

Nicola's Visit to Ambient Jam 15th July 2026



Ambient Jam is a collective of artists, musicians and dancers and members who communicate in ways that are “predominantly non-verbal, sensory, mindful, spontaneous and both emotionally subtle and vibrant”. Sessions last around 1.5 hours and are improvisatory, leading to:-

“a creative dialogue between musicians and movers, with and without disabilities. This innovative blend of live art, sound composition and dance improvisation becomes a think tank for new sensory-led arts performance events bringing Ambient Jam and this diverse ensemble out into the open”¹

As part of my work researching creative approaches to partnership working with people who have lived experience of profound disabilities/nonverbal, sensory focused communication, I have been wanting to visit ever since I saw a presentation at a conference a couple of years ago, so I was delighted to receive an invitation to one of the final sessions of this summer term.

The group involved 8 artists, two volunteers (A and L) who are lived experience experts, one with cerebral palsy using a wheelchair and an alphabet board to support their spoken communication, and 6 members², 1 in a wheelchair, and the other 5 able to move around independently.

The space

The room is a large space in the Albany Community Centre in Deptford, with double doors opening onto a garden. Black drapes hang on the walls, which one member used for going behind, and for swishing rhythmically

Chairs placed around in a rough circle.

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² I think this is correct according to my notes, but there was some coming and going, so I was sometimes not sure who was there in what capacity!

A piano for the musician who provided ambient music in response to the atmosphere and contributions of members and other artists (using a variety of instruments including harmonica (I think!) kalimba, wind chimes.

Large drum balanced on chair

Soft fabric place to be comfortable and explore on the floor. Pile of blankets, cushions, crocheted ropes and balls; soundmakers, including two beautifully crafted instruments made of wool wound round wire, with chimes and bells sewn in, the other holding a plastic box with contents that rattled. Lovely to look at, attractive to handle and use, and very robust³



On the wall, large sheets of paper that showed markings of previous artwork

Table where the resident artist sat and recorded moments through drawing lively quick images⁴; paper and drawing materials for others to use.

Preparation

Artists began with a warm up, exploring where we were in space and in relation to each other, alternating movement and stillness (Stillness is very important in Ambient Jam said the leader).

Session

Members came in with carers, not all at the same time. It was obvious that they were familiar and comfortable in the space – one or two made straight for particular places (eg the blankets, the drawing table⁵, others made their way around the room. One person spent most of the time standing by the double doors, to the right of the drawing table, though she moved to sit near the piano during a particularly rhythmic period. This felt like “their” space. The member who used a wheelchair had periods of movement around the space, being wheeled, sitting and watching, and interacting with dancers – occasionally putting out a hand. The two

³ Crafted by Amy Chen who kindly gave permission for photos to be taken.

⁴ I was honoured that the one featured here was of me...

⁵ This particular individual elected to spend the whole session drawing apart from a brief amble around the room, it was the first time she had done this.

volunteers worked in different ways – one supporting members, eg. holding or passing instruments, the other modelling interactions.

In the session, members were presented with opportunities to:-

- Explore sound making
- Explore textures
- Explore graphic art
- Interact physically through touch and body contact
- Engage in reciprocal interactions whereby their own initiated movements and sounds were mirrored back to them, providing a sense of value and respect for their contributions. This was dance as a generative spontaneous art form co-created by all involved.
- Listen to and respond to the accompanying music, which sensitively picked up on and reflected contributions.

These interactions with artists look spontaneous and easy, but in fact this is highly skilled work, requiring close observation and sensitivity to the choices and styles and patterns created by the members themselves. Movements were slow and very gentle, touch was respectful and exploratory. Opportunities were presented (eg. a sheet of crumpled brown paper, brown package netting strips) but never forced on people, who were free to ignore, explore, throw, crumple as she chose.

All members were focused, there was a lot of smiling, body posture was relaxed and confident in the case of those independently mobile.

At the end of the session carers arrived to collect individuals and artists engaged them in quiet talk.

The session is followed by a debrief for staff and volunteers, where everyone shares their impressions of the day.

The following are some of the interactions I witnessed that particularly stayed with meⁱ

1. F is sitting on the blankets. An artist sits next to him, and allows him the time to get used to his presence. F seems very comfortable with this proximity. When he turns away, the artist sets his back against the member's back and leans against him, gently moving up and down. At other points, there was physical interaction with the two of them and another artist (also male), moving around each other, stretching and rhythmically changing position, so that he was included in a strong sensory dance interaction. The member smiled at times during this.

Interpretation This conveys a sense of “you and me together in this space” “this is you and this is me”, allowing the individual to feel where his own body begins and ends⁶.

⁶ We know from sensory integration work that it can be difficult for individuals to get a sense of where they are in space without some form of contact.

2. (F is sitting on the ground, and artist brings brown paper netting and bounces it in front of F. who slowly slowly reaches to explore it. B moves to sit next to the artist and holds another piece of brown paper, Artist shares the paper and the netting, allowing B to briefly interact with it. The brown paper and netting seem attractive to several individuals.. G also uses it and raises eyes to look at the artist.

Interpretation. The interactions are three way – between member, artist and material. The material takes on a kind of identity of its own, reminiscent of the way Frozen Light theatre groupⁱⁱ use textures, smells and repurpose objects in drama. The use of materials equalises the relationship – two people explore something familiar in a new wayⁱⁱⁱ.

3. A member (H) arrived part way through the session. She moved around the space with purpose – standing against the wall, moving to the French windows, one side of the table then the other. At the back wall she thrust the curtains one way then the other, swishing them and going behind them briefly. She alternated this with taking a chair, swinging it round, sitting on it, sometimes back to others, sometimes facing. She pushed herself forward and back on the chair. Her main focus was the large drum⁷; she picked up a beater and began to bang rhythmically, and loudly on the side, then on the skin, back to the side again. Staff took turns in joining in, which H accepted, flicking glances at fellow drummers. This drumming continued throughout the session until about 30 minutes before the end. At one point there were 3 moving round the drum, creating a loud harmony, and it was at this point that C came over and sat on the floor near the piano, rocking in rhythm to the sounds – as these crescendoed there was a really orchestral feeling to what was happening, led by H and with participation from supporters.

Occasionally H glanced at me, as I sat scribbling. I went and joined her at the drum. H made a brief “ba-ba” sound, which I imitated, and we had an exchange of this sound. Right at the end of the session, she was standing a few feet away from me, back against wall, by the curtains. She looked across to me. I reached out a hand. She reached out her arm to me, then pulled back and placed her arm diagonally on her chest, still looking at me. I copied^{iv}. She stretched her arm out in front and moved it up and down rhythmically, as if banging the drum on a larger scale. For a couple of moments we were doing this in synch, till she moved away.

Interpretation

On reflection H’s movements around the space look like a kind of personal choreography; I wonder if this what she always does, as it had that feel. Also would be interesting to know if that is how she uses space in other environments. Because of the way in which artists responded to her drumming, the music making felt highly collaborative and led by the member, demonstrating role alternation with artists. H’s use of her voice added tone. Her alternating responsive behaviours showed clearly how aware she is of what goes on, and conveyed a sense of playfulness. Note that it took a good hour or more for this to emerge.

⁷ In the debrief it was explained to me that usually this drum was always used by one particular member, who unusually for them spent the entire session sitting at the table and drawing. So H the member concerned, seized their chance and was definitely making the most of it!

4. A plastic sheet was used to enable one of the volunteer members to paint a picture, by transferring the marks she made onto paper – this felt like a really innovative way of using materials to create a permanent record of their work
5. Throughout the session, an artist (I) was drawing, capturing vivid images of individuals in action, as a lively visual record of what was happening. The musician, sat at the piano was producing accompaniments, both gentle and more forceful, responding to the atmosphere in the room, with a range of instruments. Having this at the beginning meant there was a gentle sense of purpose, of being part of something larger than a collection of individuals.
6. The volunteers (A and L) made really important contributions – both practically and in acting as peers to join in and demonstrate interactions – both are people who communicate verbally and it was impressive to see how they have adopted active silence and embodied interactions to mirror the styles of the members and their fellow artists.

Conclusion

- In conclusion, it was a real privilege to be able to attend and take part in this beautiful piece of work. I feel I have learned a lot :-
- Working at this level of harmony takes time and skill to build up. A variety of artists can contribute in different ways – graphic, musical, texture and this variety feels important for the aesthetic creativity of the group. Music feels particularly important.
- Exploratory movement as dance
- An artist capturing what is going on means there are vivid images so that photographs (which are often problematic as a form of recording) are not necessary (though it is clear that film and photographs are used by the group)
- Peer Volunteers are vital participants.
- Collections of objects/props that are both found and repurposed, and crafted with the interests and capabilities of members in mind mean that there is always something of interest to explore. Objects as a third dimension.

See articles:-

Nick J. Fox & Pam Alldred (2015) New materialist social inquiry: designs, methods and the research-assemblage, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18:4, 399-414, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2014.921458)

Gómez-Victoria, N. L., Carvajal, K., Collazos, S., Muñoz, Y., & Quinchia, A. (2025). Rethinking Communication in Interactions with a Child with Autism: Ela, Her Father, and the Jellyfish in the Pool. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 27(1).

Mel Baggs (1980-2020) website, where the environment functions as a partner in their explorations. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hl2jc>

I'd like to end by thanking Ambient Jam for inviting me and being so welcoming. Hope to come again!

29th June 2026

ⁱ I used alphabetic coding to distinguish members according to the time I started observing them.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.frozenlighttheatre.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The term "queering objects" was used in one piece of research to describe the repurposing of materials

^{iv} The image at the top of the report was drawn at this point