



Leah dances in a public Ambient Jam multi-sensory improvisation event commissioned by Siobhan Davies Studios Artist Archive, 2022; photo: Roswitha Chesher.

Ambient Jam: sharing sensory literacy through playfulness and mutuality

Rebecca Swift

The word ‘communicate’ is derived from two Latin root words ‘communis’ and ‘communicare’; the first word means ‘common’ and the second can mean ‘to share’ or ‘to make common’. Following the article about Ambient Jam in the PMLD-LINK summer issue “How can people with PMLD advocate for their rights?” (Spirrett, 2025), this piece explores how the presence and communication of people labelled with PMLD can, through the arts, influence and enrich wider society.

What is Ambient Jam?

Ambient Jam is a weekly multi-media live music and dance improvisation formed from over 30 years of sustained collaboration between creatives, our members with PMLD (profound and multiple learning disabilities) and a large team of interdisciplinary artists – musicians, sculptors, theatre makers, dancers. Part of Entelechy Arts, the programme is responsive to place, enriched by the diverse sensory and embodied communication each person brings. This inclusive mix of people is adept at spontaneity and the mindfulness of the present moment, exploring how we can be together. There are currently

three Ambient Jams: two in London and one in North Wales, with more in development across the UK.

Communication, co-created by a diversity of people within an unpredictable environment, is finely interwoven with acts of care, risk-management and access, cultivating community, solidarity and camaraderie - communicated through playfulness and sensory literacy.

A dance duet where caring and art intertwine

Kirin is a member of Ambient Jam. She is dual-impaired and communicates without words using

different qualities of touch through her hands and fingertips. I am distracted and driven by the impulse to get things done, making it difficult for me to be present. Although trained in movement, I spend most of my time speaking and writing.

We sit together, opposite each other on a mat surrounded by other Ambient Jam improvisers and the sound of live music. Kirin can't hear the music, although we've wondered if she senses it through vibrations, or through subtle changes in movement from the person she's communicating with.

In this moment of settling, little transactions of everyday care are shared. An artist walks past and gives me a tissue to wipe Kirin's nose. Kirin takes off her shoe. The other shoe is too tight. She lets me untie it and then takes it off. Kirin patiently takes my hands, guiding me through a series of repeated movements - circles, back and forth - with pauses where our hands hold a fingertip connection. Sometimes she takes my hands, sometimes I take hers.

The dancer who provided the tissue unfurls a bright orange Sari, placing one end gently around my shoulders - but not around Kirin who doesn't like materials placed on her - and walks off with a smile. For a few seconds Kirin holds my hand soothingly between both of hers, possibly sensing my restlessness. I was grateful for these tiny moments of care which guided me 'out of my head' and into my body.

We shift position and sit side by side swaying. Hard to know who is leading whom. I feel held by the live music, which helps me drop into another register of being, calming my nervous system. My lower back begins to ache, and without me saying anything, another dancer appears, leaning her back against ours, creating a back-to-back trio alleviating the pressure on my back (and possibly Kirin's).

I slowly become aware of my own feelings of vulnerability, sitting here with Kirin while letting go of my work role. As this power balance shifts, I am able to sense Kirin's strength and presence more. The soundscape provides a communal pulse, which I can only assume Kirin was sensing through vibration - or me - as she initiates movement in synch with the rhythm (Or maybe the musician is tuning into her, too).

Through my connection with Kirin in a playful, sensory space, a different type of excellence unfolds. It's the ability to trust in simplicity to yield mutuality and creativity. This can exist in the repetition of movement and tiny shifts in detail. To begin with, I find this almost impossible to tolerate, and it's a journey to arrive at this new place of perception - despite Kirin and me knowing

each other for over 30 years. The shift from the world of words, clock time, and outputs into my sensing ability takes time. Ambient Jam is a space that incubates this journey. We often speak about how these moments of co-attentiveness and equality, emerging within a duet, enhance the atmosphere of the whole space.



After 20 minutes of our settling duet, we tease each other into trying something new. Kirin stands, leading me into dynamic movement in a large circle, releasing us into the space. Sometimes we explore tension by pulling away from each other, testing both our strengths. Others join, and Kirin's gestures permeate a group choreography. Over 30 years, Kirin has worked alongside us as a facilitator in workshops on sensory communication and joined us in public improvisation events with members of the community. Her unique way of communicating has travelled from these intimate dyadic moments, out into group choreographies and beyond, influencing others in the wider world.

Like many privileged to work in this field, we experience the benefits of becoming sensorially literate - attuning and responding kinaesthetically - for ourselves. Ellie Spirrett (2025) describes how Lewisham Speaking Up representatives felt "calmer and freer" after visiting Ambient Jam and reflects on her own experience as both nourishing and an opportunity to learn: "to go into something with less expectations, and to let things take

their time.when you go to an Ambient Jam, everything slows down to a natural speed. Then, we get to create relationships with people that nourish both us and them."

Artist, Cai Tomos (Ambient Jam Wales) describes this process as loosening "our grip on ... habitual ways of relating... to be available to learn new ways, by listening to each other through our bodies" (2025, p. 3). The idea that we can enhance learning and communication through sensory awareness also appears in mainstream arts education. Miranda Mathews (2021, p.2) defines 'sensory literacy' as the capacity to communicate affect, ideas and interpretations through the senses"

Ambient Jam dance artist Yun Cheng describes how her own creativity was nurtured by the creativity of Ambient Jam member Maria Nanton:

"The memories and feelings of improvising with Maria during our last session became an inspiration in my studio practice the other day. Her movement and curious, smiling face, expressing a sense of pure fun and happiness, surfaced when I was improvising, and stimulated a way, and a feeling of movement that I have not felt for some time." Yun Cheng (2025)



Cultural environments co-created by people with PMLD have porous walls, where even the subtlest creative 'gestures migrate' (Margaret Ames, 2023, p. 251) from

being tightly held within enclosed worlds outwards into connection with others. Members can safely communicate with new people visiting a session, while sharing their creative expression in public improvisation events supported by the depth of relationships cultivated over time: As Spirrett (2025) describes, "people with PMLD have opinions to express and want opportunities to meet other people and learn from each other."

Playfulness cultivates communication

Cultural spaces like Ambient Jam allow us to take creative risks safely, providing permission to turn things upside down, make a mess, and create a new equilibrium of possibilities. There is a playful dismantling of hierarchies within the carer-cared for relationship that might inhibit exploration and mutuality. The improvisation is affected and influenced by everyone's presence, honouring the space in between us all. Like any creative ensemble, the binding quality of play and attunement foster a sense of group, making "a group more sensitive to itself." (Peter Brook, 1993)



Playfulness - woven into our movement, soundscapes, vocalisations, use of objects - gives shape to contradictions and contrasting moods which reflect the plethora of emotions within lived experience. Because of our differences, and the diversity within the umbrella of

the PMLD label itself, playfulness helps us to navigate communication pathways that can be in tension - where different levels of stimulation are needed. The sense of the absurd, shared by everyone, can shake us out of habitual ways, bringing us into a different engagement with each other.



Artists Hannah James and Xan Dye duet, while simultaneously drawing together, as part of a collaborative project with Ambient Jam called Stimming Exchange. Photo: Henri T, 2025.

Through the crafts of theatre, music, sculpture, and dance, the haptic - sensed and felt through touch - communicative potential of objects contributed by our members can also be shared wider afield. Two of our members are interested in books, for their sensory tactile possibilities - of moving pages creating a breeze, the imprint of constant handling, shifting pictures and patterns, textures, and taste. Their sculptural exploration of these books within a communal arts space prompts connection with others via those objects, sharing their identity further afield. What if we amplified their sensory book expressiveness with a mound of books – transformed through improvisation and play, becoming imbued with everyone's identities? The book, as a form of communication, is shared by all, potentially illuminating possibilities we hadn't anticipated - where their creators see their explorations developed and reflected back.

What if society fully recognised the value of the rich variety of ways that people and children with PMLD communicate? How might their creativity thrive if they sensed a shift towards wider cultural affirmation. The hierarchy that privileges verbal communication over other ways of being, and concurrent lack of sensory literacy within wider society, compounds the assumption that people who may communicate differently, are unable to convey choice or be supported to make informed decisions, in new and yet-to-be-discovered ways.



Close up of Robert's book in an Ambient Jam weekly session. Snapshot: Rebecca Swift, 2025

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Notes:

Some names have been changed to respect confidentiality. Sketches are by artist Sam Chown-Ahern of an outdoor summer Ambient Jam session, 2025.

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