

Co-creating with People, usually non-artists

Hwa Young Jung

Confessions of a socially engaged artist working with people...

People are complex. People are messy. Contradictory, emotional, irrational, awesome, frustrating, surprising, ever-changing. I've been working with people from a variety of backgrounds for about a decade now, and here's a few things I've learnt.

Mostly, I'm not a part of the group I work with, so I'm mindful that I've been invited as a guest. I treat this invitation as a gift, as the hosts are welcoming me in to experience and share in their lives. So, **be nice! (- or don't be an asshole)** is a constant re-frame I have in my head when working.

When co-creating with non-artists, understand that although artistic projects have milestones, deadlines and outcomes, lived life doesn't have such clear cut boundaries. Nothing unfolds as planned, but as a process oriented artist, I give room for flexibility into the project and embrace the twists, turns and unforeseen circumstances out of my control. I am often taken back by how much better the work becomes when I let go of fixed outcomes and work in open collaboration with my co-creators.

When working embedded, in a situated place - understanding context is crucial. The right-hand page is a summary of how, why, and who I work with - which gives an overview of lessons learnt. Although all 5 apply to every project, I've narrowed in on one aspect to delve deeper for each point.

My work usually develops in 2 stages - **Content** & **Form**. Content is co-created with non-artists to explore a subject matter, then I collaborate with artists, designers, technologists to give Form to our collective narrative.

This is a personal account, and in no way intended to be taken as anything other than suggestions. I hope it's helpful, and good luck!

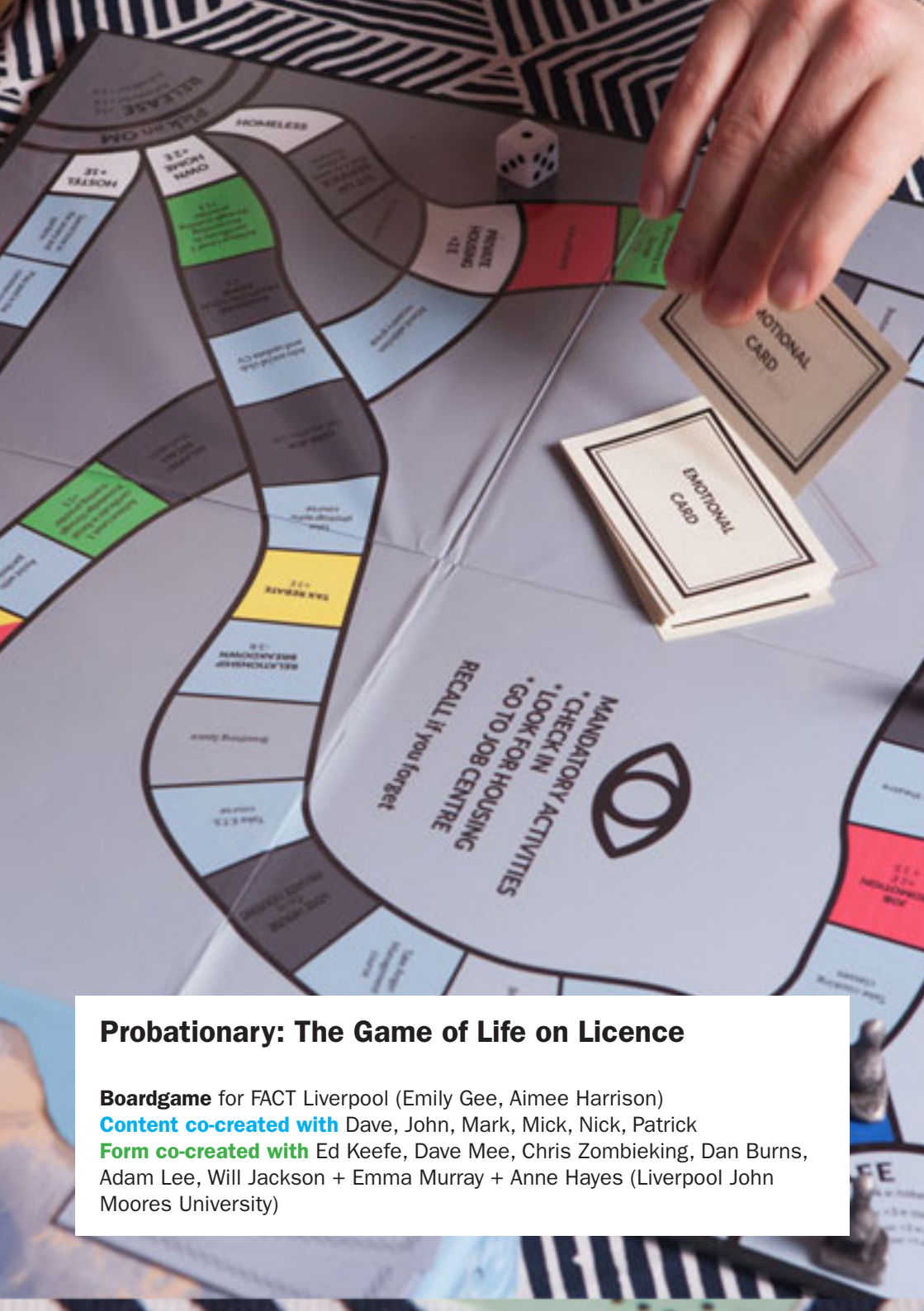
I have conversations with people (Men on probation¹, Communities of St Helens², Microbiologists and queer performance artists³, Young People learning outside mainstream education⁴) **around a common interest** (Criminal Justice System, Mental Health, Examining binary categories, relating to nature - or not) **and work together to make something** (boardgame, map, calendar) **about it to share with a wider group of people** (People in various roles in the Criminal Justice System, St Helenities, scientists & performance artists) **to understand the bigger social structure we move in.**

1 [Probationary: The Game of Life on Licence \(2017\)](#)

2 [Take Care St Helens \(2019\)](#)

3 [Endosymbiotic Love Calendar \(2020\)](#)

4 [PTownBay MMXX \(2022\)](#)



1. make with, not for

Is there an ethical way to make work about stories that are not your own, when the people are marginalised, vulnerable or under-represented? This is a question I've grappled with from my first project working with grassroots communities in digital technologies to my current collaboration with people involved in the Criminal Justice System.

I stand on the shoulders of the disabilities rights movement's central tenet of Nothing About Us Without Us¹, used to communicate the idea that no policy should be decided by any representative without the full and direct participation of members of the group(s) affected by that policy.

When I worked with men on probation, I was transparent from the beginning that we are co-creators, and that this artwork was about a collective experience of probation - not a personal one - that would reflect a holistic view, with the intention of showing the work to the general public. Therefore the workshop discussions we had were around how to represent the probation process to an outside audience. Criminologists and probation officers were part of the workshop discussions, to offer different perspectives, and for the men to be able to share their interpretations, have it heard and refined through dialogue.

The offer to **make with, not for** the men was an invitation to get beyond the usual power relationships established in criminal justice, and think through differently how we want to treat members of society who don't confirm to rules.

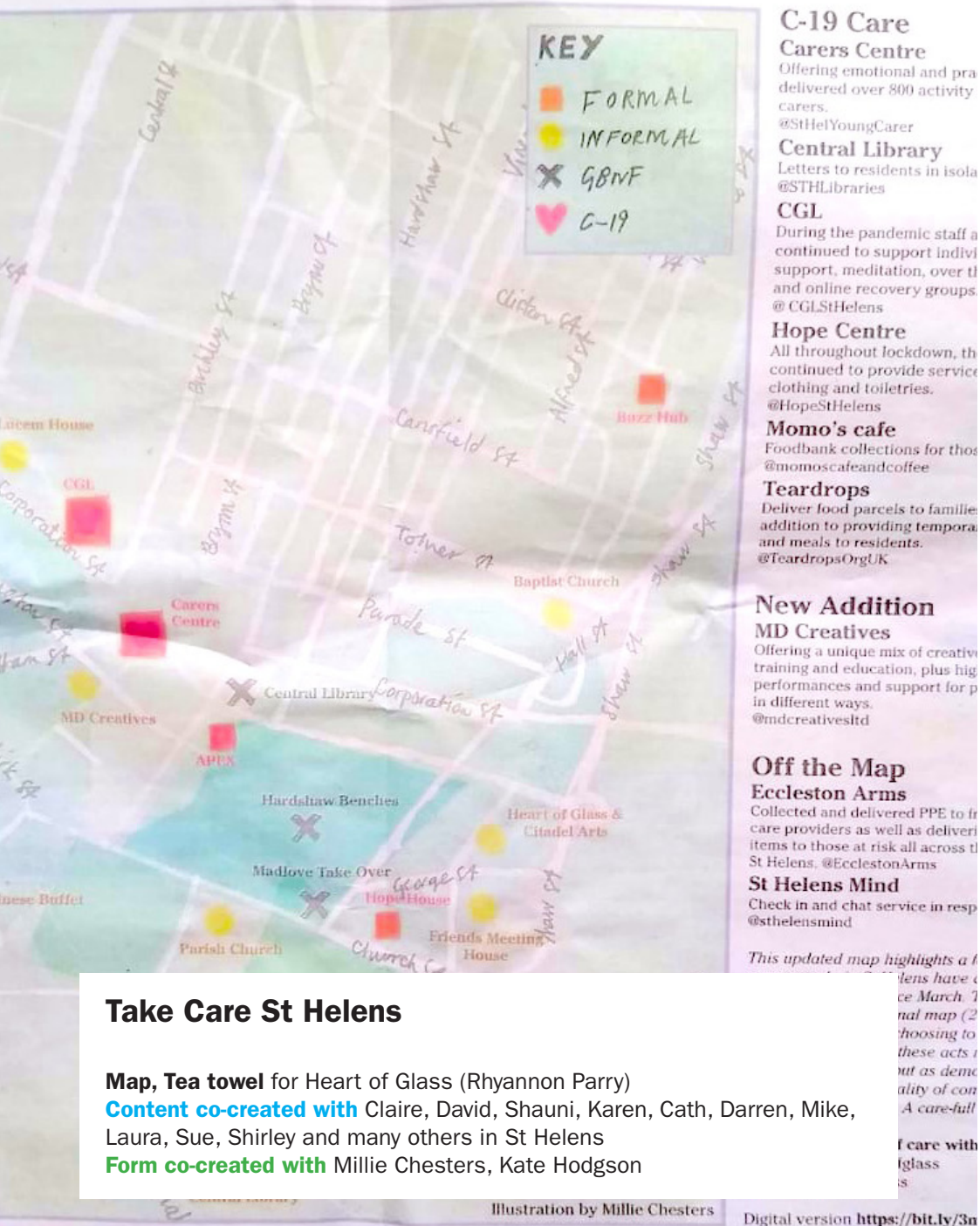
Probationary: The Game of Life on Licence

Boardgame for FACT Liverpool (Emily Gee, Aimee Harrison)

Content co-created with Dave, John, Mark, Mick, Nick, Patrick

Form co-created with Ed Keefe, Dave Mee, Chris Zombieking, Dan Burns, Adam Lee, Will Jackson + Emma Murray + Anne Hayes (Liverpool John Moores University)

¹ [Nothing About Us Without Us](#) by James I. Charlton



2. be care-ful

This map of care was commissioned for MadLove take over by Heart of Glass, which had a focus on mental health. I spent 5 months talking to various people in St Helens about formal and informal forms of care. In an area that's had many social services cut, through decades long austerity, people had a lot to say about care. I wrote a bit more about this [here](#).

The main take away for me is that, although you need to be careful when working with people, especially if they are in vulnerable situations, you shouldn't neglect to take care of yourself. I've come across so many people in caring professions, but also artists who don't take time to look after their personal mental / physical / emotional health because there's always something that needs to be done and they think they are the only one who can do it.

While that might be true in the immediate, one can't be in permacrisis mode all the time. You need to take care of yourself, in order to take care of others. It is also short-sighted to promise help, and then be unable to deliver because you've overstretched, which can break bonds of trust which would have taken a long time to establish. I say this from experience, with 2 burnouts under my belt. Each one takes longer to recover from.

Know you're human, with complex needs, and be kind to yourself, if only to be a better human to others.

Or, in the immortal words of Ru Paul, If you can't love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else? ...

3. you can only create safer spaces

This was a tricky project for many reasons, with added hurdles of adapting to working under Covid-19 restrictions. We brought artists and microbiologists together to have discussions about categorisations, more-than-human kin and finding ways to living a more equitable life across the arts and sciences.

When I run large group workshops, I try to create a welcoming, friendly, playful space to have discussions - get everyone to be open and share as much as they feel comfortable. Checking in and listening, trying to understand - in the moment - and then having time to react is a skill that takes many years to develop. I'm always learning new tricks and tips, but also having practiced it so many times, I can usually anticipate what's happening, but it's difficult to catch everything, so I try to put as much in place as I can.

Food, drink, an assistant, first aid, risk assessment, paying people for their time, covering travel, clear communication, solid prep, timely post evaluation, detailed time table... You plan as much as you can - but. But! You can't plan for everything, so let go of the idea that you can create a perfect 'safe' space, and prepare to adapt to safer or safest spaces.

The most important aspect to do is be open and transparent about why & what you're doing, LISTEN to people, take it in and be prepared to shift course. If you're honest about what you know and what you don't know, then most people will be understanding when something goes wrong. Something stronger can be built from a shared sense of generosity and vulnerability.

Endosymbiotic Love

Calendar for Domestic Science

Content co-created with Annalaura Alifuoco, Conway McDermott, RJ Lloyd, Tammy Reynolds, Dee Walshe, Emmanuel Laplantine, Ewan Russell, Lee Haines, Natalie Beveridge, Neil Dawson, Rod Dillon, Viv Dillon, Yasmine Kumordzi

Form co-created with Sunhwa Lim, Sophie Broadgate, Alex Hewitt



4. have an exit strategy

It can be difficult to think of the afterlife of a project before the project even starts, but it's an interesting thought exercise to imagine the legacy of your work. Will having this in your thoughts influence decisions you make in the planning stages?

When you're invited to a place, it means you always have the option of leaving. But the people you're working with don't. So think about what kind of space you're making when you arrive and what can replace that when you leave.

With NACRO and Peterborough, both places I have no connection with, I relied heavily on getting introductions from trusted sources (in this case Metal) who introduced and vouched for me to local artists. Working alongside local people who have much more invested in a location helps ease the departure. Although it takes more time to find and build the right relationships, front-loading a project with people to pass the torch on to means there's more likelihood of a project carrying on, or at bare minimum you can create a platform for something else to springboard off.

Letting go of a project, and allowing it to develop into something different led by someone else can also be difficult, so I try not to be precious about ideas. Not only is it counter-productive in giving a fresh input and having another existence after I've left, I'm failing to acknowledge that I'm building on someone's ideas and added elements of my own.

Projects don't have to have a shelf life, but the time you spend on it do.

PTownBay MMXXX

Boardgame for Season for Change

Content co-created with Dans, Emilijus, Kye, Oscar, Riley, Andy, Nagina, Natalie (NACRO Education Centre)

Form co-created with Prin Marshall, Hana Sayeed, Katie Pinch, James Medd, Milo Simpraga, Alex Hewitt



5. play the long game

The history of change follows a long arc, and as an artist working with social issues as subject, I'm interested to see how art can bleed into the everyday.

This means letting go of preconceived artistic outcomes, and thinking about deeper structural infrastructure I can help nudge in a certain direction. Playing the long game means I think about working with people in other fields, to build a coalition of groups, movements, gatherings to support, be in solidarity with, exchange skills, knowledge or even take comfort in knowing exists.

I have a long standing collaboration with The Howard League for Penal Reform and criminologists to influence criminal justice policy. But really I'm interested in plants and animals and would love to see wild elephant herds roaming the Peak District, part of my long term goal of being more in tune with our environment and living in closer symbiosis with other living species.

I don't have a specific project at the moment that address this (Rewilding England with Elephants) but for the past 5 years, all the projects I have done are steps in this direction. Currently, it's me talking about it, but that's how it starts - little conversation seeds that might land and sprout. The photo on the left is an AI generated image my friend made when I told him about my idea, so already something has started to germinate.

I'm always looking for more people to collaborate with! Let me know if you want to play this game with me too.

Untitled Rewilding project

This guide was created for [Metal Cultures](#) New Artist's Network in 2023. Metal New Artist Network is a programme of support for early-career artists, those in their first few years of defining themselves as an artist. The programme consists of online artist talks and creative workshops, paid artist residencies, professional mentoring and networking sessions. It supports people from all artistic practices and backgrounds and welcome emerging artists from across the UK and overseas.

Hwa Young Jung is a socially engaged artist working in the arts, cultural and sciences, facilitating collaborative projects and workshops. She works with people to co-create projects, often using games and play to explore social issues. Based in the Northwest she has been producing work with a range of people (men on probation, care workers, young people excluded from mainstream education) in England and internationally for nearly ten years.



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