynamics?

AG: When you come to the show, you will see the way it's set up in the space. We've got the suit of armour, which is held up by multiple legs. It's the first time I made a suit, not for a specific person, but for a community, I guess. The exhibition space is a massive square, with a smaller square off to the side. And the suit of armour is actually in the smaller square. And in the big square, you have two rows of chairs directly in front of it, almost like I wanted to create a space that echoed, maybe like a chapel, a place for salvation, but also like a courtroom where you're being judged, but also reminiscent of other systems, like schools. So, to have this massive space, it's quite confrontational. You've got this huge, I guess you could say imposing, suit of armour, very heavy. But it feels, at least for me, it feels quite outmanned in that space. So, you can see, or maybe feel, at certain points why it might be vulnerable in this space. I was hoping that the space could set up those dynamics.

EM: I just love that.

AG: Yeah, man, and then there's the music element, which can aid that spending time: you sit there and churn these things over. Sometimes the words can be men speaking to society. Sometimes it can be society speaking to men. Sometimes it could be women speaking to men. There's a lot of different elements at play, about separation and how we can work and function better, or not, which you might feel in those words. They're loose enough to mean anything, and also really specific. So hopefully in the space, there's that element of the wider context, the wider societal structures and systems. I mean, there's only so much you can say about this stuff unless you spend time with the work, but hopefully, the accountability and the tensions in the work will be apparent to the audience.

EM: I have one more question, if that's okay? It's about impact.

AG: Yeah, of course.

EM: I think it's a good place to finish. The aim of *Resolution* was to explore how art can affect public attitudes and influence decision-making in the justice system, but of course the impact of this work is also very personal for everyone who has been part of the programme. I'm bringing us back to some of your comments at the start of the interview now, but I wanted to give you some space to think about the impact it's had on you as a person and an artist.

AG: Okay, we can get quite real, right?

EM: Okay, yes.

AG: In all honesty, I think that working with the guys over this period, over two years, has been a really important time in my life – personally as well, becoming a dad and working stuff out. Over that time, I've been on benefits and working really crappy jobs to try and make enough to support my family while being an artist and making this project. Actually, spending time with the men, but also being able to meditate on the system, it brought me face to face with a lot more societal issues. We're talking about time with your family, and presence and peace of mind as well – being able to be not only physically present, but also in a state where you can actually be your best self with your children. It made me realise how the arts, with the lack of funding and the culture around how artists are cared for or perceived … I've realised that it's not sustainable for me to raise healthy children. So this will probably be my last exhibition, I think. Potentially. I mean, unless something changes, or if a new option comes. But the way that I've been doing it, the amount of work you do for the little financial reward, it's not possible, really. Seeing the guys and spending time with the guys and realising that, actually, you don't get that time back with your kids.

EM: Amartey, thank you for sharing that. I didn't know that. You have ended on something that it's really important to bring to the fore, and I think people need to hear it if you're happy for us to share it.

AG: Absolutely. It's a very important thing. You need to survive, and you need to make sure that the rent is going to be paid, and you need some stability for your family's future. It's taken a massive toll on me. All my artist friends have gone through something similar. It's a normal thing. It doesn't have to be like that, but it shows the way that we, as a culture, fail to value artists, and the conditions that artists experience.

EM: It was such a pleasure to speak to you today. I'm sure that what you have said will resonate with so many people. Thank you for sharing with me.

This interview took place on 19 May 2025, just before the opening of Amartey's exhibition at FACT, *Chainmail 4: Silent Knight*. To find out more about the project, have a look at FACT's website.

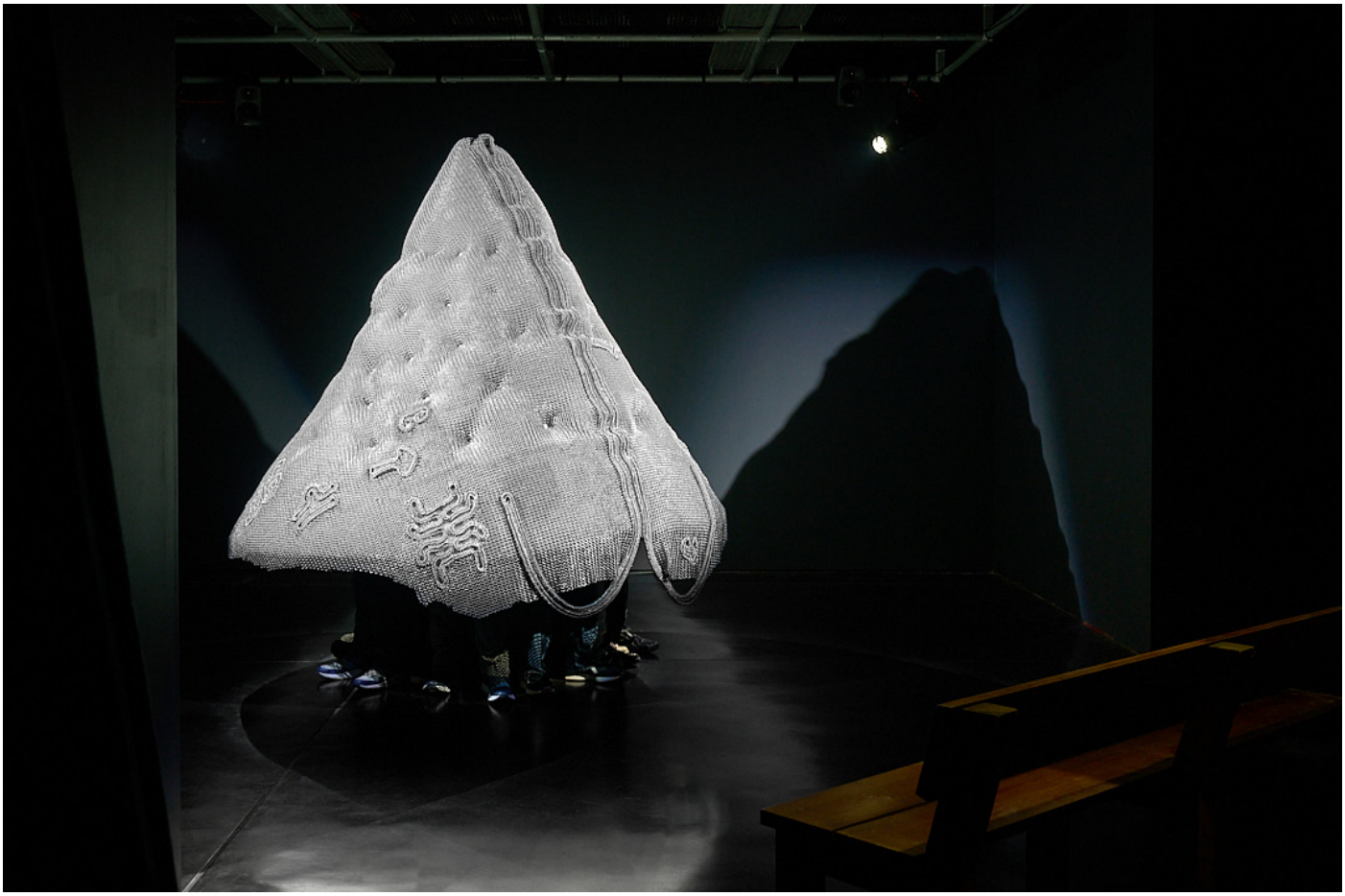

Image: Amartey Golding, *Chainmail 4: Silent Knight* (2025). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby

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Front cover image: Amartey Golding, *Chainmail 4: Silent Knight* (2025). Installation view at FACT Liverpool. Photography by Rob Battersby