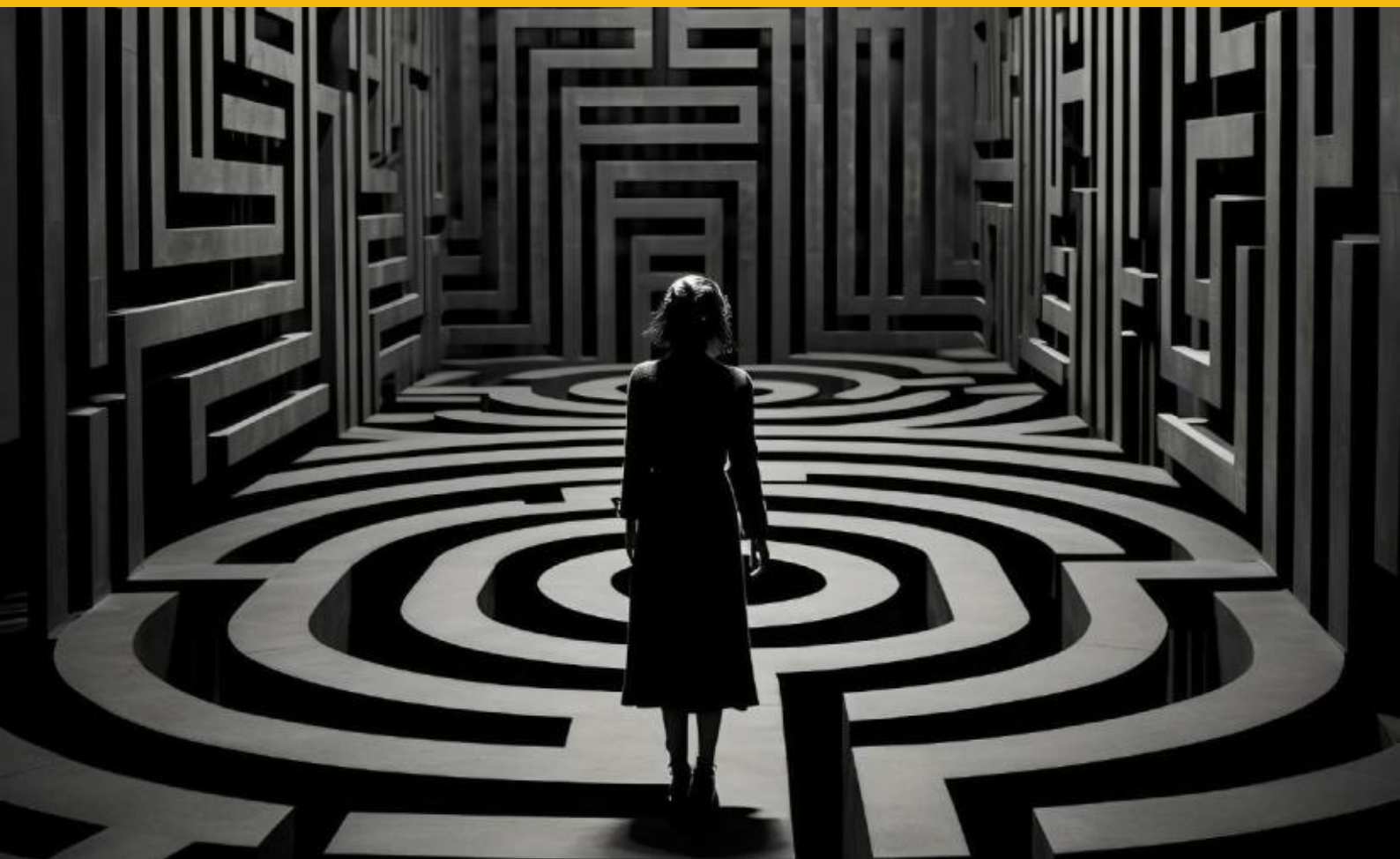# Undisciplined Spaces AI Art Workshop and Exhibition

in collaboration with the Young Foundation and Lewisham Arts Network

PROJECT SUMMARY

Our project was a collaboration with the Lewisham-based Arts Network, a mental health and arts charity that provides a studio space, materials, and guidance for local artists experiencing severe mental health conditions. All of the Network's members have been referred through mental health services. The project involved holding an AI art workshop at the Network's Lewisham Space, on the 12th July 2023. Twelve participants were given two hours to use the cutting-edge Midjourney platform, which generates art based on user prompts of any length, complexity, and specificity. Following the workshop, we organized an exhibition for the 20th September 2023 at the Inigo Rooms in Somerset House to which all participants, Network staff, and friends and family were invited. We displayed a piece of work by each participant, as well as gifting them a smaller print to take home.

Our team were part of KCL's Undisciplined Spaces programme, funded by the AHRC Impact Acceleration Account grant granted to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, and received training and support from the Young Foundation. The project had two main goals. The first was to provide the members access to a surprisingly costly new medium, requiring equipment the Arts Network lacks and resources such as professional printing, which are difficult for the organisation to fund. The second was to spark a conversation about the positives and negatives of using AI as a creative tool, specifically in relation to members' experiences with other creative practices, and in juxtaposition to the live elements of the workshop that we also funded: a live musician, providing atmosphere, and live artist documenting the session.

ROAD TO THE PROJECT

The AI art project was developed as part of King's College's Undisciplined Spaces programme. Inspired by one of our team member's direct experiences using AI art to explore their severe anxiety, depression, and OCD, we decided to collaborate with a mental health charity on an AI art workshop.
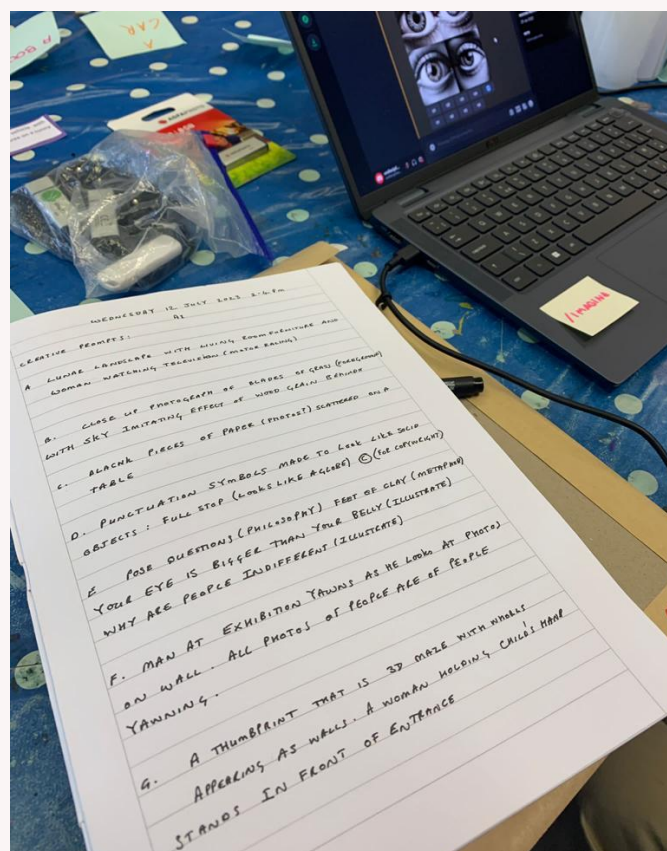
Top: the spiritual text brought by one member; Bottom: the pre-written prompts and questions brought by another.

Our group formed early on in the programme, thanks to one member reaching out by email. The group met regularly (once a week for two hours), and slowly but surely, the project began to come together. The turning point was securing a partnership with the Arts Network, one of two interested charities. We continued to meet regularly, planning the workshop in detail and assessing our budget. We arranged several meetings with the staff at the Arts Network to discuss logistics and safeguarding. By the time the date of the event came around, we were well-prepared: catering was booked, the musician was booked, laptops had been secured through King's and were boxed and ready to be transported on the day of the workshop. Crucially, we had already gone through the laborious process of setting up twelve Midjourney accounts and logging them in on the individual laptops. Surprisingly, of all the things we dealt with during the project, this was the most fiddly! Each Midjourney account required a separate email (which also had to be set up), the entry of payment details (which were constantly, inexplicably being rejected), and repetitive user verification.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The workshop surpassed our expectations, almost entirely because of the enthusiasm and creativity of the twelve participants. We had set the room up with the laptop stations and accounts, positioned the illustrator and musicians, and laid out the catering. The laptop stations were surrounded by example prompts we hoped would spark the participants' imaginations and get them going: try 'a dream', 'a memory', 'something in the style of a painter you like', and so on. Though this did help some of the more hesitant and unsure participants, the bulk of the group arrived with a clear idea of what they wanted to explore. One member brought a spiritual text and used passages of scripture as prompts. Another brought a notebook with pages and pages of pre-written prompts – not just incredibly precise images that they wanted to generate, but also questions they wanted to pose to the artificial intelligence itself. There were also two members who had used AI art platforms before, and were keen to try Midjourney, which is the top-of-the-line option for AI artists.

Excellent catering by Berry & Brie
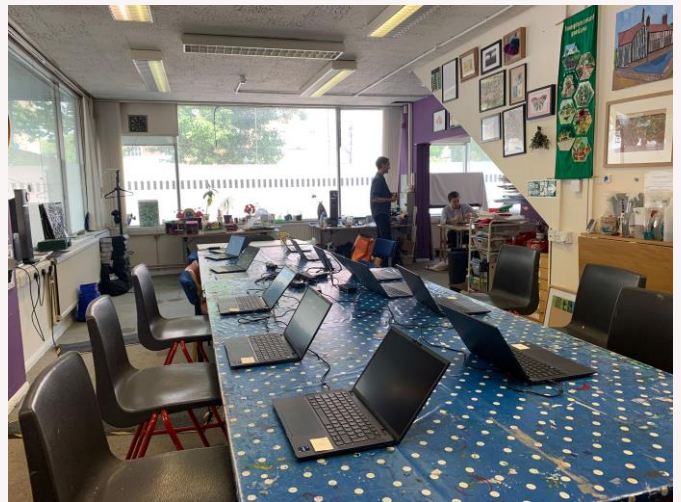
The laptop stations laid out

Another angle, with Joe hard at work! This was before we had put out the prompt suggestions

There was a wonderful atmosphere in the room, with everyone chatting and sharing their creations (as well as a few surprising results and missteps on Midjourney's part!). To close the workshop, we had a brief discussion about what the members thought of the software, how they felt about AI in general, and what impact they thought it would have on artists in the near future. Much of this discussion was captured by our live illustrator (see image above).

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

We left the workshop believing that we had already made an impact: the participants had clearly enjoyed using the platform and were eager for more, with one member asking when we would be seeing them again (a request we can now fulfil given recent developments, outlined below). However, it wasn't until the exhibition that we really understood the value of what we had put together.
We arranged for the exhibition to be held at Somerset House's Inigo Rooms gallery space. Members were asked to make two selections from their generated images: one for exhibiting and one for taking home.

We had both professionally printed and delivered, the former in A3 and the latter A5. We ordered frames in both sizes and spent the day before the exhibition framing the images with white and black paper backgrounds and hanging them at the space. Again, it's always the mundane things: getting the nails level on the walls was a pain (though that isn't surprising for arts and humanities academics). After hanging the pieces we put the smaller framed images, for taking home, on two tables in front of the bare wall. We also signed thank you cards and put them into individual gift bags. We closed up and waited for the next day.

The exhibition was exceptionally well-attended, with almost all participants, some plus-ones (family and friends), and all of the Network's staff and volunteers coming along, amounting to around twenty-five people. The members were delighted to have their work displayed in such a prestigious building, and the room was abuzz. Again, just as at the workshop, the members were the stars of the show: thought-provoking conversation was happening all around the room, about the individual artworks, the Midjourney platform, the implications of AI, the creative process, mental health, and so on, between participants, staff, ourselves, and representatives from King's

At the close of the event, we gathered everyone around and gave a short thank you speech, as well as outlining the next steps for the project and our continued collaboration with the Arts Network. There were rounds of applause for us, King's, and the Young Foundation, but more importantly for the Network and for the artists that had made all the wonderful images we were surrounded by.
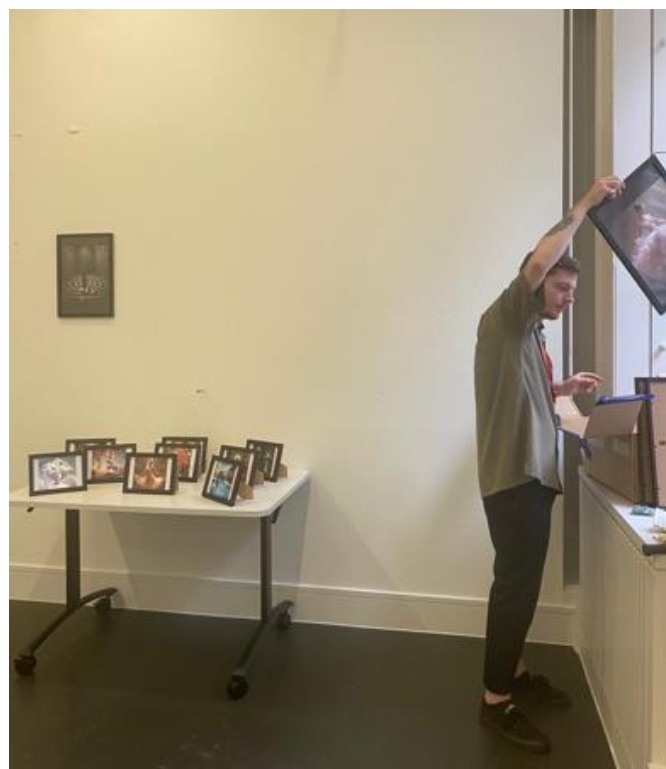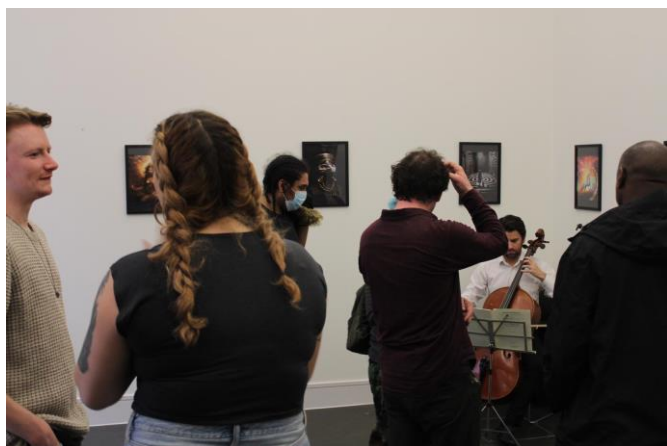
Above: Scott unboxing the framed A3 prints, and a table of A5 prints on the left; below: George heaving a table into the room
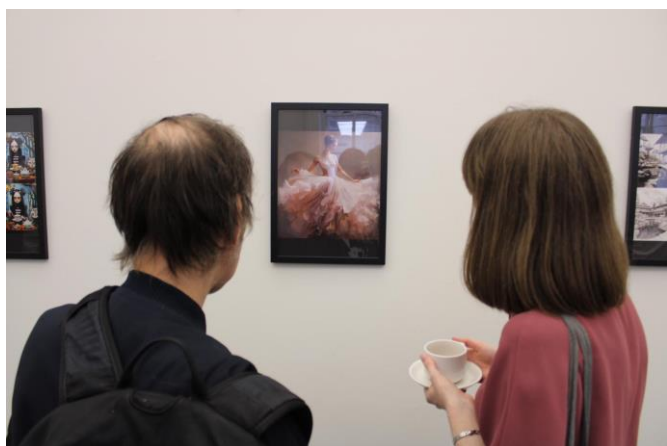
Top: attendees and the cellist; middle: a member and staff admiring some of the artwork; bottom: Scott, Becky, and George with Network arts facilitator Jasmine Waldorf, giving the closing speeches.

Above: a selection of artwork chosen for the personal A5 printing.
Below and on the right: the exhibited artworks.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The most important part of working on a project like this as a team is maintaining a routine. We realized immediately that if we did not commit to a set meeting time every week, without exception, we would lose momentum. Not only that, but even when there seemed to be less to do, we still kept our appointment and for the same length of time, because it is when the pressure is off, and when the to-do list looks scant, that you get the breathing room to truly be creative.

As well, it is crucial to always communicate openly and honestly about all aspects of the project – the negative and the positive. Problems have to be raised, disappointments felt, doubts heard; at the same time, you should relish in your successes as a group and be proud and excited about what you have achieved together. Of course, group chemistry is not something you can manufacture, which means that part of your success does depend on the luck of the draw. However, things certainly won't work out if you aren't open-minded, attentive, approachable, dependable, and genuine. We would all agree that we brought the best versions of ourselves out in one another, which was a huge part of the immense satisfaction we got from the project.

We also found it important to communicate with external parties as a single entity. Even if one person is taking responsibility for an email reply, it is important to speak as a team; word emails from the collective 'we' and sign them off accordingly. That way, you can all bear the load of liaising with the various parties involved, even jumping in mid-conversation. It also provides a much more united and legitimate front!

Lastly: you have to have fun. You have to enjoy what you're doing and enjoy spending time with each other. Not once did this project feel like work; it felt like a privilege.

GOING FORWARD

Given the roaring success of the workshop and exhibition, we are planning to hold more of both in the coming year with support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Impact Acceleration Account. Despite the fact that one of our team members is moving on from King's, they are remaining involved, which speaks to how strong our team is and how enthusiastic and passionate we all are about the project and its potential in the future. We are also keeping lines of communication open with the Arts Network and will be speaking to them regularly to organize the next round of events.

The team with some eerily convincing Instagram-filter moustaches!

The team sans moustaches.