

Creating Empowering Counter-Narratives through Collective Digital Art by Disabled People

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Figure 1: Images from the project showing the participants and the lead artists working together, a sample of a self-portrait created, and a picture from the inauguration of the collective sculpture

Abstract

Art has long been a powerful means by which disabled people and other minority group have established counter-narratives, pushing back against damaging stereotypes. These efforts become particularly meaningful when bringing together the work and stories of multiple disabled people, helping to move away from individual,

while striving to preserve the uniqueness of everyone's contribution. In this paper, we document a collective digital art project led by an internationally acclaimed disabled artist involving 16 local disabled people in Japan, featuring a series of workshops where participants created self-portraits using iPads subsequently included in a larger inflatable sculpture. The generated art piece was exhibited to the local community during a series of events organised for the International Day of People with Disability. We reflect on our experiences to suggest key methodological learnings around peer-led collaborative art for counter-narrative creation and examine the role of technology in the context of curation.



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CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; **Empirical studies in accessibility**.

Keywords

Disability, art, community, counternarratives, Japan

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1 Introduction

Disability perceptions are recurrently influenced by ingrained prejudices and stigma that derive from societal misconceptions. These preconceptions are frequently shaped without active involvement or sanction of disabled individuals¹, perpetuating a skewed understanding of their experiences and proficiency [34, 36, 108]. Throughout history, disabled people have found countless ways to push against these ableist narratives by creating and sharing their counter-narratives documenting the complexities of their experiences as individuals, and highlight how they are negatively affected by social oppression as much, if not more, than they are by any limitation of their own bodies [8, 39, 102]. Disability art, a term referring to the work of artists that is specifically rooted in their own lived experience of disability and carries the purpose of fighting social injustices, has been particularly significant in providing tools to articulate these counter-narratives [17, 99, 100]. The advantage of leveraging art to reflect, articulate, and share counter-narratives is that it can simultaneously represent a personal therapeutic outlet for the artist to re-assert their own identity against lived experiences of physical and emotional pain, as well as acting as a socio-political statement that draws attention to systemic injustices and promotes disability pride [4, 26, 91, 105, 116].

Art can also be created, shared, and experienced in almost an infinite number of formats, which can be adapted to the needs of individuals and, contrary to ableist prejudice, is enriched rather than diminished by multi-sensory exploration [14, 41, 65]. Researchers in HCI and accessibility have explored the role of technology in enabling access to various artistic expressions for disabled people, as well as attempted to unpack how professional artists leverage different technologies in unique ways in their creative processes [6, 24, 48, 55, 88]. However, most of the existing work focuses on analyzing individual interactions with digital technology for art making or understanding the dynamics of collaboration between artists and researchers to design better artifacts and systems, but there is limited work looking at how peer-led collective art projects can help to elevate the stories of disabled individuals and what role can digital technologies play to support such processes [23, 60, 82].

Across the globe, inclusive art collectives from dance troupes, musical orchestras, and visual art groups featuring people with

different disabilities continue to show how artistic practices can transcend differences between bodies, communication styles, and sensory preferences weaving together individual and collective stories to affirm identities, subvert expectations, and advocate for change [1, 78, 84, 92, 112]. Previous studies have highlighted how engaging in artistic endeavors as a way for disabled people to craft their own counter-narratives is especially meaningful when these initiatives are not simply *inclusive*, but *disability-led* [28, 58, 103]. Peer training and support are cornerstones of disabled people's lives, including formal experiences such as wheelchair or orientation and mobility training [3, 11], online or in-person mentoring [95, 97], advice and evaluation of assistive technology [13, 64], or advocacy and activism [68, 75]. However, the majority of studies focusing on collective art for self-expression are not led by disabled artist, which arguably hinders their power to create counter-narratives that are fully owned by disabled communities [49, 111].

In this paper, we present our research surrounding the production of a collective inflatable sculpture led by an internationally acclaimed disabled digital artist with the involvement of 16 local disabled people in Japan. The design of the shape of the sculpture was devised by the artist based on the interactions with local disabled participants, and its surface is covered with a series of badges featuring self-portraits and other self-representing creations that were made by the participants. Throughout a series of workshops, the artist guided participants in utilizing the commercially available Procreate application on the iPad, to make their artistic creations, replicating the process he uses to create his pieces. The completed sculpture was exhibited at a local gallery as part of a series of events hosted in celebration of the International Day of People with Disability. Throughout this process our research group worked as facilitators and supporters, documenting the interactions between artists and participants during the workshop, as well as the reactions of visitors and participating artists themselves at the public exhibition.

Our work seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How can peer-led collective art projects be leveraged as a method to support people with disabilities in creating and sharing their own counter-narratives?
- (2) Which techno-material considerations should be taken into account to support these disability-led collaborative art practices?

Video recordings, researcher notes, participants' messages, and interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis to generate insights into how the peer-led art approach enabled participants to reflect on the stories they wished to tell about themselves, surface tensions with dominant disability narratives experienced individually and collectively, recognize the value of reciprocal exchange, as well as exploring how technological mediation shaped participants' experiences. Leveraging the results from the study, we articulate methodological reflections around the importance of resonance in collective art projects for counter-narrative creation, and explore the infrastructural role of technology for collective curation.

Our contributions to this work can be summarized as follows: (1) the documentation of a disability-led community digital art project which supported participants in crafting and sharing their personal

¹Across the manuscript, we interchangeably use identity-first and person-first language in acknowledgement of the different preferences of individuals who participated in this research noting that such distinction does not necessarily reflect the cultural and linguistic implications in the context of Japan [40]

stories in a meaningful way, (2) a collection of methodological insights on how to promote disability-led narrative construction in by leveraging artistic co-creation practices.

2 Related Work

Our work builds on prior research on the role of disability art as a means for creating and sharing counter-narratives, as well as role of technology in HCI research to support inclusive digital art practices at individual and collective levels. It should be noted that the following sections largely include work concerning community-based disability art projects and HCI which are primarily referring to anglophone western contexts and thus affected by contextually relevant social and political structures. Unfortunately, we were only able to find limited number of publications specifically referring to the Japanese context [37, 38]. While we believe that many of the aspects discussed in the available literature are closely related to our own work, it is important to remain mindful of how socio-cultural differences particularly related to the conceptualization of dominant narratives of disability would affect both artistic and research practices.

2.1 Counter-narratives and Disability Art

When proposing the theory of Figured Worlds to illustrate meaning making process of individuals and societies, Holland et al. [53] articulates how these can be defined as *"socially and culturally constructed realms of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others"* [53]. Such definition highlights, both explicitly and by omission, the hierarchical structure embedded in our contextualized and collective cultures, determining not only how stories are told, but also whose stories are considered worthy of being told [53, 70]. These narratives do not just shape the abstract portrayal of individuals and groups in society, but directly shape access to civil rights and opportunities in daily life [29, 76, 80, 83].

Although there is no such thing as a single unified dominant narrative of disability, as all narratives are by-products of specific socio-political contexts, scholars have pointed out how some key commonalities that shape the portrayal of disability in society [36, 73, 108, 109]. These span from the idea of nameless bodies and minds who are somehow less valuable, thus to be hidden pitied, or corrected [2, 7, 109]; to the sensationalization of extraordinary and inspiring supercrip individuals who overcome their disability, often excelling in sporting endeavours or theoretical intellectual pursuits, through technological integration, innate brilliance, or sheer persistence without any need for systemic change [2, 44, 57]. Simply put, the narrative of disability is often not told, and when it is, it is shaped by the incorrect perceptions of the abilities and lived experiences, which are superimposed on disabled individuals by others who lack any epistemic knowledge [7, 34, 36].

Counternarratives stand in opposition to these dominant stories, often representing an act of resistance carried out by marginalized groups with the goal of sharing awareness, challenge power dynamics, and shift societal perceptions [70, 83, 101]. Disability art, akin to other forms of *Artivism* [16, 59, 104] has historically been used to question dominant narratives and create counternarratives that

collect and amplify the voices of the disabled community. Art can be leveraged by individual practitioners to share personal stories about their experience of disability [79], but also approached from a community point of view to gather and collate stories which are meaningful both individually and as a collective [49, 59, 90]. Art as a medium for both personal and group storytelling can yield a profound meaning for disabled persons and other from marginalized identities. Scholars have pointed out how substantial benefits arise simply as a result of increased agency gained by the disabled artist, both in relation to the ability to share their own story via their creation, but also because of their ability to make choices about the creative process in itself, whether this manifest by selecting a specific colour for a painting, or scripting a dialogue for a theatre performance [77, 86, 94]. The advocacy dimension inherent in Disability Art also enhances its significance for disabled individuals, enabling the pursuit of justice in both personal contexts, for example by redressing power imbalances in relationships with clinicians or family members, as well as public ones, pushing for systemic changes in access to fair services [41, 81, 86, 96, 107]. Finally, when artistic activities are carried out as part of a group of disabled individuals, as well as when outputs are shared with relevant communities, art can act as a catalyst for creating personal connections, primarily with the other disabled creators that one can interact with, but also with non-disabled audiences who are exposed to the final products [33, 37, 38, 42, 86, 110].

Although individual artistic contribution in community-based disability art projects are produced by disabled people, leaders and facilitators frequently belong to research institutions or not-for-profit organizations led by non-disabled people [42, 49, 90]. While these works are participatory in nature and still offer powerful opportunities for disabled people who are not professional artists to engage in creative practices to craft and share personalized counter narratives, disability-led initiatives give communities authentic ownership on the creation modalities and outcomes of collective endeavours [43, 58, 91, 111].

Community-based disability art can leverage any form or medium, but visual arts including painting, drawing, photography are often the most commonly utilized forms. With adequate adaptations visual arts can be made accessible to all individuals regardless of physical, cognitive, or sensorial capabilities, can be implemented with relatively affordable technologies, utilizing multi-purpose community spaces, and can be curated and displayed in a variety of formats which makes them easier to share with the audience of choice [14, 21, 42, 93]. Technology can play an essential role as tool to both enable disabled individuals to participate in community-based art projects that empower them to create their own counter narratives, but also to curate individual contributions into more complex collective narratives. In the following section we look at HCI literature on inclusive digital art practices with a particular focus on how technology can help disabled individuals to develop and share counternarratives based on their unique experiences.

2.2 HCI for inclusive digital art

The HCI community has explored different tools and approaches to construct and share counter narratives to question existing practices, diversify education, and empower marginalized individuals

[16, 25, 62, 71, 114]. The literature review by Mariani et al. [71] shows how digital technologies from virtual and augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and social media platforms can be used by people to create and share counternarratives in multimodal formats. Grassroots and community-based approaches are essential to ensure the truthful representation of non-dominant experiences. To promote participation, is then crucially important for researchers and practitioners to carefully examine that the technological complexity, as well as time and modality of engagement of individual projects, are aligned with the needs and goals of specific communities [16, 37, 46, 117].

Designer and accessibility researchers have proposed a variety of new tools and applications which can support disabled creators in engaging in different forms of visual arts from haptic-audio interface for non sighted drawing [18], gaze-based multimodal interfaces for graphic design by those who have severely limited mobility [24], voice-based drawing for artists with upper limb movement restrictions [47], mouth-based gestures for hand-free XR interaction [56] and text-to-image generation using AI tools [106]. At the same time, analysis of the creative practices of disabled visual artists including the work of Creed [23], Barbareschi and Inakage [6], Cossovich et al. [22], and Bennett et al. [10] showed how creative professionals often leveraged mainstream applications and devices, albeit sometime in combination with dedicated adaptations and strategies they developed to overcome existing accessibility shortcomings. Utilizing existing mainstream devices such as laptop computers, tablets and smartphones is also a popular approach in community based digital art projects seeking to engage novices in digital visual art creation as they are likely to be more familiar and intuitive to disabled participants, and eventual carers who might act as supporters [27, 85, 89].

Finally, although there are example of HCI researchers showcasing how inclusive digital tools and platforms can help to collate individual artwork representing counternarratives of individual contributors into even more impactful collective ones [16, 25, 45], these are not necessarily focused on groups of disabled artists.

Overall, although research on disability art has shown the potential of engagement in creative visual activities centred on personal experiences to allow disabled novices to craft and share their own counternarratives, there is limited work that examines the methodological implications of implementing such approach as a disability-led initiative. Moreover, while digital devices and applications are often utilized to support inclusive art practices of disabled novice and professional experts, limited research have looked at their role in supporting the integration of personal and collective counter narratives in the community. Our work extends prior research by documenting how collaboration between a professional disabled artist and 16 local disabled people in Japan, centred on the creation of an inflatable sculpture, contributed to the formation of counternarratives of disability, while also reflecting on the role of digital technologies within this context.

3 Methodology

Overall, the project was articulated over a period of 10 months between February and December 2023. After securing funding from a combination of art and research foundations between December

2022 and January 2023, the team begun planning the implementation of the workshops, drawing a conceptual note to share with potential local community partners, identifying suitable spaces, and organizing logistics aspects. Three workshops were conducted in Japan with a total of 16 disabled participants from two different organizations in April. After the workshops the lead artist returned to the UK and, between May and November, he worked on the design of the collective sculpture and the integration of all the individual art pieces created by participants. Finally, an exhibition to unveil the sculpture and present it to the public was hosted at a local community gallery in Japan on the 3rd of December 2023 in occasion of a festival for the International Day of Persons with disabilities. An overview of the timeline of the project is shown in Figure 2. In the following sections we describe the settings of the project and the positionality of the research team, the characteristics of the 16 local participants, the overall structure of the workshops and final exhibition, as well as our approach to data collection and analysis.

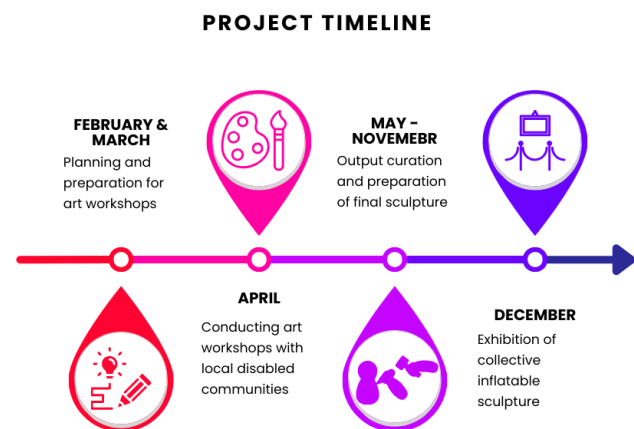


Figure 2: Timeline of the project from February to December 2023

3.1 Settings and Team Positionality

The current project encompasses the collaboration between a team of researchers in Japan, local disabled communities and social welfare governmental organizations also based in Japan, and an internationally famous disabled artist from the United Kingdom. Our research group have a long history of over 6 years collaboration with local organizations for persons with disabilities, social enterprises who employ people with disabilities as well as local government offices in charge of Social Welfare in the Yachiyo Chiba region. With the support of these organizations, we have delivered numerous workshops, participated and volunteered in community events, and conducted participatory research which always prioritized the interests of disabled people and older adults in the local communities, striving to balance academic rigour with methodological flexibility to ensure that our work fits around their needs, schedules and priorities, rather than requiring the opposite. Our approach is inspired by seminal work on the burden of participation, design with

established communities, and the need to sustained engagement which have been advocated by scholars working with marginalized communities [31, 66, 115].

The project illustrated in this paper was not the first in which members of our research team organized and delivered an inclusive art themed workshop, in fact the popularity of such events with the local community and participants desire to engage with different forms of creative activities with and without the use of technology, has been an important motivator in proposing new projects which might suit different access needs and creative aspirations. At the same time, we remain conscious of our position as relatively young researchers (between 20 and 50 years of age), with expertise ranging from HCI, accessibility, service design, art therapy, or media design, and no lived experience of disability, creates specific power dynamics and places us as guests rather than members of the community. The first author of the paper has a long history of friendship and previous experience of collaboration with the Lead Disabled Artist, including supporting with facilitation for some of his previous art workshops for disabled people in the UK. The UK based internationally famous digital artist describes himself as a working-class 56 years old man with multiple complex disabilities affecting his upper and lower mobility. He has also been a wheelchair user for over 40 years.

The research team, stakeholders from local organizations and the artist engaged in initial meetings to scope the opportunities for organizing and hosting inclusive disability-led art workshops in Japan in early 2023 and collectively secured funding from multiple sources to be able to support material cost for both the community engagement and the production of the collective art piece. The goal was to leverage the skills and experience of the professional artist to guide a series of events where local disabled people could engage in the process of creating a digital art piece that will represent their own stories. Each individual piece would then be merged into a collective composition in the form of an inflatable sculpture by the artist himself to capture and share the stories of the entire community.

As this project unfolded our team discussed extensively with stakeholders, participants and with the Lead Disabled Artist how to best balance the sometimes competing needs and priorities of the artistic and the research components of this work. On the one hand, it was important that disabled individuals would retain complete agency over the creation of self-portraits without being concerned about having to prioritize their role as research participants, who were asked to produce data for generating insights, over their role as artistic contributors, working on their chosen creative outputs for the sculpture as a way to share their stories. At the same time, we wanted to rigorously investigate the factors and dynamics that supported or hindered participants ability to create and share their counternarratives through the artistic process. As a result, we opted for a combined approach where the leadership over the workshops, individual outputs, and collective curation was firmly given to the Lead Disabled Artist and the participants, whereas the research team would focus on leading the analytical process aimed at surfacing insights from the activities. As noted by Waycott et al. [113], such approach is perhaps an imperfect compromise in which the researcher can influence how the voice of the participant is delivered to the reader. However, it also ensures that burdens are

appropriately distributed between participants, researchers and other stakeholders. Overall, we believe that honest and transparent negotiation between the research team and other stakeholders helped to support meaningful participation and maximise impact.

3.2 Participants

Once the funding had been secured, partner organizations began to advertise the workshop using a combination of physical flyers, community newsletters, and posts on dedicated websites which included details about the goals of workshops, the use of digital tools, expected dates, a brief introduction of the artist including samples of previous works, and clear information about the fact that anyone who was interested could participate regardless of their disability or familiarity with digital tools. The information shared clarified that the team would make every effort to accommodate access needs including supporting transportation, ensuring accessibility of the venue, providing support throughout the workshop, adapting duration and timeline of the activities.

Based on the number and characteristics of people who expressed interest in participating, we divided the workshops in two separate sets. The first workshop was delivered in one full day (around 7 hours including breaks) and involved nine participants (P1-9) between the age of 20 to 40 years of age, and reported different, and sometimes multiple disabilities, including mild hearing impairment, mild/moderate/severe intellectual disabilities, and neurodivergent conditions including Autism. All were employed at the same pharmaceutical company which offers work opportunities for persons with disabilities and, while they did not all work in the same department, they were all familiar with each other. The second set of workshops was delivered over three half days (around 2 hours x 3 days) and involved seven participants (P10-16) of which 3 people took part in all 3 days, one person participated for 2 days, and 3 people participated to 1 day. Participants age ranged between 18 and 80 years of age and most participants reported multiple disabilities including mobility impairments in the upper and lower limbs, with three participants who were wheelchair users, and five who had mild/moderate/severe intellectual disabilities. None of the seven participants who joined the second set of workshops had known each other prior to joining the sessions. The duration and location of the workshops was decided in collaboration with participants groups and partner organizations to suit the specific groups. Workers at the pharmaceutical company preferred a more condensed format that would take place on a Saturday to not interfere with their working hours or family activities which would normally occur on Sundays. They were not concerned about becoming tired, as the total length of the workshop including breaks would be similar to a working day. On the other hand, participants on the second set of workshops were not engaged in regular employment, so they were more inclined to space workshop activities over multiple days for shorter sessions. Such arrangement also accommodated for potential emergence of fatigue, as several individual had complex physical disabilities. Both sets of workshops also were joined by local supporters from the pharmaceutical company (first workshop only), families, local authorities and communities, and local artists who frequently engaged with community projects.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Workshop Participants (P1–P16)

ID	Gender	Disability	Participation
Workshop 1 (Full-day, 9 participants)			
P1	Female	Mild hearing impairment; Mild intellectual disability	Full-day
P2	Female	Mild intellectual disability	Full-day
P3	Female	Mild intellectual disability	Full-day
P4	Male	Neurodivergent condition (ADD)	Full-day
P5	Male	Mild intellectual disability	Full-day
P6	Male	Severe intellectual disability	Full-day
P7	Female	Neurodivergent condition (AS)	Full-day
P8	Female	Mild intellectual disability	Full-day
P9	Female	Moderate intellectual disability	Full-day
Workshop 2 (3 half-days, 7 participants)			
P10	Female	Mild motor disability (uses cane)	1 day
P11	Male	Severe motor disability; Moderate intellectual disability	3 days
P12	Female	Moderate motor disability (uses wheelchair)	3 days
P13	Female	Moderate motor disability, Mild intellectual disability	3 days
P14	Female	Severe motor disability and moderate intellectual disability	2 days
P15	Female	Severe motor and intellectual disability	1 day
P16	Female	Severe motor and intellectual disability	1 day

3.3 Workshops Procedure

All workshop were conducted by the Lead Disabled Artist who was supported by a professional translator fluent in both English and Japanese, alongside three facilitators from his team who travelled with him from the UK. At least three members of the research team who were fluent in both Japanese and English were also present at every workshop and while they primarily focused on collecting data, they also provided help with translation between UK facilitators and participants and lend additional support as needed.

Throughout the workshops all participants utilized an 11-inch iPad A16 with the Procreate Application installed². Procreate allows users to sketch, paint and compose visual art. The application includes multiple accessibility features such as motion filtering and single tap options for those with impaired mobility, multiple color display options, color naming and sound feedback for users with reduced vision, and compatibility with iOS accessibility suite. The application has already been used in other projects focusing on artistic activities for people with different disabilities [61] and has shown to be easy to use, but also able to offer advanced features for more sophisticated creations. All participants interacted directly with the iPad touchscreen without the use of styluses or other interface adaptations.

Although the workshops all had different schedules to accommodate for participants needs, they all followed the same structure of activities which can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Introductions and Workshop Overview: The Lead Artist, disabled participants and supporters introduced each other. The Lead Artist also showed examples of his work, highlighting how he leverages art to share his experiences as a disabled working class man, and explaining how he uses digital tools to craft individual portions of each piece, as well as collating multiple creations into one composition. The artist

illustrated how the goal of the workshop is for everyone to create a self-portrait to tell their own stories and then merge individual pieces together into a single sculpture that will be produced and exposed in Japan.

- (2) Start your portrait: Participants were handed over the iPads by the facilitators, and the artist showed them how they could take a picture of themselves, place it as a base-layer in Procreate, and then use their fingers to trace each line to create a drawing, using simple commands to zoom in and out to capture details, and changing the type and colour of the brushes to create an effect that matched their artistic vision. Once participants traced all the lines, the artist showed them how to remove the picture so that only the drawing remains.
- (3) Colour the portrait: As they completed their base drawing participants were shown how to utilize various brushes and colour palettes to apply to different part of their drawing, choosing different strategies from creating manual lines of colour, using area effects, or applying patterns to add depth to their creations.
- (4) Create your backdrop: Ahead of the workshop participants were asked to bring physical or digital versions of pictures or even small objects which were meaningful to them, and they felt represented who they were. After finishing their initial portrait participants were asked to show the others the objects or pictures they chose and why these were important to them. All participants were then asked to take a photo of their physical pictures and objects or transfer a digital copy on the iPad, and then create a coloured drawing using the steps they previously followed (See 2 and 3).
- (5) Bring it all together: After they completed their chosen backdrop drawings, participants were shown by the artists how they could save them as images, combine them together in a pattern that they liked, and place it as a base canvas layer on

²<https://procreate.com/procreate>

which they overlay their previously created portraits. Figure 3 shows the individual drawings created by one of the participants and how they were combined together into a single artwork.

- (6) Show and tell: After everyone in the group finished their artwork they were asked to display all the complete pieces they had created during the workshops, explain to the rest of the group how their portrait told their stories, as well as share any thoughts about the workshop.

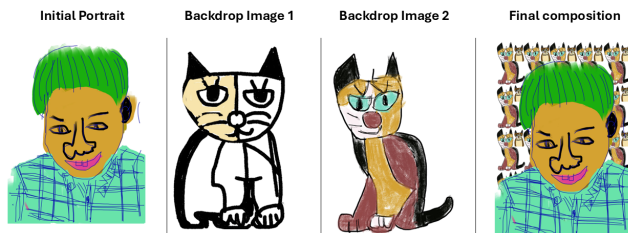


Figure 3: Individual elements and final composition for the artwork created by one of the participants in the workshop

As participants had different disabilities, previous experiences with creative activities and they were able to join the workshops for different amounts of time, they produced a different number of completed artworks per person. All sixteen participants completed at least the first 3 steps, making their own colored self-portraits, which was considered the most important goal of the workshop. Moreover, 12 participants completed at least one portrait with personalized backdrop, and 9 participants created multiple completed artworks. At the end of the workshop, all created art pieces were stored in a common online repository with participants consent, to allow them to access their creations, print them, and share them with families and friends. Examples of created artwork are shown in Figure 4. The same digital files were also used by the Lead Artist to incorporate individual pieces in the final inflatable sculpture.



Figure 4: Examples of art pieces created by participants during the workshops

3.4 Final collective sculpture

The form factor of the collective art-piece was a 185cm tall x 300cm long x 220cm wide inflatable sculpture. This format was chosen as it was suitable for the artist to draw patterns using digital application incorporating all the artwork produced by participants in the workshops and ensuring that each created piece was easily visible in detail. Inflatable sculptures were also a type of installation that the artist had produced before, could be easily shipped from the UK to Japan, and it feasible to install in the space selected for the exhibition.

The inflatable sculpture, shown in Figure 5, had the shape of a humanoid figure, with a large head and a long tail covered in scales. The Lead Artist explained how the sculpture was inspired by his residence in Japan, including the places he visited and the things participants had shared with him as representative of Japanese culture and their everyday life. The elongated shape of the eyes and the ears were intended as an homage to the many cat pets that people talked about and drew during the workshops, the tail was directly inspired by the popular figure of Godzilla, and the patterns on the surface of the sculpture was covered in a mixture of sakura blossoms and Yorkshire roses, to signify the connection between the British artist and his Japanese collaborators. The *skin* of the sculpture featured a total of 41 round badges that were made using the many compositions created by all the participants, including the 16 disabled people but also the supporters that decided to join the activities.



Figure 5: Front and side view of the sculpture

3.5 Public Exhibition

The produced sculpture was displayed at a local community gallery for a period of three days for an annual festival hosted in occasion of the International Day for Persons with Disabilities. The location was chosen as it was on the same premises of where two days of the second set of workshop were hosted. The gallery was keen to display the sculpture to the community of some of the workshop participants, to raise awareness about the activity of disabled residents and celebrate their cultural contributions to the area. The gallery had also the advantage of being an accessible building which was routinely frequented by residents with and without disabilities, and able to attract significant amounts of visitors for the festival celebrating the International Day for Persons with Disabilities.

The exhibition was scheduled over a 3-day period, with an unveiling and inauguration of the inflatable sculpture on the Friday

morning, and free visits allowed on the Friday afternoon and the entire day on Saturday and Sunday. (See Figure 6-C) All disabled participants and supporters who had taken part in the workshop came to see the sculpture in person, except for P15 who was unable to visit the gallery due to health issues. The participants from the first workshop, who were employed at the pharmaceutical company, were unfortunately unable to visit in person as the location was too far for them to easily reach it. However, in coordination with the CEO, we hosted a video conference where participants could join from the multi-purpose room in the company and one of our researchers would support them exploring the sculpture by conducting a guided remote visit using a tablet, to ensure that P1-P9 could also examine the final results of the work they had contributed to.

3.6 Data Collection

All workshops were video recorded from a single camera position to capture a bird-eye view of the workshop space. Throughout the workshops individual researchers took observation notes, engage participants in conversation to elicit contextual insights from them as well as their supporters and the artists. Researchers also took short close up videos to capture meaningful moments and detailed interactions as they occurred during the various workshops. All participants provided verbal feedback at the end of the workshop and, those who struggled with spoken language, were also emailed a short survey after the workshop which they could complete with the help of their supporters to better articulate their feedback about the event, and the meaning of their self-portrait, in their own time. Supporters and observers from the local communities were also asked to fill in a short survey after the workshop to ask about their impressions and describe any meaningful moments they observed.

Throughout the three exhibition days at least a member of the research team was consistently present at the gallery to conduct observations and short interviews to assess the visitor's perception of the sculpture. When disabled people and non-disabled facilitators who had previously taken part in the workshops visited the gallery, the researchers recorded their interaction with the sculpture, asked them about their opinion of the final result, and how did it compare to their expectations. Interviews were kept casual and unstructured as we primarily sought to engage visitors and previous participants in conversation to discover how they felt about the sculpture as a collective piece, but also the impressions of seeing individual artworks as part of it, and specific memories from the workshop that were recalled during the visit. In total, we captured short conversation with 35 visitors including residents with and without disabilities, interviews with fourteen previous participants, nine online and four in-person, and three supporters who had contributed to the sculpture. The initial inauguration was also video recorded, as well as the remote guided visit that the research team supported using video conferencing tools for P1-P9.

3.7 Data Analysis

All collected videos for each workshop were organized in a single timeline utilizing the continuous recording taken from the fixed camera. For video data collected from the exhibition we established a timeline based on the timestamps of individual files which were

cross checked with the notes taken by researchers. At the beginning of the data analysis process, the first author watched all the video footage from the workshops to identify key moments and interactions and produce annotations. The second author produced full transcripts of identified key moments. Videos and short interviews from the exhibition were also examined and annotated firstly by the first authors with the second author assisting in the provision of full transcripts. Observation notes from researcher and written responses to the surveys were also added to the data corpus. All data was initially transcribed in the original spoken language (Japanese for participants and English for the lead artist) and subsequently translated in English for analysis.

The first and second authors coded all available data first independently using an inductive approach and then merged codes through iterative discussion [19]. An initial set of 63 codes was then presented to the broader research team. In total, 5 hybrid discussions meetings were carried out using visual maps and affinity diagrams to progressively aggregate codes, no additional codes emerged in this phase. Aggregation was carried out utilizing our research questions for interpretative lens to unpack the methodological features of the workshops that supported participants in creating their own counter-narratives, the frictions that emerged in relation to dominant narratives to which they were subjected, and the importance of the produced artwork as individual and collective testimony [51].

4 Results

Our findings are presented across four different themes which comprehensively capture the insights from the workshops: "Reshaping One's Identity", "I am because we are", "Appropriating digital interactions", "I am more than what you see".

4.1 Reshaping One's Identity

Lack of confidence was something that was commonly observed in most most participants at the start of the project. Several individuals held self-stigmatizing beliefs about their own lack of capabilities. This was further reinforced by the protective behavior of supporters who, upon hearing the initial explanation of planned activities and seeing examples of the work of the lead artist, expressed doubts about the ability of participants to create digital self-portraits of the same standard of quality. For example, the carers of P15 and P16, two sisters who lived in an assisted facility in the area, mentioned how, albeit they had enjoyed participating in crafting workshops before, they had little interactions with digital devices and, due to their motor disability, could struggle with the coordination required to make precise lines for a portrait using the iPad, and could even accidentally drop and damage the device. One carer warned one of the researchers about the difficulties that the sisters, especially P16, could face in maintaining attention for prolonged periods of time and that they could become restless if they were asked to stay seated for long.

It should be noted that none of this was communicated in a matter that suggested that the carers were dismissing participants or implying that they would be willingly *disruptive*. Carers were mostly concerned about the welfare of participants, they wanted them to have an enjoyable time and feared that lack of success



Figure 6: A: Participants in Workshop 1, B: Participants in Workshop 2, C: Public Exhibition

could create disappointment and further hinder their confidence. Previous studies have shown how such protective attitudes are often more pronounced amongst Japanese carers compared to Western counterparts and, while they frequently generate from a desire for caring and sheltering, they can result in disempowering dynamics that exacerbate negative beliefs [54]. Moreover, such attitudes were frequently echoed by participants themselves who at the beginning doubted anything from their artistic skills (*"I cannot really draw well"* - P2), digital skills (*"I am not very familiar with technology"* - P10), or motor capabilities (*"My hands are stiff and I can't hold a brush or anything now"* - P14).

Regardless of initial doubts, the combination of a scaffolded structure, step-by-step guidance, and consistent encouragement from the artist and facilitators, enabled participants to approach the task and very quickly become completely absorbed in it. Although as researchers we had been warned that participants might struggle with attention, and indeed we made sure to incorporate breaks at several points to avoid fatigue among participants, it was clear that participants experienced no difficulties maintain attention for extended period. In contrast, they would more easily become engrossed in the task, investing care in their artistic choices, focusing on creating clean strokes and pleasing colour combinations, and constantly exploring new tools on the application to enhance expressive capabilities. Supporters from various workshops noticed that although participants would joke with the artist and each other during rest time, and were keen to show and explain their artwork during show and tell, they would become reflective and highly focused during drawing periods, indicating that they were concentrating on producing outputs of high quality, which could convey the image of themselves they were trying to express *"I was surprised by how quiet and focused they are when they engage in their work. I think it's a workshop to communicate something to others, where you can discover your speciality - something that only you know about yourself"* - CEO of Pharmaceutical Company who acted as a supporter during the first workshop..

It was not just the perceptions of supporters who throughout the workshops started to change, but the image that participants had of themselves also evolved as the project progressed. Being able to witness their own outputs, observe the quality of the work they had created, and receive endorsement from a professional disabled artist that they admired, but also recognized as facing some of their own struggles, increased their sense of appreciation for their own skills.

"I had a great time creating art and works using ways that I had never been familiar with. Moreover, I was moved by the fact that even I was able to create a piece of work that took on such a wonderful shape." - P3

The value that participants attributed to their artwork was also shown by the extreme care with which they experimented with colour combinations, different brushes and composition arrangements until they were satisfied that the digital drawings created conveyed their intended meaning. At the same time, the colourful and playful nature of individual pieces and the artist's own work, encouraged them to experiment, without necessarily holding themselves to standardized ideas of what a self-portrait should look like, but be guided by their own desire for expression and connection.

"When I was little, my parents would take me to art classes instead of going to kindergarten. After going there, I sometimes felt pressure to draw well, so I stayed away from it. By participating in this project, I was able to return to my childhood again for the first time in a long time, take on challenges regardless of whether I was good or bad, interact with many different people, and have a fun time." - P12

4.2 I am because we are

For many participants what resonated most about the project was the opportunity to interact, collaborate, and produce a joint output in the form of the collective sculpture. The format of the workshops gave them the opportunity to share their stories with others, but also listen to other people's stories. For example, P14 explained how the pandemic has been very hard as she had little opportunity for social interactions. In the past she was used to take part in watercolour painting workshops at the community centre, and many of her painted post card are still hanging on the walls, due to her worsening health she has been unable to leave her house much using her wheelchair and her arthritis had limited her ability to paint. She had never used technology to draw and was hesitant about joining the workshops, but she decided to join as she wanted to meet the disabled lead artist and hoped that some of the friends from previous events would also join.

Many of the participants explained how they never had the opportunity of interacting with another disabled person who had been successful in crafting an international career as an artist. What they described as most surprising was not only the fact that he was a disabled artist, but that he made disability a central point of his art. Even those like P12 who had received art classes and were clearly talented in the visual art, had relatively low confidence when they

joined, that they could create something worth to be part of such an ambitious composition. The lead artist also explained how he perceived a huge discrepancy between the actual degree of skills that participants had, in comparison to their level of confidence. *"People were so shy about their work, and most of them did not believe it was good until I told them, and said I was being honest. They are so talented, genuinely so talented. And like there was this ... talk about the quality of the line, which I think is down to this kind of graphic training for the writing style. And there was this really sort of interesting use of colour and but honestly, the artwork was kind of mind-blowing good."* - Lead Artist.

It should be noted that such humble attitude is in part a cultural trait, as Japanese people regardless of their individual characteristics, are encouraged to be modest and the specific forms in the language that one uses to refer to themselves reinforce this [50]. However, it was not just the opportunity to interact with the lead artist that gave value to the experience of a collaborative art project in the eye of participants, but also the ability to connect with each other, listen to each other's stories, and show mutual appreciation.

"I had a great time being involved in this and being able to participate in society with many other people like me. Looks like [name of the Lead Artist] will be putting all the artwork together in a huge piece that will be shown to other people with disabilities. May the circle of international exchanges grow!" - P11

Albeit many participants, especially those in the first workshop who were employed at the same company, had frequent positive interactions with other disabled people, their social circles remain relatively small. Being able to establish a sense of connection with others at both national and international level, gave them the confidence which can only be gained by the feeling of belonging in a particular community. This was further reflected when it came to observe the reactions of participants once they were able to see the final sculpture during the exhibition.

As an example, when P10 visited the gallery with a friend to participate in the inaugural ceremony on the Friday morning, she pointed at the sculpture and said *"Wow is so big! Look at the colours and the shape! It's amazing isn't it?"*. As her friend nodded vigorously, she inquired *"It is so amazing, did you really helped to make this?"*. P10 nodded pointing at some of the badges *"Yes, many people helped, and each made one of this using a tablet. I am looking but I cannot see where mine is..."*. The pair slowly circled around the sculpture to look for the badge and she found it P10 drew the attention of her friend *"This is mine, I am here on the tail. I made this in the workshop, do you not recognize me from my portrait?"* [laughs] Look at this one so pretty, P13 made it, she was in the same workshop with me. It is incredible to see everyone here". The exchange above is an example of an interaction we observed whenever one of the contributors, or a friend that knew they had created art which was part of the sculpture, visited the exhibition. The interaction showed how participants enjoyed finding their individual artworks, locating their position and discovering all the other badges that they were able to find, remembering who drew it and what it represented to the individual. The badges were not seen or described as separate, independent pieces, but as part of a collective one that they had all contributed towards. The sculpture represented both each person's own story but also the collaborative stories of all the

disabled participants, supporters and the Lead Artist which made its realization possible.

4.3 Appropriating Digital Interactions

Albeit some of the participants had some degrees of digital literacy, largely related to the use of smartphones and in a few cases tablets. However, none of them had previous experience with digital art creation. For participants in the first workshop such as P2, P4, P5, P6, and P9, the curiosity towards observing and trying to learn how to draw with the iPad, was one of the motivating factors which made them want to join the workshops. On the other hand, for others who participated in the second set of workshops like P10, P11, and P14 their lack of familiarity with technology and how this would affect their ability to engage in the activities, was a source of hesitancy and anxiety before the start of the project. Regardless of their level of digital skills or disability, participants were all able to quickly master how to utilize the application and using their fingers to draw lines, select appropriate brush types and sizes, as well as colour the digital artwork they produced. Moreover, the complex patterns they created to work as a backdrop and the delicate composition of multiple layers showed that by the time the workshops were fished, they had become familiar with also some of the more advanced features the system offered.

Although the artist did not provide a detailed tutorial on how to use the application, relying more on introducing new functions as and when they were needed, participants gained confidence as they progressively learned how to add each new tool to their repertoire, by mirroring the actions of the artist or one of the facilitators. Such approach was actually intentional, designed not to overwhelm participants with lengthy explanations of various features, and allow them to discover new tools by providing advice and demonstrating functions as and when they needed them throughout the workshop. *"I have done a lot of work with other disabled people, especially learning disabled people who have learning disabilities, and folks who have never done art or know nothing about technology. The worst thing you can do is give them a lot of options that they don't know what to do with. If they copy my simple actions to gain a bit of confidence, then they get the courage to try new things"* - Lead Artist

The structure of the workshop also encouraged reinforcement through repetition as the strategies used by participants to draw the objects they chose for their backdrop were the same they had utilized to produce the initial portraits of themselves. Recognizing that they were familiar with the steps they needed to take meant that participants became more confidence and requested less help from their supporters. When new tasks were introduced, the Lead Artist or one of the facilitators will show participants how to use a new function, which would quickly be added to the list of commands they had mastered. As a testament to the greater digital confidence acquired by participants we observed how those who completed more than one piece of artwork, did not actually request for any help in the creation of their second or third pieces, and when they wanted to try new tools to observe the effect it would have on the composition, they simply explored different functions independently, until they found one that match their creative vision.

"I feel like I learned many things without even noticing. When I started my self portrait I did not know how to use different lines and

get all the details right. But you get to practice a lot and everyone could show you how to do things. When I started to work on the hedgehog [the subject of the second piece created by the participant], I knew what to do and I could find new things that I wanted to add" - P7

As a result of this increased independence of participants in the appropriation of digital tools for their artistic pursuits, supporters who had initially joined the workshop to provide help to the people they had accompanied, found that their help was mostly not necessary. Some, such as the mother of P6 remained beside the person they usually provided support to, offering encouragement and engaging him in conversation throughout the workshop to elicit reflections to better understand the meaning behind his portrait. However, others simply joined the creative activities alongside participants. As we observed the supporters and the participants drawing side by side we witnessed how the conversation between them changed, with their roles changing from ones where one gives and the other received support, to a more balanced one where disabled participants and supporters showed to each other the artworks they were creating, asked advice about best colour combinations or patterns that would help made specific features of the drawing stand out, and illustrated how a particular tool could be found in the application. The shift in power dynamic allowed everyone to simply enjoy the activity regardless of their characteristics, and appreciate the outputs they were able to generate.

"It fun for me to participate with all the people who came. I had a lot of fun, everyone was smiling. Through the iPad activities, I felt that the atmosphere was very relaxed. People can enjoy activities regardless of whether they have a disability or not. And there is not much difference in the fished work; if anything, the participants who worked on it more were better at it" - Supporter from the Social Welfare team.

4.4 I am more than what you see

Participants created self-portraits using many overlapping layers, each showcasing many different aspects which they felt were part of their own identities. The objects each individual decided to include in their own backdrops captured many different aspects which they felt were part of their own identities. Such choices could reflect personal associations with hobbies and interest, or meaningful places (*"Piplup because is my favourite Pokemon and Odawara Castle in blue because I love the place when I go there with my family" - P1*; artistic and cultural preferences *"I chose to use sakura as a background which is very Japanese [laughs]. Sakura season is my favourite time in Japan and I think is beautiful and you can see it in many art here" - P8*. Moreover, portraits could also seek to capture the important social connections that participants felt were part of their identity, which is something which was reflected in the decision to include their pets, or specific people that were important to them. P5 mentioned he wanted to included all his friends and colleagues who were at the workshop, as a way to document an meaningful memory. On the other hand, P7 explained how she wanted her portrait to be almost a visual diary of her life, which could capture and show her love for the things that had contribute to shape her self-identity and that gave her daily joy.

"I drew four things I like, Shuri Castle in Okinawa, Mt. Fuji, my partner, and my cat, Chibi. First of all, I have roots in Okinawa, spent

time in Shizuoka, met my boyfriend and his cat Chibi, and now I'm not alone. I chose this theme because I wanted to convey that I am here now because of the support of the people around me." - P7

Others, like P2 and P12, initially rejected the idea of a self-portrait having to capture their own face, and chose instead to focus on transmitting their inner selves through a metaphorical visualization. Both participants explained how they were not convinced by the idea of a portrait having to strictly be a physical representation of selves. Both explained that who they were was not necessarily reflected in their faces, their bodies or, for P12's wheelchair. These things were part of them but they saw themselves differently. P2 chose to use a Fox as an avatar, which in traditional Japanese culture are shapeshifters who, as the year pass and their wisdom grows, they gain new tails which just increases their beauty. P12 initially drew the picture of her own cat, and subsequently chose to add herself to the portrait, as she enjoyed the idea to being captured alongside it.

Such a variety of representation is a testament to participants engagement with the process of creating a self-portrait and the desire to convey the complexities that shaped their personal identities. Ultimately, all of these choices are equally valid as they represent the aspects and modalities that felt most treasured to each person, and as such should be honoured without judgement.

5 Discussion

Our study represent an example of a disability-led community art project that sought to engage disabled people in the creation of a collective sculpture which enabled them to capture and share their own counternarratives. Our work builds on previous studies showing the potential of disability art in empowering participants, and especially those who have intellectual disabilities, to express their unique experience and gain affirmation [37, 90]. We also draw on previous literature on the use of technology to support inclusive digital art creation [6, 10, 22, 23]. It should be noted that while the current manuscript is an academic research paper, this project was never intended as a research-oriented engagement where participants would test a new participation framework, experiment with new technologies, or support ideation about inclusive application. The goal behind it was always to develop an opportunity for a meaningful disability-led artistic collaboration for local disabled people, offering a way to amplify their voices, share their stories, and gain acknowledgment for their cultural contributions in their communities. As researcher we sought to facilitate engagement between stakeholders with whom we have collaborated extensively, observe the unfolding of the process, document the experiences of participants and gain new insights about the opportunities for HCI and Accessibility research to learn strategies and find opportunities for supporting similar efforts in the future. Below, we reflect on how the process of counternarrative development is supported by phenomenon of resonance which occurs as participants start to be exposed to task that invite reflection on their true self, and are progressively amplified as they find confirmation of their strengths in their own outputs, and ally-ship in others. Finally, we highlight key the role of curation role of technology to support such processes.



Figure 7: Samples of artworks and scenes from the workshop exhibition

5.1 Counternarratives as Progressive Resonance

The idea of resonance as a phenomena that can help marginalised groups to amplify their voices and gather momentum for social change has been explored by scholars within and outside HCI [20, 30, 69]. Coleman et al. [20] describes social resonance as "A dynamic of shared energy and connection within and between people and groups in a particular time and space". In our project we observed how the process of counternarrative creation was shaped by a sense of progressive resonance as participants were asked first to reflect on their own stories and identities to decide how to craft their own self-portrait, identifying an initial dissonance in the juxtaposition of a different dominant narrative, then engaged in the creative act which exposed them first to growing success in both digital interactions and artistic outputs, and finally exposed themselves to other similar narratives by engaging with the lead artist, listening to the stories of others, and witnessing the result in the form of the collective sculpture.

When they had to engage with the task of creating a self-portrait that captured their real selves, in a way they wanted to be seen participants ended up confronting the dominant narratives shaping their experiences. Because of their disability, socio cultural contexts, personal traits and previous life events, many of our participants had internalised specific narratives about themselves, whether as a jovial but impulsive athlete, a restless person with limited capabilities, or a classically trained artist whose body has become a barrier to engage in everyday life. Like many dominant narratives, these were often superimposed by a combination of external pressures and internal ruminations [12, 63]. Although participants themselves had become used to these narratives, and had also knowingly or unknowingly actively engaged in crafting them, there was something about them that felt restrictive. Being invited to create a representative self-portrait, nudged participants in a position to actively reflecting not on just on others or even their own perceptions of selves at a superficial level, but at the real essence they wanted to convey [52].

Historically, disabled people have been excluded from traditional portraits, with few notable exceptions such as the artist Frida Kahlo, due to the stigma surrounding the aesthetic of disability [67]. In turn, this has deprived countless of people with disabilities to share their stories through the visual representation that a self-portrait can offer. As an act of resistance, many proud professional disabled artists, including the Lead Artist in this project, have created and shared self-portraits to express the complexities of their disabled narratives [72, 105]. The Lead Artist invited participants to share this practice, not only through the guidance provided in the workshops, but sharing concrete examples of how he does it in his own work.

The other key aspect that deeply affected participant's experiences and had a dramatic effect on their questioning of dominant narratives and the creation of counternarratives, were the encounters with the lead disabled artist and with each other, whether in person at one of the sessions, or vicariously through the collective art piece. All participants mentioned how the opportunity to interact with the artist was, in itself one of the highlights of the workshops. This resonates with previous research showcasing the transformational power of peer leadership amongst disabled and marginalised communities to improve self- and collective confidence, whether in the context of sport, daily life skills, career prospects, or artistic creation [9, 32, 42, 86, 110].

Ultimately, the importance of disability leadership in these community-based art projects that are centred on the idea of creating and sharing disabled people's counternarratives not only as individuals, but as a collective community cannot be understated. In this project we had the privilege and opportunity to work with an internationally acclaimed disabled artist, but we acknowledge that this is not always a viable option for research teams or professional artists. However, we advocate for approaches that invite disabled participants in community art projects, not only to engage with a proposed activity at an individual level, but build rooms for collaboration and mutual inspiration, offering facilitation towards the integration of individual contributions into collective representation. These processes can help groups develop counternarratives that are more genuinely

shaped by the reciprocal interactions between participants, the sense of connection and their shared identity.

Moreover, we believe that in such context the active participation of researchers, and the interconnection between the artistic and research components of the project, can help to amplify this progressive resonance that strengthen the emergence of counternarratives. During the workshops we observed how both the opportunistic conversations initiated by the researchers who asked why participants chose to include specific details, as well as structured times for sharing and reflection as part of the "Show and Tell" phase, helped participants to engage in self-reflection and take time to articulate their own stories. Similarly, during the exhibition, asking visitors to elaborate on their impressions of the sculpture, nudged them to reflect on the meaning of such collaborative effort. As researchers, we acknowledge that our goal in these circumstances was to collect data that we could analyse to unpack how participants crafted their own self-portraits, how they interacted with digital technologies to achieve their creative goals, and how the resulting artefacts were perceived by the community. At the same time, in the eyes of participants and other stakeholders involved in the project, the mutually agreed framework of a research investigation centred on an inclusive disability-led art project helped to legitimise both the reflective processes that invisibly shaped how disabled contributors generated individual outputs and how these were combined in the resulting sculpture. Rather than simply placing different items they liked on a digital canvas, disabled participants took the time to select and explain how individual elements related to their personal identities as they wanted the researchers to capture these details correctly. Similarly, the final sculpture, was not just presented as an aesthetically beautiful object with many contributors, but as the embodiment of a collection of stories capturing all participants as individuals and as a cohesive group.

5.2 Explore technological potential for impactful collective curation

One insight that clearly emerged from our experience in this project was the fact that the process of curation and exhibition in community-based inclusive art workshops is as important as the one of the initial engagement with creative activities at an individual level, and that technology can play an essential role at both levels.

Digital technologies such as iPads, drawing applications, and complex rendering tools which supported the making of the sculpture, were continuously intertwined in the project at every step of the process. In such creative art projects whose success depends on the combination of individual artworks created by different contributors, into a single coherent output, technology plays a fundamental infrastructural role [5, 74].

A central tenet of our project was the need to balance individual expressions, preserving each original artwork in their original form while creating a collective representation of all those involved in the forms of an inflatable digital sculpture. This process of creative curation that simultaneously preserves and intertwines individual stories is an area that we believe could offer significant opportunities for innovation, particularly exploring the interactive opportunities offered by various technologies [45, 46, 71]. Observations from the art exhibition showed how the form factor of the inflatable

sculpture which offered an organic canvas where participants had their own place, but were all part of the same being, conveyed a strong impression of the final artwork being made possible only by their combined efforts. In turn, this reinforced the sense of belonging as individuals within the larger disabled community they created together.

While the materiality of the sculpture, with its imposing size, definitely helped to maximize the feeling of everyone's work being encapsulated into the collective result, we believe that digital representation could also achieved the same impact. From a design point of view we invite researcher, practitioners and curators to carefully consider the importance of size when it comes to envisioning how to best showcase disability-led collective art and how digital and physical technologies might help to achieve the desired form factor. Our provocation is that, when it comes to exhibiting art-mediated disability counternarratives, no size is too big or medium too striking. Disabled individuals and their stories are frequently silenced or overlooked, the juxtaposition of a purposeful artefact or experience that is, by design "impossible to ignore" can send a powerful message showing how disabled artists, especially drawing on their collective strengths, will not be made small [15, 87, 98].

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge how relative "sizes" of individual contributions, like the badges capturing individual portraits in the sculpture, is also an important consideration. This reflection should not just be taken at face value to mean that each output in an exhibition, within a single or multiple art pieces, has to have the exact same physical or experiential constraints, but that curators need to account for the fact that all individuals all deserve equal space and recognition for their artistic contributions. Technology can be explored to devise multimodal creative ways to ensure that each story captured in the collective art piece is valued and conveyed with equal emphasis [14, 35].

6 Conclusion

This paper has examined a disability-led collective digital art project as a means of fostering counter-narratives among disabled participants. The project demonstrates how accessible digital tools, when paired with peer-led facilitation, can support both individual expression and collective representation. Through the creation of self-portraits as layered compositions, participants engaged in a process that allowed for the articulation of diverse aspects of their identities. The resulting inflatable sculpture served as a material artifact of these experiences, providing a site for community engagement and public recognition. The findings suggest that disability-led digital art projects offer a productive framework for advancing both creative expression and socio-cultural visibility within local communities.

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