

How do you prepare to work with vulnerable contributors?

Agnė Giedraitė, MA Documentary Film student, in conversation with Professor Pratap Rughani, University of the Arts London

Duration of video clip: 3 minutes and 51 seconds

Agnė: in my major project I might work with groups of people that have different mental illnesses and they're not always completely alert and aware of the camera, and I remember in the film there was one shot where she (Justine) kind of comes up and waves to the camera, or notices the camera, and I was wondering, was it uncomfortable sometimes for her to be observed by this interesting equipment, like was it easy for her to understand it, or was it a bit of a challenge to make her feel kind of less awkward?

Pratap: We do our best in in in documentary to make a connection with our subjects, and what I wanted to do was introduce Justine to me alongside the camera, so she saw us as, you know, indivisible or she got used to me being there and working. I didn't hire a camera person, I shot it myself and that was partly a kind of ethics decision, as well because I think I thought it needed the absolute minimum crew. So when I first met her I remember, I was quite nervous actually. Also I didn't have experience with people with different neurologies like this and I'd done some training over a period of the year to improve my own um knowledge of how to be in those environments, and then when Mum introduced us, they introduced me, I had my camera with me and I didn't switch it on or anything because I'd obviously want her permission first. But Justine said yes to me, and no to the camera initially, because when I gestured towards it and see if she wanted to look at it, or whether I could take a photo she was doing, she started dancing and singing ABBA. I wanted to record that, it felt like an important first impression but because she didn't want that, it was all about the conversation.

Agnė: I work for the lens of a musician who comes to teach music to different care houses, and people vary from such conditions as completely being unaware and having quite a high functioning, let's say autism. So people have such disabilities as let's say an ability to hear and so on, so obviously is a different kind of audience but what falls into one group is really random, so I guess I have to be prepared for any sort of thing.

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Pratap: Got it - and these you know these words like autism and disability, I mean there's such a kind of umbrella word or portmanteau word, I mean what does that mean at all? The thing I had to watch is that just becoming a label that doesn't really tell an audience anything, it just, it can even be a stigma. So I didn't use that language, but what I did do, was training with a woman called Kate Adams and was in this kind of work, and it produced a lot of guidance and discussion about how to work with people with a range of neurologies and disabilities, so if it's new to you, if you're new to working with someone who's wired differently to so-called neurotypical, there are a lot of resources around that can help you get into that sort of mindset.