

ART AND THE NEURO-VOICE

Creative Mediums for Autistic Communication

[Link to video thesis](#)

INTRODUCTION

The term *neurodiversity* describes the natural variation of neurotypes which the majority deem to be abnormal (Silberman, 2016). Neurotypes, including autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, are often perceived as disruptions to a neurotypically moulded society. As a result, many neurodiverse individuals feel isolated; they believe they lack a purpose due to their pre-determined obstacles. In a verbally demanding world, the neurodiverse person wants to express how they feel, but the role of communication creates a barrier between the neurodivergent and their graspable potential (Silberman, 2016).

The education around neurodiversity has fortunately seen an increase in recent years, credited to an uprise of positive visibility within mass culture (Armstrong, 2011). However, it is impossible to ignore the constant waves of derogatory and dehumanising narratives spewed by key figures. Autism Speaks' push on eugenical treatment, Donald Trump's stance that disabled people "should just die" (Trump, 2024), as well as exaggerated depictions in beloved television and film; high influence creates a high level of misconception. We can draw from televised representations and their impact on neurodiverse perception. Characters like Sheldon Cooper of *The Big Bang Theory* or *The Good Doctor*'s Shaun Murphy focus on the "Hollywood-savant" stereotype, which infantilises and generalises the neurodiverse model.

On the other hand, this thesis will also consider creative mediums as a form of self-advocacy, self-discovery, and self-worth as the neurodivergent community realises their value as a member of society. Creative mediums, whether visual or literary, could break the communicative wall, which prevents the neurodiverse community from expressing their internal emotions. Art may provide differently-minded people with a way to share their experiences with the public eye, possibly lowering the stigma and misinformation that surrounds them.

Referring to artistic expression as an “instrument” considers the various forms of art as different languages, which neurodiverse people may pursue as tools of communication. This investigation will consider the potential vitality of creativity as a non-vocal method of speech, which may apply to those with social disadvantages. Creative guidance as a tool of communication may give neurodiverse individuals the opportunity not only to contribute to workspaces but also to share their experiences with a wider audience.

By the end of this video, creative mediums as a form of empowerment for the neurodiverse, as well as their role in self-regulation, will become clearer. In addition, exposure to creative applications will inform industries on more inclusive approaches, which allow the neurodiverse to function amongst their neurotypical peers (Armstrong, 2011).

Though neurodiversity as a whole will be discussed, I will be focussing on “autism” as a primary topic for this video essay.

UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERSITY

The word neurodiversity was coined by Judy Singer, who recognised the unique ways the brain structures are a natural occurrence in humanity (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Singer argued that conditions like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia are not conditions to be “fixed.” Instead, these conditions are valid expressions of the diversity of the human experience. Neurodiversity refers to the cognitive differences that make up the human experience and exist outside of the “norm.” These differences may create barriers that affect the way neurodivergent individuals communicate with the world around them, especially in a society that is not structured with them in mind.

Historical attitudes echo Singer’s statement, most notably the treatment of people with mental and physical disabilities at Willowbrook State School during the 1940s, where residents received both physical and sexual abuse (Adressi, 2007.) In addition to neglectful supervision, many were subjected to experimental eugenical practices. For example, children with cognitive differences were forcefully infected with hepatitis and treated as human guinea pigs to better understand disease transmission and immunity. Willowbrook helped surpass a law benefiting disabled rights (Adressi, 2007), you would hope that the scrutiny amongst the differently-minded would change for the better. Unfortunately, rigid ideologies are still present in the modern day.

The online realm acts as a catalyst for misinformation, which spreads amongst the masses. A recent example is the hysteria around the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out and its supposed connection to cognitive deficiency development, which was later proven false (Gabis et al., 2021). As previously discussed, widespread exposure to media has the power to cause great harm, but if used positively, it can help change the modern-day view of the neurodiverse

community. However, more positive portrayals of neurodivergent characters in film and television have started to change the way audiences understand neurodivergent people. For instance, *Heart Break High*'s Australian series portrays autism through “Quinni”, played by a female autist and advocate, Chloé Hayden. By breaking the norms of neurodiverse representation, *Heart Break High* provides a realistic and informative display of a neurodiverse condition, especially considering how under-represented female autists are in televised media (Tharian, et al., 2019). Despite positive inclusion within pop culture, much more reform is still needed to shift perspectives of the neurodiverse. Prominent foundations push eugenical treatments and hide behind the façade of a supportive charity, thus reinforcing the notion that neurodiverse traits need to be abolished. These ignorant ideals only worsen the neurodivergent’s sense of isolation in society.

Today, 20% of the world’s population is considered neurodiverse (Zurich, 2024). This most commonly includes conditions such as ASD, ADHD, and Dyslexia. Having said this, the vast spectrum of neurodiversity is complex, given the various forms it undertakes. It is important to stray away from generalising experiences. Despite sharing identical diagnoses on the DSM-5, neurodiversity acknowledges that atypical experiences will vary from person to person (Berrington, 2013). This is why visual aids of expression can provide clearer communication, which benefits a greater understanding of cognitive variance, especially as a non-verbal instrument for those who find vocal communication improbable. In the current age of disinformation, sharing our experiences can create a great impact. Whether it is to an audience or just one person, it is a step closer to a future that recognises the neurodiverse community as functioning members of society, a future that recognises us for our talents, not our deficits.

CASE STUDIES

Many notable neurodiverse individuals attribute their differences in cognition to their success. To elaborate, Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (1995) expands on how recognising your neurodivergent talents can provide self-worth. Grandin introduces the concept of the "visual thinker", suggesting that visual aids allow us to absorb information coherently. Grandin is modern-day proof that acknowledging and harnessing your neurodiverse traits can lead to fruitful possibilities.

To emphasise my stance on creativity's link with neurodiversity, we will begin to examine various neurodiverse artists and practitioners. By doing so, we can see how the neurodiverse experience can manifest into a piece of visual expression. To cover all bases, we will be recognising artists of diverse conditions and the various art forms that they use in relation.

Firstly, we will delve into examples from the world of fine art and photography. Hands-on processes such as painting or photography have the ability to present direct viewpoints or imagined depictions of their internal state of being.

To begin with, let us discuss Erin Lefevre's *Liam's World* (2014). Though Lefevre is not neurodiverse herself, this photographic work engages with her 19-year-old autistic brother, Liam. Lefevre accompanies a series of portraits with handwritten text by her brother, which I think is aiding the purpose of this work. The artist could have easily taken a typographic approach, simply noting Liam's words. However, Liam's role as the scribe tells us that he is directly communicating his thoughts with us. There is nothing to be implied or over-analysed, this series shows us an honest perspective which does not dehumanise the neurodiverse community.

On that note, I would like to discuss my practice and how a creative medium has allowed me to express myself freely and find a purpose in a world where I still feel isolated. To give some context, I am a late-diagnosed autistic adult who found photography to be an effective non-verbal device. Throughout my early academic career, I have always considered myself to be more engaged with visually dominant subjects such as art and photography; this brings us back to Grandin's idea of the "visual thinker." To me, creative learning freed me from the rules and linguistics that would surround me daily. It is a break from the overload of information, which I still struggle to cope with. So, I would like to introduce two projects of mine which speak of my experience as an autistic person.

My first project is titled *A Figure of Eight* (2024). This 6-minute video piece acts as a one-sided conversation between the observer and the subject, where the "observer" questions the atypical characteristics of the neurodiverse individual. The subject appears non-responsive. However, their body language displays that they feel overstimulated by the situation, which is emphasised by incorporating a multi-layered video.

This brings me to my current ongoing project, *Veil* (2024-25). Considering the theory of cymatics, in other words, "sound visualisation", I am investigating how internalised stimuli responses can be externalised. This project derives from the stigma and disinformation which is spread due to the neurodiverse community's ability to mask their bodily responses (Armstrong, 2017). To combat this, I aim to produce a body of "non-representational" representations which directly communicate how those with invisible disabilities feel in spaces which are built with the neurotypical in mind (Grandin, 1995).

Mediums such as art and photography can provide the neurodiverse with an almost instantaneous release of expression. When considering various processes, there are many options that can apply to the needs of neurodiverse people. I am more inclined to use analogue processes in the darkroom because the environment is completely void of negative stimulation.

Before considering performance, I want to reaffirm why positive and realistic portrayals are important to the neurodiverse. Many examples of visual media, especially film and television, can be held responsible for creating inaccurate and damaging displays of the autistic community. Referring back to the term “Hollywood Autism”, the way autistic people are represented in visual media has followed a very stereotypical and narrow-minded model, which not only generalises us but also encourages negative attitudes towards us. Take Sheldon Cooper for an example. Across *The Big Bang Theory*’s 12-season run, Cooper’s neurodiverse traits are vilified by the cast, causing him to take on a deuteragonist role. Cooper is written to be ignorant and childlike, and the ensemble often seems to “put up” with his atypical behaviour. If we consider the popularity of this show, it can be argued that its widespread exposure may influence how people perceive the full scope of autism (Armstrong, 2017). If you reside within the autism sphere, you may be familiar with an organisation called Autism Speaks. At first glance, you would assume that they strive for autism advocacy and enlightenment. However, Autism Speaks has become notorious for its push on eugenical treatment, which is highly frowned upon in the medical world (Berrington, 2013). Their infamous advertising campaign, *I am Autism* (2009), shows their true ideologies towards the autistic community. At the beginning of the video, there is a very ominous presence. The narrator plays the role of “autism”, speaking like a wicked spirit. The derogatory language which is used is alienating and fear-mongering, making autistic people sound like blood-sucking parasites rather than human beings. If you insist on being an advocate of the autistic community, reinforcing the narrative that autistic people are a burden to families will do the exact opposite. So, to conclude my point,

performative representation, which not only recognises but celebrates autistic people, can be impactful in the incline of neurodiverse acceptance (Rogers, 1993).

Performance as an artistic medium amalgamates the various ways the body can be used as a tool of expression, including performance art, dance and music. We can look at Prue Stevenson's *Expend* (2018) as an example of performance art. Using her body like a makeshift paintbrush, Stevenson explores the value of self-regulation in the art world and how "expending excess energy" is appropriate in a creative context. Speaking as an autistic artist, she considers how many autistic people are shunned from openly showing their neurodiverse traits. Stevenson's use of Taekwondo links to the premise that certain spaces, like a Taekwondo arena, encourage self-regulation.

Next, we will look at contemporary dance and how it can be used as a mode of neurodiverse communication. Like Stevenson's *Expend*, performance art speaks directly to the audience, whether vocal or non-vocal. Contemporary dance can silently convey a narrative, drawing the viewer closer to inspect what is being told. Intricate choreography can raise awareness on certain matters, which is further informed when the performers speak from personal experience (Silberman, 2016). Diane Portelli's *Diversly Typical* (2022) is an example of how dance can speak to the neurodiverse experience.

Diversly Typical is also an example of self-regulation through performance by using the whole body as a vehicle. In this case, performers of the Moveo Dance Company mimic gestures commonly associated with neurodiverse responses. These gestures, known as "stimming", are autonomous responses to environmental stimuli. Many members of the autistic community feel they need to suppress in order to fit in with societal conventions (Armstrong, 2010). However, *Diversly Typical* tears down the mask and brings these hidden traits to the forefront. This

performance piece celebrates cognitive diversity and addresses what the neurodiverse considers the norm.

To conclude our case studies, we will investigate the role of sound in relation to neurodiverse expression. This will be divided into two categories: music and sound alone. To begin with, music can be considered one of the most widespread ways of getting the point across, according to the present day (Silberman, 2016). Music is diverse at its core, with many genres and sub-genres it encapsulates. It can be loud or quiet, fast or slow; the flexibility of music can help transcend across infinite subject areas. From a neurodiverse perspective, listening to a well-known musician speak about their atypical experience can reassure the average neurodiverse consumer that they are not alone in their struggles.

Earlier this year, Dallan Weekes, who you may know as the frontman for *iDKHOW* and former bassist of *Panic! At The Disco*, opened up about his late autism diagnosis at the age of forty. Upon his release of *Gloom Division* (2024), Weekes expresses how he is still on a journey of self-discovery; to quote Weekes, “My whole life I’d been wearing a mask that I didn’t even know I was wearing (AXS, 2024).” Across his expansive collective of creative works, Weekes has utilised music as a way to commentate on the world around him. Songs such as *Social Climb* (2018), where he investigates society’s desire for high social status or *iDIOTS OF Oz* (2024), where Dallan emphasises that we should not care about how the world perceives us. Though Weekes has not explicitly commended his neurodiversity to his success as a musician, he has shown how music can be used as both an audible and visual medium of communication.

Finally, let us dissect the role of sound art. To close our investigation of creative works, I would like to re-introduce my project, *Veil*, in relation to sound art. In this project, I use “sound” as a catalyst to bring my work to life. I am hypersensitive to sound, especially when those sounds

begin to overlap each other. *Veil* revolves around the notion of autism as an invisible disability, meaning my response to overwhelming stimuli manifests itself internally (Grandin, 2006). By applying the cymatics theory, I am able to actively visualise how I feel within the space.

EDUCATIONAL AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Now, we can consider how creative mediums can be applied within education. Looking back on my time at school as an undiagnosed autistic student, I remember the academic environment to be loud and crowded; this chaos was broken during lesson periods where my learning abilities were tested. The weekly toll is strenuous for autistic pupils who must suppress and mask their neurodiverse traits to comply with their neurotypical peers. And let's not forget the heightened bullying culture towards autistic students, which only increases their anxieties (NHS, no date). Many schools worldwide already provide spaces like "sensory rooms", which can offer a secluded place for those who need to self-regulate in private; this should not have to be the case. However, a lack of education does not help. The downside of these sensory rooms is that they often isolate the neurodiverse student. Sure, a stimuli-free space can be beneficial, but it negates the opportunity to express their feelings to the outside. This is why applying "art therapy" within academic environments can help break the communicative barrier.

The success of art therapy, including its practice in early psychoanalysis, has been recognised since 1942. Sigmund Freud's teachings on the psychoanalytical art theory express art's power to reveal the subconscious (Freud, 1910, p. 144-45). Art therapy promotes the visualisation of internal emotions, which helps paint a clearer picture of the participant's feelings (Rogers, 1993). This especially benefits members of the autistic community who experience non-verbalism, which would make it impossible for them to express themselves vocally. Art therapy

also acts as a vehicle for self-regulation, thus promoting the ease of anxiety and overstimulation. Considering art therapy and its role in psychoanalysis, we can understand how it can be a fruitful resource for the neurodiverse to better communicate their experience to their peers. The *VSA*, or *Very Special Arts*, is an example of a successful program which offers art education to neurodiverse and disabled people.

The *VSA* is a performance arts-focused initiative established by the *John F. Kennedy Centre* in Washington. Branching across 50 countries worldwide, the *VSA* emphasises that everyone has the right to contribute to the arts, regardless of ability or inability. Through their *Playright* initiative, neurodiverse people can experiment with various artistic mediums to speak about their atypical experiences. The *VSA Arts Festival*, which debuted in 1989, compiles the collated work into an exhibition of neurodiverse identity. By showcasing the abnormality of neurodiverse existence, we become acknowledged for our capabilities.

To solidify the impact of art therapy, we can compare it to an alternative method, most notably, the traditional face-to-face model. This form of treatment can work for many people, but from an autistic point of view, this style may feel confrontational (Silberman, 2016) If you also consider how many autistic individuals struggle with socialisation, therapy which heavily relies on communication may not suit the needs of autistic people.

By applying art therapy practices to educational and interventional spaces, we can promote a deeper and widespread discussion around the neurodiverse experience. The feeling of isolation is common for autistic people. As a suggestion, an environment which congregates the autistic community can provide a relatable, transparent exchange of experiences aided by artistic mediums.

FUTURE OF NEURODIVERSE CREATIVITY

We live in a generation where digital exposure is more prominent than ever. With the introduction of social platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Reddit, self-advocacy as a whole is capable of reaching a wider audience. If we compare to the pre-digital age, the ability to share our experiences has become instantaneous and accessible to everyone; including news broadcasting, social media has become the go-to form of absorbing worldwide information. Social media platforms have become the hub for artists across all mediums as it is considered the most efficient tool to branch their work out (Starko, et al., 2023) Considering this, neurodiverse creatives can take advantage of this as a means of self-advocacy and fostering a community that relates to them. Of course, the online realm has seen a rise in “troll culture” as the power of anonymity takes its toll. To tackle the wave of hatred and disinformation, we – the autistic community – can utilise these platforms with our creativity as a way of correcting the bigoted attitudes towards us.

But “creativity” is not limited to visual expression. The autistic perspective in workspaces should be valued due to our enhanced problem-solving skills, which are 40% faster compared to the neurotypical (Embrace Autism, 2023) As discussed previously, people like Temple Grandin have acquired creative thinking as a conduit, which has led to a prosperous career in her field of work. If we are to value autistic minds in neurotypically dominated industries, an inclusive environment which accommodates their difficulties and cultivates a positive relationship between the autistic and allistic can help bridge this gap. An example of a major establishment that recognises the talents of neurodiverse people is Microsoft, which values the creative and innovative skills of the neurodiverse through its neurodiverse hiring program. By uniting neurodiverse and neurotypical people in the workplace, we can begin to see a

change in how society views the autistic community, not as a product of their weaknesses but of their strengths.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, we have explored the nuance of neurodiversity, its stance on society, and the current false perspectives which surround us. By introducing Grandin's concept of the "visual thinker", we have dissected the creative works of autistic artists as tools for self-expression and advocacy. The ways in which creative mediums can be applied to support the well-being of autistic people, such as art therapy, have been discussed. Finally, we have expressed the value of the neurodiverse mind in workspaces and the benefits of modern advances as a vehicle for communicating experiences to the world.

Autism should be recognised as a neurotype, not a disease. In a century where we are striving for inclusivity, an overwhelming amount of people still fall into misinformed beliefs, viewing the autistic community as lesser. If we really want progress, acknowledging that autistic people are human-beings that are capable of extraordinary things should be the first call of action. Whilst creative mediums as vocal devices will make autistic voices heard, a lot more reform is needed for the autistic community to feel accepted within society.

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