



SHADOWLIGHT ARTISTS: RISING

Project Self-Evaluation by *film* oxford

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Introduction

Rising, originally known as *Platform*, was a project based around the creation of a new body of work by the Shadowlight Artists, centred on offering creative and professional opportunities to the group.

The project aimed to provide the Shadowlight Artists - an established group of artists with learning disabilities - with opportunities to build relationships with professional artists through creative collaboration and engage with audiences through exhibition. The group engaged with the learning disability community through encouragement and leadership, and the wider cultural landscape through participation in exhibition and performance at mainstream venues. During the project each artist produced new, high-quality artistic work that progressed their creative development, spanning theatre, photography, installation, painting and digital media.

The Shadowlight Artists were formed in 2009 and have in common that each member has a learning disability, a demonstrated track record of commitment to their own work, and a desire to not only be seen as creative champions within the learning disability community, but for their work to be seen on an equal footing to that of 'mainstream' artists. Within a supported framework provided by Film Oxford, the Shadowlight Artists have achieved a considerable degree of self-determination. Through monthly meetings the group decide their future direction as well as providing a mutually supportive platform for the creative discussion of their diverse practices.

"The Shadowlight Artists are setting the standard for artists with learning difficulties, not just nationally but internationally.... As an international expert on inclusion and diversity, I believe that Film Oxford's work with Shadowlight Artists makes a significant contribution to the Creative Case for Diversity".

Dr Ju Gosling FRSA, Artistic Director of Together! 2012

Summary of Outcomes

The following measurable outcomes were achieved during the project:

- The 6 Shadowlight Artists have each produced new works. A total of 30 new works were produced by the group during the project, spanning digital media, print, video installation and theatrical forms. These break down as:
 - 18 2D artworks
 - 2 film artworks
 - 2 video installations
 - 1 play performed on 2 occasions (an edited performance video is online).
 - 2 group video pieces
 - 4 documentation films
- Two group productions have been completed involving both the core group and new invited participants.
- An exhibition was held across two venues simultaneously: the Old Fire Station and Modern Art Oxford, drawing estimated audiences of around 24,500.
- Russell Highsmith's play had 2 performances at the Old Fire Station, Oxford, to a total audience of 213 people. Around 100 of the audience were people with learning disabilities,

with 48 of these from local groups who were especially invited and given free tickets. An edited video of the 1 hour and 40 minute play was produced and published on-line.

- The group gave artist's talks with Q&A at both exhibition venues at public opening events, attended by 215 people
- The group presented their film works at the Together! Film Festival in Stratford, London as part of Disability History Month.
- A 68-page publication was produced to accompany the exhibition
- The process of submitting the film works produced during the project is underway, with 23 film festival entries made to date across the eight films. This process will continue beyond the project end date due to the year-round submission cycle of the festival circuit. One film has already been screened in Mexico City.
- All the film work produced by the group and the associates is to be shown on the Together television station (formerly the Community Channel) between 2019 and 2024. Based on current viewing statistics, this will bring the films before an audience of 25,200 per year, or 126,000 over the life of the contract
- Film Oxford have supported the group to produce a website documenting their activities: shadowlightartists.org.uk
- Workshops and film screenings with Q&A were held for over 60 people with learning disabilities during autumn 2018.
- As of 08/05/2019, the films produced during the project had 5559 plays via social media links
- A new member, Wendy Belcher, has been inducted into the core group. Wendy presented the two group productions she worked on for a public event during Oxford International Womens Festival to an audience of 52.

Overall, the core outcomes were delivered, and several opportunities beyond the original scope of the project arose and were taken - within the existing project resources - resulting in a significant over-delivery compared to original goals in this area.

Project Aims

The core aims of the Rising project were as follows:

- To produce high quality work and develop artistically
- To support the Shadowlight group in developing relationships with artists in the 'mainstream'
- To challenge and facilitate engagement with arts establishments
- To bring new insights into the worlds, perspectives and experiences of people with a learning disability

The first two aims will be dealt with through a breakdown by artist, and the others in terms of their impact across the group.

Aim 1: To produce high quality work and develop artistically

The framework of the Rising project was originally designed to allow the artists to explore their chosen medium in greater depth through collaboration with an established professional. This opportunity for creative exchange has allowed each artist to broaden the scope of their practice and to engage with a broader community of artists, bringing fresh perspectives to their work. Some group members continued with an established working relationship, whilst others (Danny Smith, Tom Breach) worked with a new collaborator.

Mark Hemsworth

Mark's pieces allowed him to explore new ways of utilising his long-established interest in landscape and photography walks, drawing extensively from his personal archive of tens of thousands of photographs taken over the course of 2 years. This project resulted in 3 large-scale digital print works, which were exhibited at the Old Fire Station, along with a film exploring his working practice produced in collaboration with Naomi Morris.

Mark said of the project:

"I really enjoyed making the prints, and I would be happy to carry on making more in the series."



Mark Hemsworth, 255 ways to Fly Away, C-type print, 2018

Russell Highsmith

Russell wrote a second full-length play, *Singles Night*, which was performed by a cast of professional actors at Old Fire Station, Oxford. The play is a comedy drawn from Russell's own experiences of dating agencies and disability and was far more revealing of the experiences of people with learning disabilities than his previous works. Russell continued his collaboration with Mark Ralph-Bowman for this project.

Russell said of the experience of writing and producing *Singles Night*:

"Working with professional actors made a big difference to the play."

"It was easier this time because I've done it before - I was more confident and it felt more stable"

At the application stage it was planned that unpaid student actors would be used, but Russell and his collaborating artist made the case that in order to do his writing justice he needed a professional cast of actors being paid the Equity minimum.



Russell Highsmith, *Singles Night*, Still of performance, 2018

Richard Hunt

Richard decided to expand his activity away from painting for this project, and broaden his practice to explore installation, whilst still retaining a painterly element. Richard produced *Rocking the Boat on the Beach* in collaboration with Sonia Boué, in a working relationship that is now into its fourth year. The piece was based around a beach scene, revisiting a common motif in Richard's work: bodies of water.

Richard on his new work: "I chose what I really wanted to do. I found it easier to work on rocks than on canvas."



Richard Hunt, *Rocking the Boat on the Beach*, Video installation, 2018

Lucy Skuce

Lucy's background is as a filmmaker, and for this project she decided to incorporate a film element into an installation work, a form she explored in her previous project during *Rising*. For this project, Lucy designed a piece that explored her obsessions with construction and controlled domestic environments to create a large sculptural installation based around a sash window. The piece uses back projection to create the illusion that we are looking through the window to see Lucy in an idealised domestic space. This ambitious project utilised elements of fabrication alongside technical filmmaking using digital 3D modelling and composition.

Lucy said of her work:

"Fantastic. It was about me. I liked building the window - I was good at sawing and using power tools."



Lucy Skuce, *Blue Sash Window*, Video installation, 2018

Danny Smith

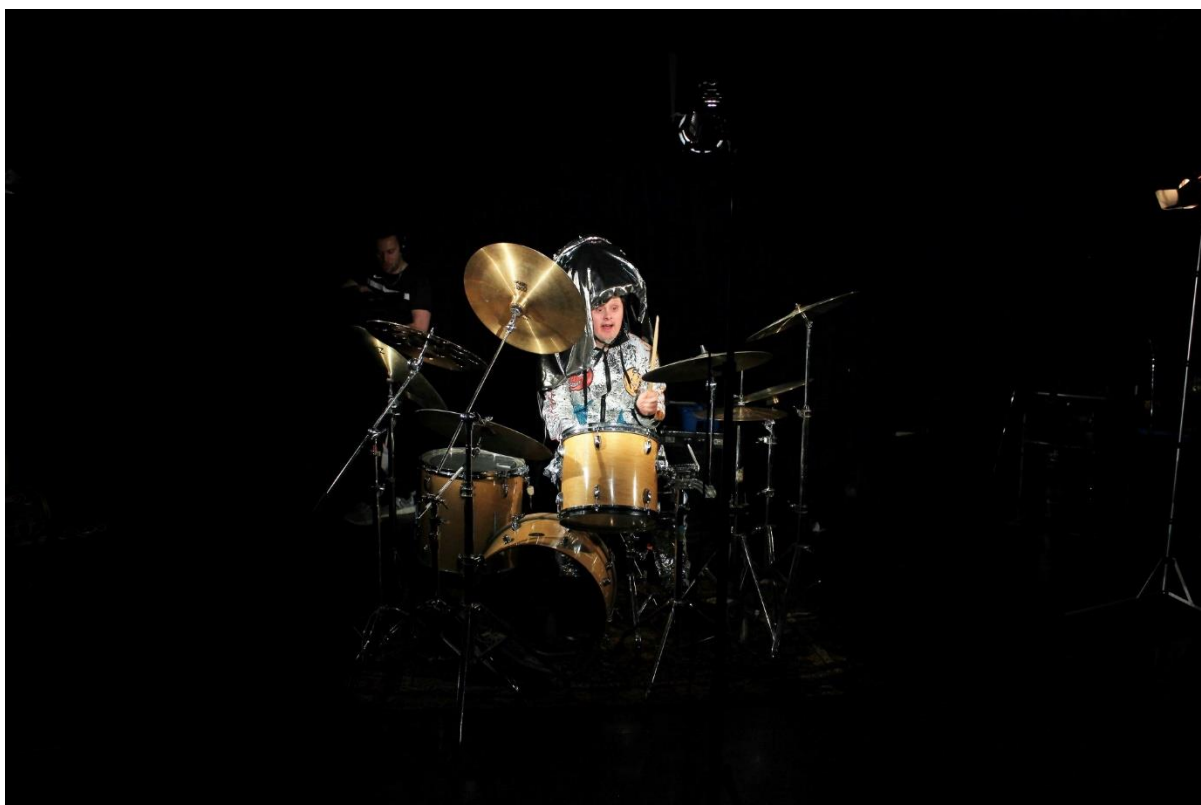
Danny's earlier work with the Shadowlight Artists has always focused on film and photography but has been diverse in terms of approach. His previous piece marked a change in direction, when Danny produced *Light from My Crystal*, an artist's film exploring a dream state in which Danny becomes a Neolithic cave-dweller with shamanic powers. His new piece, *Time to Leave*, develops this approach, with Danny casting himself as a fish-god opposing the day-to-day challenges he faces as a person with Down's Syndrome trying to assert himself in mainstream society.

Danny said of creating *Time to Leave*:

"It's like a book of my life."

"The drawings on my costume are the problems in my life."

Danny's film was shot on location on National Trust land in South Wales.



Danny Smith, still from *Time to Leave*, HD Video, 2018

Response from Joe Turnbull, Disability Arts Online

Joe Turnbull, Assistant Editor at Disability Arts Online, who publishes a blog written by the Shadowlight Artists, said of the films produced during the project:

"I found the series of films in the Shadowlight Artists' recent playlist, Rising, on Disability Arts Online highly original and peppered with striking images. The films were funny, insightful and informative in equal measure. What struck me most was the sheer variety of concepts and formats, encompassing conversations, wild adventures, animation, how-to videos and much more besides. Taken together, Rising is a journey from the sublime to the ridiculous and everything in between."

Aim 2: To collaborate and build creative exchanges

The Shadowlights each made a decision to continue working with an established professional artist where a working relationship already existed, or were assisted by Film Oxford in the recruitment of a new collaborator.

Each of the Shadowlights had developed a concept for their project independently of their collaborator, which allowed the artists to maintain ownership of their own work. Reflections on these artistic exchanges and working relationships are detailed by each artist below.

Mark Hemsworth

Mark continued working with filmmaker Naomi Morris and worked with Chris Oakley in the design and production of his finished print works.

"I liked getting support from Naomi. I chose the locations we went to [to take photographs and shoot the film]."

Mark feels that working with Naomi allowed him to focus a lot more on the narrative and content of the film, which he found difficult previously.

Russell Highsmith

Russell continued his collaboration with playwright and dramatist Mark Ralph-Bowman, established during the *Creative Bridges* project.

"It was easier with Mark this time – I didn't feel like we were fighting. Last time it was quite difficult to switch from writing for TV."

Russell feels there is a lot more that can be achieved through this collaboration, which he hopes can be continued.

Richard Hunt

Richard continued his established collaboration with Sonia Boué as he moved into the territory of a new medium.

"Sonia helped me working on the rocks, but I choose what I really want."

Lucy Skuce

Lucy recruited Chris Oakley to work with her on her installation piece and film.

"It was good. It was about me."

Danny Smith

Danny recruited artist Roly Carline to collaborate on his project. Danny finds it important to work with different artists for each of his projects.

"Roly is an interesting person. He let me talk."

"I think it's good working with different artists."

Tom Breach

For Tom's first self-initiated piece since his induction into the group, Tom worked with Chris Oakley to develop his animation, *Revenge of the Penguin*.

"I'm looking forward to developing the characters in my animations"

Aim 3: Engaging with art establishments

One of the core aims of the project was to facilitate the Shadowlight Artists in engaging with art establishments on a level of parity with non-disabled artists. Several significant barriers exist in this area, not least the barriers to art education which, to a large extent, determine perceptions of artists as professional or otherwise. To this end the group received curatorial input from Film Oxford's exhibition partners Modern Art Oxford and Old Fire Station. During scheduled Shadowlight meetings, the group presented their works in progress to Sarah Lowes (MAO) and Sarah Mossop (OFS) for creative feedback.

Additionally, the group gave artists' talks at the opening event at each of the venues. The group appreciated being introduced by MAO director Paul Hobson.

Mark felt that the hang of his works at Old Fire Station was *"a good design"*. Mark was involved in the installation process.

Lucy said of the exhibition at Modern Art Oxford *"It was good for me"*, and enjoyed the interest her piece received, as well as being able to speak to the public directly in her artist's talk at Modern Art Oxford.

Russell liked the intimacy of the theatre space at Old Fire Station *"I really like the theatre - it's like someone's front room!"*

Danny felt that Modern Art Oxford was an *"amazing place"* to show his work.

Sarah Mossop of Old Fire Station said of working with the group:

"Working with the Shadowlight Artists on their exhibition was a very positive experience for the team at the Old Fire Station, increasing our understanding of inclusive arts practice and, through the exceptionally high standard of the work, raising the profile of artists with learning disabilities with our audiences."

Sara Lowes of Modern Art Oxford said of working with the group:

"Modern Art Oxford has had the pleasure of working with Film Oxford and the Shadowlight Artists over a number of years and is delighted to continue to support this remarkable collective. The Shadowlight Artists are ideal role models for aspiring artists of any age, with or without disabilities. They speak passionately about working together and demonstrate a dedicated creative practice that is reflected in the ambition of their work, most recently the incredibly successful and well-attended premiere of Shadowlight Artists: Rising, shown at Modern Art Oxford and Arts at the Old Fire Station in 2018"

Dr Ju Gosling FRSA, Artistic Director of Together! 2012 said of working with the group:

"Shadowlight Artists continue to go from strength to strength, both as individual artists and as a filmmakers' group. I have thoroughly enjoyed viewing their submissions to the past five Together! Disability Film Festivals, of which each and every film has been selected for screening within a variety of programmes including animation, dance and artists' films and videos. Their films remain listed online, with links where available, as part of our archived programmes for everyone who is interested in Disability Film including scholars, programmers and critics."

"I have also enjoyed hosting visits to the Festival by the filmmakers, who, in addition to introducing some of their films, have been able to network with other filmmakers and provide role models for emerging filmmakers. I receive submissions from some groups where the standard is a great deal lower, and others where the filmmakers fail to progress year on year, while Shadowlight Artists demonstrate the high standards that should be aimed for - and can be achieved by - groups working with artists with learning difficulties. This underlines the achievement of Film Oxford with Shadowlight Artists."

Aim 4: Engaging and challenging public audiences

The public performances and exhibitions held during the project have generated an overwhelmingly positive response from the public, as evidenced by the responses summarised later in this report. The level of artistic and technical achievement demonstrated in the work produced seems to have resonated with the public.

The work produced during the project will continue to be brought before audiences as the programme of submissions to film festivals continues in the coming months according to the annual cycle of the international festival circuit.

Engagement Deliverables

Deliverable 1:

2-3 week exhibition of the work at Modern Art Oxford, with curatorial input by Modern Art Oxford throughout the development & productions phases of the project.

The project significantly over-delivered on *Deliverable 1* with a 4-week exhibition being held across 2 partner sites in Oxford, Modern Art Oxford and Arts at Old Fire Station, with curatorial input given to the artist's during the production phase by Sarah Mossop of AOFS and Sara Lowes of MAO. Workshops and film screenings with Q&A were held for over 60 people with learning disabilities. Additionally, a further 213 participants attended the artists' talk/Q&A sessions at MAO and AOFS during the Opening Event



Lucy Skuce delivering artist's talk at Rising opening, Modern Art Oxford

Deliverable 2:

b) Artist's presentation of work to audiences through a London showcase event hosted by Together! 2012, plus associated workshops.

The group presented their work at the Together! Festival in Stratford, London, and delivered artist talks with Q&A.



Shadowlights Associates, still from *Undersea Adventure*, HD Video, 2018

Deliverable 3:

An ongoing programme of submission of work in digital media to a programme of local, national & international media arts festivals, artists' showcases and relevant television stations. This activity has resulted in bringing the group's work to very large audiences during previous projects.

This programme is currently underway, and already a distribution agreement for all 8 films has been signed with the Together TV Channel (formerly Community Channel) available on Freeview, Sky, Virgin & Freesat from 2019 to 2024 (no relationship to "Together! Film Festival"). Based on current viewing figures, this will bring the group's films to audiences of 25,500 per year based on current viewing statistics (totalling 126,000 over the life of the contract).

Deliverable 4:

Another unusual focus of the group is the emphasis on 'digital engagement', to compliment the local physical exhibitions and screenings the group undertake. Many people with learning disabilities are isolated, particularly in the evenings (Day Service support usually ends about 3pm), and so many now use social media to communicate with each other. By sharing their work digitally, the group can spread their message of inclusion in the arts and society, not only locally to those that know the group's work in the real world, but beyond to audiences nationally and internationally.

During the project, Film Oxford produced a website exclusively to document and disseminate the work of the Shadowlight Artists with their oversight (shadowlightartists.org.uk). Alongside this, the group remains very active on social media, particularly their Facebook page. The group have also been blogging about the project through its development as a result of an editorial invite via Disability Arts Online.

APPENDICES

I. Media Coverage

1. Oxford Times 13th Sept 2019
Pre-play writer's profile of Russell. "For Arts Sake"
2. Oxford Times 11th Oct 2018
Review of Singles Night Play by reviewer Naomi Lanighan

"Specifically aimed at, and welcoming to those with learning disabilities, word had clearly got out as the room was bursting"

"The storylines highlight the added difficulties people with mental & physical health issues face while dating. It is an inclusive show where all are truly welcome - for that alone it should be applauded"
3. Review of Singles Night posted online by Karima Brookes 21/9/18

"Went to see Singles Night last night. Expected something good and quirky but was absolutely bowled over! It was positively Shakespearean with its mixture of misunderstandings, puns, jokes, slapstick and comings and goings. It also tackled serious issues like epilepsy and young adults (showed you what to do if someone had a seizure); over-possessive, controlling mother; and when house mates really want to become something more.

There was great audience involvement too! High five to the playwright, Russell Highsmith, and all the actors and members of Shadowlight Artists. I DO hope this tours- it deserves to be much more widely seen!"
4. BBC South News report on Rising Exhibition (shot during installation on 16/10/19) broadcast 24/10/19

Facebook version: <https://www.facebook.com/bbcoxford/videos/2170427706507176/>
web version (same as broadcast): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-oxfordshire-45954203/the-art-collective-breaking-barriers>
5. Review of Rising on DAO by Deborah Caulfield 21/11/18
<http://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/shadowlight-artists-rising/>

"When was the last time you left an art exhibition with your emotional dial reset to happy?"

"Not a single work failed to please this reviewer"

"So of course Hemsworth's pictures are engaging and enthralling; of course we want to look at each individual image separately; and of course we then draw back to grasp the totality of the composite image, its complexity, and its simplicity. We are awestruck by the vastness of the space - the pictorial space, the wider sky, and outer space as well. It takes an artist to do all this for us."

"As in his paintings, there is a timeless quality about Rocking the Boat on the Beach, and an ancient spirituality. It emanates tranquillity and calm, speaking to the connectedness of things, a reassurance that all will be well."
6. Podcast review on Podbean by Lia Doolan on 10-11-18
<https://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-4g8qp-9ec304>
7. Live Radio Oxford Radio interview with Danny Smith (1st week of exhibition.)

II. Audience Responses

Extracts from the exhibition comments book, Old Fire Station:

"Good stuff! The Photo-montage is excellent, fragments of life form the whole add up to the sky.

-RS"

"Great work all round, Highsmith is uplifting, Hemsworth floored me!

-AP"

"Brilliant work! Well done all artists!

Katherine"

"Absolutely Brilliant, Well done. 20/10/2018"

"Fantastic portrait Danny Smith!

Mc/x"

"Fish God! Brilliant!"

"Really enjoyed the play and the Future Cities are great"

"Love the composition of the photos"

"Masahiko from Japan 23/Oct/2018

Wonderful Fantastic!!

As if I entered into a Future city

The arts look like Takashi Yanse (Anpanman Artists)

Talking about art of Tom Breach"

"Wonderful show, thank you for giving the Roar collective a tour"

"Just great! I love everything in this show!"

"Disability is based on what's normal. AS"

"The more people become or start seeing more disabilities, then that will be seen as normal. So disability can turn into ability, that's what I see in this exhibition. I am refreshed by what I see.

S Rodbells"

"Awesome and inspiring work"

"Beautiful, thought-provoking film piece- beautifully scripted, but my favourite is the 'Sparkle of the Pear' for the vibrant colour, and perfect division of the canvas.

V. well executed show- thank you

Katie from the engine room"

"Excellent exhibition beautiful and sad"

"How did they draw that!!! Wow!! Brilliant!!"

"To be honest some of them were pretty creepy!"

"Together with the exhibition at Modern Art Oxford, this is fantastic and eclectic collection of art in a different form- hugely creative. Thanks"

"Especially love Mark Hemsworth's photography. Fantastic work. SA"

"I went to see one of Russell's first production in Didcot, his perspective is unique and he is a great comedy writer. I think it was called 'The Big Sock. Always express yourself. Naomi"

Extracts from Comments book at Modern Art Oxford

"It's very inspiring I loved it so much!"

"Wonderful film & animation!"

"This is brilliant! Best work that I've seen in ages. Well done all"

"Very creative artists and very professionally presented. Well done everybody and well done for the sensitive support given"

"I really love to see all the projects finished everyone has done a fantastic job I am so happy for everyone involved you should all be very proud of yourselves"

"Inspiring and innovative. Great ideas and lovely use of space. This stuff needs to be out there. Show the world what you can do!"

"SHADOWLIGHT your stuff is really cool! Keep making stuff"

"The rocks are beautiful!"

"Loved the window - kept walking around it. The beach and rocks are beautiful and felt very calm. Loved it"

"Beautifully presented gallery space with very emotive, inspirational work. Love the window piece - powerful stuff"

"Absolutely fantastic & brilliant exhibition. The art has challenged me in a way I never thought possible! Thank you"

"I laughed and I loved the blue window. Something poignant and moving about the sea and the blue and the beach - Thank you!"

"Very calming, tranquil - thank you"

"What a wonderful show! I loved this and the Old Fire Station exhibition. Thank you for so much fun"