

On Neurodiversity

A Study Room Guide on Neurodiversity



Compiled & written by Daniel Oliver
2019



Live Art
Development
Agency

LADA Study Room Guides

As part of the continuous development of the Study Room we regularly commission artists and thinkers to write personal Study Room Guides on specific themes.

The idea is to help navigate Study Room users through the resource, enable them to experience the materials in a new way and highlight materials that they may not have otherwise come across.

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on Neurodiversity

by Daniel Oliver

A collection of recorded conversations with neurodivergent artists working in Live Art and performance:

Jon Adams, FK Alexander, James Leadbitter (the vacuum cleaner), Oozing Gloop, Luke Ferris, Jess Thom (Touretteshero), Paul Wady, Annette Foster, Simon Raven, Chiron Stamp, Vijay Patel, Nwando Ebizie, and Lucy Hutson.

Cover image from Daniel Oliver's LADA DIY project MAX Dyspraxe's Neurodivergent Revolution Funtime

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INTRODUCTION

I am dyspraxic, hence I am 'neurodivergent'. Recently I have been claiming that my own performance practice involves an "embracing of my neurodivergency". I'm not really sure I understand what that means – to "embrace my neurodivergency". It means something to do with making performances that are themselves dyspraxic - clumsy, disorganised, relational in odd ways, digressive, awkward...

I also think that saying that I'm doing something and not really knowing what I mean when I say that, or even if I am really doing it, is part of me "embracing my neurodivergency". In order to try and figure out what I mean by "embracing my neurodivergency" I decided to talk to neurodivergent artists about neurodiversity and the ways in which they feel their own practices embrace their neurodivergencies. I also thought it would be useful to find out about challenges they have faced as neurodivergent individuals in terms of the production, funding, dissemination and support of their practice. I thought this might also be useful for other people, so I asked Lois Keidan if I could make it into a study guide for the study room at the Live Art Development Agency.

This was partly because there was not much in the LADA Study room to help me develop an understanding of neurodivergency and performance. This is not the fault of the study room. There is not much anywhere on neurodiversity and performance. The few resources and documents that do exist are listed in the resources section of this guide. Because of this lack of existing resources, this is not primarily a guide to documents, texts and objects and other raw materials in the LADA Study room. Instead I have collaborated on making some documents/raw materials for the study room - a growing series of one-to-one conversations between myself and neurodivergent artists who make performances.

Each artist was asked to discuss their experiences, ideas, processes and opinions, and to give advice and recommendations in relation to the theme of neurodiversity. I think they did this amazingly and they were incredibly generous with their time. I found the conversations very useful and I hope you do too.

The artists are, at the time of writing: Jon Adams, FK Alexander, the vacuum cleaner, Oozing Gloop, Luke Ferris, Jess Thom (Touretteshero), Paul Wady, Annette Foster, Simon Raven, Chiron Stamp, Vijay Patel, Nwando Ebizie, and Lucy Hutson.

This is an on-going project and I aim to continue expanding and diversifying this list. This may mean finding other ways of hearing from neurodivergent artists for whom spoken conversation is inappropriate, difficult, impossible or undesirable. I welcome suggestions of other neurodivergent artists who make performances that I can bring into this project. I recorded the conversations I have had with neurodivergent artists and have had them transcribed by Chiron Stamp, Phoebe Patey-Ferguson and myself (with minimal editing – see below). At the time of writing all but two (Jess Thom and Jon Adams) of the interviews are only accessible as recordings, but the

plan is to have the transcriptions edited and organised like Jess Thom's and Jon Adam's and added into the pack when ready.

The following few pages act as a light-touch guide to working with these interviews, a kind of guide to a Study Room Guide that is not really a Study Room Guide. It's possible that what I have done here is not really what Lois Keidan meant when we discussed doing a study room guide on neurodiversity. And that's all part of 'embracing my neurodivergency', whatever that means.

DEFINITIONS

Finding useful definitions of neurodiversity and neurodivergency has been a core part of this study guide project. The first thing I asked each of the artists was "what does neurodiversity mean to you?" It is more important for me to get a sense of how these terms make sense to neurodivergent people rather than have some all-encompassing definition that comes from a single source of authority or expertise.

I talk about what these terms mean to me in my conversation with Nwando Ebizie that makes up part of this guide. In summary, as stated on the website for my recent 'MAX Dyspraxe' (www.maxdyspraxe.com) project, I think 'neurodivergent' refers to those who's brains don't work in the way that is generally expected or accepted. Neurotypical, on the other hand, refers to those who's brains do seem to work in the way that is generally expected or accepted. Neurodiversity refers to the idea that there are many different ways of thinking and of being in the world and being with others. It implies that the current expectations about what is deemed functional or acceptable in terms of how we think, how we are in the world, and how we are with others, are potential restrictive, narrow, excluding, and damaging.

When I had nearly completed doing all the interviews for this guide I came across Nick Walker's blog <http://neurocosmopolitanism.com>. It is a very useful resource. It provides a list of definitions I have found very clear and accessible - <http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions>

I wish I had found them earlier, as I think that at various points in the interviews I have used the word 'neurodiverse' or 'neurodiversity' when, following Nick Walker, I could have used the word 'neurodivergent' or 'neurodivergency', or the terms 'neurodiversity movement' or 'neurodiversity paradigm'. Sorry, I hope you still understand what we mean.

I am starting to use my own term 'neurotransgressive' more. I like that it gives me a sense of agency (thanks to Shane Boyle for helping me think that through). I also like that it connects my subjectivity to movements such as Transgressive Cinema, which are inherently punky, difficult, radical, experimental, and stand implicitly against normative ideals of quality and functionality.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWS

The word 'interviews' feels a bit too proper for what happened between me and the neurodivergent artists I spoke to. They are more like loosely structured informal conversations.

In the rare times I have been interviewed in front of an audience I have occasionally experienced the infuriating and undignified situation in which the interviewer listens to my answer and then says "... I think what Daniel is trying to say here is..." I do not want these interviews, or the transcriptions of the interviews, to do anything like that.

It was, therefore, important to me that these informal conversations had the potential to go off track, to get disrupted, to trail off, to be repetitive, and to include my own glitches, mishaps and interruptions as an interviewer. I wanted everything to be recorded and for the interviews to be transcribed with very minimal editing. This does not mean writing down every 'um' or other incidental utterance, it just means avoiding deciding what bits were useful or not and what bits were expressed 'well' or not. This is what I think embracing neurodivergency might look or sound like. I very much appreciate that this also has the potential for the interviewees (and the interviewer) to feel more vulnerable or exposed than they might were the interviews more rigorously edited, and I am very grateful that this was embraced.

The conversations were loosely based around three questions:

"What does neurodiversity mean to you?", "How does neurodivergency manifest in your practice?", and "Do you have any advice for other neurodivergent artists?". I also asked the artists if there are any resources they feel should be added to the Live Art Development Agency Study Room.

In order to speed up the process for someone looking for specific answers, or to help readers find ways into the interviews, I have added a collection of quotes from the interviews that I found enlightening or useful or entertaining in my own pursuit of working out what I mean when I say 'embracing neurodivergency'. These quotes connect to the three core questions and are collected together at the beginning of each interview transcription.

Each of these conversations lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. They were transcribed by Chiron Stamp and Phoebe Patey-Ferguson and myself.

The recordings are catalogued and available in the Study Room (Digital File, EF5292), or alternatively, they can be listened to online at:

<https://soundcloud.com/thisisliveart/sets/study-room-guide-on-neurodiversity/s-F7kjW>

Study Room resources on Neurodiversity

Access all Areas : Live Art and Disability

This is a great resource that documents a symposium that brought together lots of artists making work connecting to disability. The interview between Aaron Williamson and Sinead O'Donnell (pp.17-30) is particularly apt here due to its references to invisible disabilities. So is Rita Marcalo's contribution *Involuntary Dances: Correspondence* (pp. 114 -128). Marcalo is epileptic. Here she documents a series of letters connected to inducing an epileptic seizure in a live performance.

Artist/Author: Various
Reference No: P1864
Editor: Live Art Development Agency
Date Logged: 01.05.2012
ISBN: 978-0-9561342-7-1
Publisher/Date: Live Art Development Agency, 2012
Edition/Format: Publication

applying performance: live Art, socially engaged theatre and affective practice

Part 6: 'Participatory (Syn)aesthetics' (pp. 185-249) in this book by Nicola Shaughnessy builds on Josephine Machon's concept of '(syn)aesthetics (P2094, see below). It makes specific references to autism from pages 235-253 and uses the term 'neurodivergent aesthetics' (p. 242).

Artist/Author: Nicola Shaughnessy
Reference No: P3535
Date Logged: 05.03.2018
ISBN: 978-1349317059
Publisher/Date: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012
Edition/Format: Publication

Caution

A book and DVDs by dyslexic artist Sinead O'Donnell that brings together six international performance artists exploring invisible disabilities.

Artist/Author: Sinead O'Donnell
Reference No: P1963
Date Logged: 23.08.2012
ISBN: 978-0-9565621-5-9
Publisher/Date: Artsadmin, 2012
Edition/Format: Publication

Different times. Drag, life, rock'n'roll: five years in Six Inch Killaz, 1994-99

This is a zine by Simon Murphy, who has Asperger's Syndrome. It is about their experience in the 'all-drag punk-ish band' (p.3) Six Inch Killaz.

Artist/Author: Simon Murphy
Reference No: P3420
Date Logged: 07.11.2017
Edition/Format: Publication

Scottee: I Made It

I have a short piece in here about dyslexia, dyspraxia, weirdos, diagnosis, 'success' and being 'high functioning'.

Reference No: P3610
Date Logged: 24.09.2018
ISBN: 978-0-9935611-8-4
Publisher/Date: Live Art Development Agency, 2018
Edition/Format: Publication

Shy Radicals: The Antisystemic Politics of the Militant Introvert

This fantastic, angry, funny book by artists, activist, curator and writer Hamja Ahsan introduces the reader to 'Aspergistan' – 'a utopian state for introverted people'. It has a nice dig at the concept of neurodiversity on pages 63-65.

Artist/Author: Hamja Ahsan
Reference No: P3445
Date Logged: 23.01.2018
ISBN: 978-1906012571
Publisher/Date: Book Works, 2017
Edition/Format: Publication

(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance

In this book Josephine Machon develops a new way of thinking and talking about experiential arts that connects to the medical term 'synaesthesia' – 'where a fusing of sensations occurs when one sense is stimulated which automatically and

Artist/Author: Josephine Machon, Various
Reference No: P2094
Date Logged: 27.02.2013
Publisher/Date: Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke , 2011
Edition/Format: Publication

Theatre & Disability

This book, by Petra Kuppers, has a brief but useful few pages on representations of autism in theatre and television, as well as references to autistic actors (pp. 12-16). Kuppers is a leading writer on disability and performance, so it is worth looking through the various books by her held in the study room.

Artist/Author: Petra Kuppers
Reference No: P3321
Date Logged: 15.09.2017
ISBN: 978-1137605719
Publisher/Date: Palgrave, 2017
Edition/Format: Publication

Theatres of Learning Disability: Good, Bad, or Plain Ugly

In this book Matt Hargreaves focuses 'exclusively on theatre and learning disability as theatre – rather than advocacy or therapy' (blurb)

Artist/Author: Matt Hargrave
Reference No: P3526
Date Logged: 05.03.2018
ISBN: 978-1349700233
Publisher/Date: Palgrave Macmillan , 2014
Edition/Format: Publication

Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience

In the first chapter of this book by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi is called 'Coming Alive in a World of Texture: For Neurodiversity' (pp.3-22). It argues for the curing of the 'neurotypical devaluing of autistic experiences' (p. 22)

Artist/Author: Erin Manning, Brian Massumi
Reference No: P3534
Date Logged: 05.03.2018
ISBN: 978-0816679676
Publisher/Date: University Of Minnesota Press , 2014
Edition/Format: Publication

Walking as Reading and Memory

'A performative text of the Adult ADHD Self Report Scale Symptom Checklist' by artist Rebekah Dean

Artist/Author: Rebekah Dean
Reference No: P3273
Date Logged: 02.08.2017
Edition/Format: Publication

Welcome to Biscuit Land: A Year in the Life of Touretteshero

A book by Jess Thom, aka Touretteshero, that follows a year in her life.

Artist/Author: Jessica Thom
Reference No: P3441
Date Logged: 23.01.2018
ISBN: 978-0285641273
Publisher/Date: Souvenir Press Ltd, 2012
Edition/Format: Publication

You're Not My Dad!

A zine on autism life and culture by Simon Murphy and Charlotte Cooper

Artist/Author: Simon Murphy and Charlotte Cooper
Reference No: P3419
Date Logged: 07.11.2017
Edition/Format: Publication

Documentation of Work by the Artists Interviewed

Chiron Stamp

Chiron Stamp collection (Digital File, EF5285)

Jess Thom - Touretteshero

Unlimited 2016 Programme (Publication, P3046)

Jon Adams

Access All Areas: Dysarticulate2 (Digital File, EF5043)

Access All Areas: Dysarticulate2 (DVD, D1623)

Access All Areas: Dysarticulate2 (Publication, P1716, P1717)

Lucy Hutson

If you want bigger Yorkshire puddings you need a bigger tin (DVD, D2053, and Digital File, EF5131)

Everything In My Head At One Time In My Life (P3668)

Oozing Gloop

We Green Things Programme (Publication, P3242)

GOOEY AND CRUNCHY (Digital file, EF5290)

The Gloop Show (Digital file, EF5291)

Simon Raven

East End Collaborations: Images and Film Documentation (DVD, D1445)

Vacuum Cleaner

Talking Heads (Digital File, DB0053)

NRLA 2008: The Problem is the Solution (Part1) (DVD, D1103) NRLA 2008: The

Problem is the Solution (Part2) (DVD, D1104) Anti Adverts (DVD, D0180)

Selected Works: A load of rubbish (Digital File, DB0051)

Cleaning up after capitalism (DVD, D2266)

Madlove (with Hannah Hull) (Digital File, EF5276)

Selected Online Resources

Access All Areas Theatre - <http://www.accessallareastheatre.org/>

British Dyslexia Association - <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/>

Davis Dyslexia Association - <https://www.dyslexia.com/>

Dyspraxia Foundation - <https://dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk/>

Dyspraxic Me - <http://dyspraxic.me.uk/>

Ecologies of Care - www.ecologiesofcare.org

Flow Observatorium - <https://twitter.com/ObservatoriumF>

National Autistic Society - www.autism.org.uk

Neurocosmopolitanism - <http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/>

Neuroqueer - neuroqueer.blogspot.com

Tourettes Action - www.tourettes-action.org.uk

Touretteshero - <https://www.touretteshero.com/>

Unlimited Festival Resources - <https://weareunlimited.org.uk/resources/>

Conversation One: Jon Adams Neurodiversity and 'The Force'

Link to Audio File

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Full Conversation: 8

Jon Adams – Introduction



Jon Adams, *My School Pen*

Jon Adams is an autistic artist, advocate, illustrator and geologist. Examples of Adams work in the study room are:

[Access All Areas: Dysarticulate 2 \(Digital File, EF5043\)](#)

[Access All Areas: Dysarticulate 2 \(DVD, D1623\)](#)

[Access All Areas: Dysarticulate 2 \(Publication, P1716, P1717\)](#)

Adams also experiences synaesthesia, which he describes as personifying inanimate objects, having the ability to touch and feel time, and smelling colours. If, having engaged with Adams discussion of his experience of synaesthesia in relation to his art practice, you wanted to read more about overlaps between this condition and certain performance practices, there is a book called '(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance' (P2094) by Josephine Machon in the study room. Machon describes synaesthesia as 'a neurological condition where a fusing of sensations occurs when one sense is stimulated which automatically and simultaneously causes a stimulation in

another of the senses'.² She creates the term '(syn)aesthetics' in order to discuss performance practices that consist of 'a blending of disciplines and techniques' in order to produce 'a visceral response in the audience'.³

Adams runs [Flow Observatorium](#) – 'a neurodivergent led artist hub campaigning for rights, respect recognition & parity in the arts culture & society for neurodivergent people, funded by Arts Council England'. Flow Observatorium have produced a *Neurodivergent Arts Manifesto* which can be found [here](#).

An article by Jon Harris about Adams' experience of being diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome later in life appeared in the [Guardian](#) in 2016. Adams himself has also written about autism, diagnosis and creativity in an article for [Network Autism](#). He has spoken widely about these topics, and documentation of these talks can be found online.

² Josephine Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance*, (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 13.

³ Machon, p.14.

Key Quotes

If you click on these quotes it will take you to the corresponding place in the full transcription. To skip straight to the full transcription click [here](#).

What does neurodiversity mean to you?

You can use the analogy of biodiversity. It's life basically in all its glory, tooth and claw. If we didn't have biodiversity we wouldn't be here. If we didn't have neurodiversity we wouldn't be here. Neurodiversity encompasses all of us. It's the way we think, the differences.

It's about an innate way of thinking that is so radically different from most people because our brains are wider. We are not broken, we're not faulty. I'm not one of those people who would like to be cured. I firmly feel like I only have my creative talent in the way I do because of what other people considered wrong with me.

You know autism is innate. I'm not broken, I'm just human, I'm just a variation, you know, I'm neuro-diverse, I'm neuro-divergent rather. Neuro-diversity is all of us, neuro-divergent is people who differ from the majority. It's about me, it's the same as being a gay person. You know it's them it's not something you can separate. I hate the term "a person with autism." I'm not with autism, I am autistic. You know I don't live with autism, I live with my wife and two cats.

I hate the word normal, normal is a setting on a tumble drier.

How does neurodiversity manifest in your practice?

...you know I left things in places, I leave things, anything can be artwork. I used to cut books so that they'd fit over bits of stone work and leave them in galleries and words... I got several residencies and shows out of that including one at Pallant House and they immediately declared me an outsider artist, which I was really... I was much more happy than being called a disabled artist.

And he said "how about writing something about crossing boundaries?" Now when you say something to an autistic, Aspergers, Dyslexic, neurodivergent person, that triggers a lot of things. We're not good at blank sheets of paper.

D: Yeah

J: You know, you can probably understand that

D: Sure...

J: But you give us a piece of paper with three dots and a line...

started from that point and then I looked at the... You know we go off on all sorts of tangents and angles so I wrote this piece.

A lot of us are polymath, a lot of us cross a lot of boundaries in the work we make because we see the world so differently we don't see it in categories. This is strictly painting, this is strictly performance, this is a play, this is poetry. You know we see the world as one, it's very holistic.

On Dyslexia

My Dyslexia enables me to think in 3D. When I was a kid I loved looking at the world through that filter. I understood rocks, stones, geology, could see underground, my drawing could never equal the way I saw things in my head. It took a little while to learn how to draw in 3D but then it came kind of naturally.

On Autism

People would give me a map and tell me the plan and tell me to draw that as reality. And I didn't realise it then because I didn't know I was dyslexic, but that's why I could do it. I can see it in my head and turn it around. And why I was so obsessed with detail— obviously that was the autism... Aspergers.

I'm obsessed with detail. It's not that I get lost in it, there's another autism myth, that autistic people can't see the bigger picture, but that's not true, we can. But we do get taken in by the detail, each detail is important. It's important *to* the bigger picture. Because if you get the detail wrong you get the bigger picture wrong.

“okay, the second performance is at Turner Contemporary as part of their Risk season, what's the biggest risk an autistic person can do? That's look someone in the eye.”

On Synaesthesia

I'm also synaesthetic, which goes with my autism, which means that I personify inanimate objects.

I also have a synaesthetic ability with time. I can touch time, I can feel it. So I'm very good with layers. And, you know, visioning time scales and things so that fitted in nicely.

And a lot of my work now works with time and timescales.

I said earlier I can't stand the colour yellow, so I proposed a performance piece where I paint a wall yellow and nail books to it and I got to do it and there was a bucket and I used it and I did that, but I didn't think, I didn't know, because of my naivety in the arts world I didn't know that was a performance piece.

I did a sound installation in the Tate. It was a playday, arranged through a project and every time I've gone in the Tate I hear seagulls because of my synaesthesia in the space. Couldn't explain why, don't want to know. So what I did for that day was I just played the sound of seagulls in there so that other people would hear what I've heard. "How did you think of that?" "Well I didn't. It's me"

Advice for producers/ facilitators/ programmers/ funders

I got a residency through Artists Access to Art Colleges, because the application was easy, it was: 'tell us about why you want to do it'. I could do that. Some application forms are quite difficult. As neurodivergent I'm not very good with applications because often, we have got the whole thing in our head. Not done, but we can see it, taste it, feel it and how do you transcribe that into two dimensional words? It's very difficult.

Because we're quiet, we're invisible— mainly— and it's about time that changed.

The thing that changed everything was labelling myself as an autistic artist. Self-diagnosed— I admit— and there's a lot of snobbery around diagnosed and self-diagnosis. I don't think there should be. You know I could tell people who are autistic, who have Aspergers. I recognise that way of thinking - we're all different, we're all different because we've got different experiences, we have different mixtures. You know autism doesn't come on its own often, it comes with Dyslexia or Dyspraxia or ADHD. And then you have the imposed mental health issues because people don't treat you very well so you're a mixture of all this stuff and to get that out as performance or whatever or work is the best thing.

So, I would not be without my neurodivergence, it gives me an edge and if you want to see work that is truly and utterly different then you need to commission people who see the world very, very differently, but you need to think differently about the way you commission and the way you work with them and that's the change that's needed.

Advice for Neurodivergent Artists

...“you'll find where you are, keep chipping away, but find your tribe, start talking to other members.”

So I would say, go with what you are. Don't try and be clever. There's enough neuro-typicals out there trying to be clever. And you know, be authentic, be honest to your own voice inside you. And you can spot that in people, you can spot that in work. That's why some work stands out and some doesn't. It's not contrived. You know who's the best expert in yourself? You are. Who's the best expert in the way you see the world? You are. Use it.

You don't have to make work about autism to show the talent and creativeness that comes with autism. For some people autism is very difficult,

some people with autism have very difficult communication issues. It's a wide spectrum, some people aren't able to voice what's going on in their head and we have to respect that too. But it is yeah, use it. And a really silly analogy is like the force really I guess isn't it? You know the more you try music the less you'll be able to be, you just have to lean back and do it.



Jon Adams, *Flag*

FULL DISCUSSION

Jon Adams: Start me up with a question.

Daniel Oliver: What does neurodiversity means to you?

J: Interesting question. It's about the way people think and the different ways people think. You know, throughout the whole human race. You can use the analogy of biodiversity. It's life basically in all its glory, tooth and claw. If we didn't have biodiversity we wouldn't be here. If we didn't have neurodiversity we wouldn't be here. Neurodiversity encompasses all of us. It's the way we think, the differences. If we didn't all think differently we would be a bunch of robots unable to solve problems and do things. So we need people to think differently. You know, there are the problem solvers, the ones who see the solution, who come up with ideas. Like I say it's almost like Will Smith looking at all them robots. They all look the same, they all have the same programming, what's the point? Would the world covered in one type of plant, one type of insect work? No. It's that complex interplay that we don't quite understand between everything. And you know, to segregate groups of people because they think differently is kinda wrong. It would be like to segregate animals because they look different from plants. You know there's a lot of analogy and - this is a myth bust for you - autistic people aren't supposed to use analogy, are we?

[laugh]

but there we go, that's one of the myths we need to break. The only time I think people think the same is when they discriminate against minorities.

D: Sure.

J: You know people get a wrong idea and then they think something, it becomes a myth, becomes an urban legend and then the people on the

opposite end of it suffer. Neurodiversity is kind of life, and people kind of argue against it but then when you start using the biodiversity argument they can't say it doesn't exist.

D: That's great. That's really good. So maybe you can talk a bit about your work and how neurodiversity fits into that?

J: Sure. I didn't know I was neurodivergent. And I use the word neurodivergent. There's a lot of terminology in and around the whole aspect of neurodiversity, as an autistic person I'm neuro-atypical. You know it divides into two things: neuro-typical people and neuro-atypical people but I prefer neurodivergent. And that covers a multitude of things you know: Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADHD, Autism, Aspergers, probably Bipolar or Schizophrenia too. It's about an innate way of thinking that is so radically different from most people because our brains are wider. We are not broken, we're not faulty. I'm not one of those people who would like to be cured. I firmly feel like I only have my creative talent in the way I do because of what other people considered wrong with me. My Dyslexia enables me to think in 3D. When I was a kid I loved looking at the world through that filter. I understood rocks, stones, geology, could see underground, my drawing could never equal the way I saw things in my head. It took a little while to learn how to draw in 3D but then it came kind of naturally. I'm also synaesthetic, which goes with my autism, which means that I personify inanimate objects.

So you mix that with a love of rocks, stones and fossils, I kinda got on with rocks, stones and fossils as people, better than people, you know. Stones and rocks don't let you down, don't hurt you, don't scream horrible things at you. Like I said I never went to art college because when I was probably 10 and a half, almost 11, near the end of Junior School, I was drawing really quite advanced then 3D etc. I did this picture, the headmaster saw it and said he wanted it on the wall. And mind you this is 1971– 70 or 71– when there wasn't much on the wall. I'd always been teased a lot because I couldn't spell, so this was chance to prove I was okay. But my teacher said to write my name

on it and I couldn't spell it so I did the best I could and held it up in front of the class who tore it up. They said, "you'll never be anything because you can't even spell your own name". So, that kind of shook me a bit and I never went to art college. And I'm kinda glad I didn't because, I wouldn't have studied rocks and fossils. Like I said I have a synaesthetic ability with that. I also have a synaesthetic ability with time. I can touch time, I can feel it. So I'm very good with layers. And, you know, visioning time scales and things so that fitted in nicely. And a lot of my work now works with time and timescales. So that time as a geologist wasn't wasted at all. I never went into a job as a geologist. I was supposed to do a PhD in sharks, but people being people, there were a few incidents let's say... But I worked at the Barbican art gallery for a while and some of the shows there influenced my practice. One especially was an artist called (??) when they unwrapped his pictures I could hear them, and taste them because of my synaesthesia. I didn't know I was synaesthetic, you know nobody had told me that. It's a bit like being colour blind, you think everybody sees the world the way you do and they obviously don't. Especially with synaesthesia cause I react badly to certain colours— yellow, I hate yellow. Tastes of mould, can't go near it. So as a kid you look odd. You carry this like a rucksack on your back. I realised that, when I was 6, I said I was gonna be an artist, I didn't know why, then at 22 I realised through, you know, seeing and working with pictures that I had to do it. And I found a niche market doing geological illustration. I could do the job of two people. People like Shell, you know. I could draw in 3D, I could cut things away so I started to do a lot of illustration because they didn't have to pay a geologist to tell them what to do. "Draw me a fault" "Okay, what type?" "Can you draw with this?" I ended up drawing a whole oil refinery and things like that. Being one of the first people to draw the propagation of seismic waves through stone. And then I started drawing books, kid's books, archeological illustration. People would give me a map and tell me the plan and tell me to draw that as reality. And I didn't realise it then because I didn't know I was dyslexic, but that's why I could do it. I can see it in my head and turn it around. And why I was so obsessed with detail— obviously that was the autism, Aspergers.

People said you must be very patient to draw like that, and I'm not a very patient person, but I'm obsessed with detail. It's not that I get lost in it, there's another autism myth, that autistic people can't see the bigger picture, but that's not true, we can. But we do get taken in by the detail, each detail is important. It's important *to* the bigger picture. Because if you get the detail wrong you get the bigger picture wrong. In 1999 I kinda had a crisis, a lot of the book publishers that I worked for merged and then went their different ways and I'd always found the social side of asking for things very difficult. I put that down to my time at school, I didn't put it down to being autistic and Aspergers. You know, the social thing, I very rarely went to any office parties, I very rarely went to any of these big publishers' do's. I didn't know what to say, what to do. It just seemed strange.

I developed a personal relationship with the people I worked with purely because I thought if they knew me they're more likely to give me work. Yeah... and you know, I watched other people, people who were late with delivering work and I worked out that the only two things that mattered were "do what they ask you to do" –and I used to hide things in the pictures even though I used to sign things that I didn't– and also "get it in on time" and you know that's relevant all the way through for anyone really. So I had this crisis and during that crisis I found out I was dyslexic. I happened to mention to someone that when I read it was like it was under water and they sort of twigged and said "ooo, have you ever had a dyslexia test?" and I said "well, my son has he's very dyslexic but I'm just dim"– because that's what I was told at school– and they said " No, no, if your son has it you may think differently" and so I had the test. I was convinced they were gonna call me clinically stupid but no, she came back and said "this is your I.Q for visual stuff, this is your I.Q for writing, this is your I.Q for verbal comprehension and written comprehension" and it was like a jagged set of mountains. I was dyslexic. Took a little bit of time to sink in, I had to look up what dyslexia was. But at that moment I suddenly realised that I'd drawn other people's pictures all my life and I wanted to do something for me.

Now there wasn't much opportunity to draw. I was a single parent looking after kids, I needed money, I needed work and there wasn't much opportunity to draw for myself but I started writing and I wrote profusely. In the first year I managed to win a couple of competitions cause I dared send them in. One of them was an international poetry competition. And at the preview I went to there were illustrations made from the poems. One of the judges, Andrew Motion, took me aside and said "never stop writing" and I never have. It's been intermittent. You know, this realisation that most of my life people had told me the way I think was wrong and I realised that I didn't think like everybody else, I didn't experience the world like everybody else, so part of that came out through the writing and part of that came out through wanting to try out new ways of expressing things and the first one of that was film. I wanted to make a film because I felt that dyslexia wasn't fairly represented. And I did a course on making film, people liked me, they employed me. And then various other things happened and I started to make sculpture. I got a residency through Artists Access to Art Colleges, because the application was easy, it was: 'tell us about why you want to do it'. I could do that.

Some application forms are quite difficult. As neurodivergent I'm not very good with applications because often, we have got the whole thing in our head. Not done, but we can see it, taste it, feel it and how do you transcribe that into two dimensional words? It's very difficult. So I did [go to art college]. I tried sculpture, music - I'd always been interested in music, since I was a young kid especially synthesised music, because for some reason I could touch that in my head. Sequences and Tangerine Dreams – I saw them when I was 15. I was totally hooked on synthesisers because I could touch them easily, but I didn't know other people couldn't.

So I did all this sort of thing and then someone came and told me... I was working with some dyslexic kids, teaching them memory techniques because I learnt– I have a very systematic memory. Dyslexia is a short-term memory issue, it's just about the way you get things in, when you get it in there it stays. I have a very visual way of learning and if you turn things into visual imagery in your head and follow maps and things you can learn stuff without...quite nice and easy and it makes you look like...you know when you stand up and

do a talk without notes it makes things...people have a different opinion of you. And I was teaching that to some kids for their work and you know most people tell dyslexic people what they can't do but they don't tell them what they can. And the woman who was in charge of the whole thing came up to me and said "have you ever thought you were autistic?" and I said "no, what's that?" She gave me a book, I read the first page and couldn't read anymore, because I thought someone else is seeing inside my head. This is the way I think. I didn't go for an autism/Aspergers test at that point because it was too expensive and too difficult. I was kinda wrapped up in the disability arts world, although I never felt like I fitted in because it's more about obvious disability than it is about hidden issues. I found there was a little bit of prejudice there. And some of that was vocalised by people, some of it wasn't, and I found likeminded people like me who didn't fit. And then I thought about doing other stuff, like... I guess the first performance thing I did was... I said earlier I cant stand the colour yellow, so I proposed a performance piece where I paint a wall yellow and nail books to it and I got to do it and there was a bucket and I used it and I did that, but I didn't think, I didn't know, because of my naivety in the arts world I didn't know that was a performance piece.

D: Is there any documentation of it anywhere?

J: There is. I won a prize for it actually. No, there should be. That was done in conjunction with Holton Lee down in Dorset when Tony [Heaton] from Shape ran it, but I enjoyed doing that. I think it was because I didn't divide things up into categories, I didn't divide things into categories so I just see everything as a piece of artwork. And I think that's been really useful because as I said some people get stuck in just drawing and I thought sculpture and making things; reinterpreting the world to the way I think, looking at it through the lenses that I see the world through. So I did, you know I left things in places, I leave things, anything can be artwork. I used to cut books so that they'd fit over bits of stonework and leave them in galleries and words... I got several residencies and shows out of that including one at Pallant House and they immediately declared me an outsider artist, which I was really... I was much

more happy than being called a disabled artist.

The thing I did with the Live Art [Development Agency?], was the flags. I was doing a residency on the trains, mapping people's journeys and making visual maps out of journeys or objects and I thought, what would grab people's attention? I thought flags. What's the cheapest way to make flags? Get old books, take them apart and stick them to kebab sticks. Tried it out at Whitstable Biennale, it worked and the Olympics people picked up on it.

D: Great.

J: And as well as the neurodivergent affecting the way I think, affecting my creativity, it makes me sometimes a bit blunt. You've got like 15 people around a table all thinking the same thing and then one person pops up and says, "what if you do it this way?" You know, you're not in that impasse. And I've done it several times. Found myself applying for a position as area council member for Arts Council and got on. And influencing some of the artwork for London 2012 but also influencing for neurodivergent people too. Because we're quiet, we're invisible— mainly— and it's about time that changed. The thing that changed everything was labelling myself as an autistic artist. Self-diagnosed— I admit— and there's a lot of snobbery around diagnosed and self-diagnosis. I don't think there should be. You know I could tell people who are autistic, who have Aspergers. I recognise that way of thinking - we're all different, we're all different because we've got different experiences, we have different mixtures. You know autism doesn't come on its own often, it comes with Dyslexia or Dyspraxia or ADHD. And then you have the imposed mental health issues because people don't treat you very well so you're a mixture of all this stuff and to get that out as performance or whatever or work is the best thing. I was spotted by the Arts Catalyst, they came to a talk I did, they said "we'd like you to do a talk for us" and I said "ok, I'll do that" and next thing I know I'm doing a talk at Cheltenham Science Festival with Simon Baron-Cohen, Professor Simon Baron-Cohen. We get along very well, he invites me to go and see him, an hour convo turns into 5 hours, turns into "I want do

things with you, you're very interesting..." That's the first time someone had taken an interest in the way I thought. You know like I said all my life I've been told "nah, that's the wrong way to think about things Jon" and that creates a real disconnect inside your head because you know you can't think any other way. So what that does to you is that it makes you have very low self-confidence. And that's one of the things that need changing and it needs people to understand. So, we applied to the Wellcome [Trust], invited. I came up with a project off the top of my head— alongside Arts Catalyst and Simon— about systemising. We applied, we got the money. Unfortunately I acquired PTSD around the same time and that affected when I started. And I was working on mapping the Olympics on a geological metaphor— you see, it came in useful— I made a geological map of the Olympics.

D: Is that available anywhere?

J: It is. Yes. I made a map of my time, but engaging with it. So I turned my time, into geological time, into layers, and wrote everything I did down, for four years. Thousands and thousands, millions of minutes actually. But that's what we do and that's what got me my diagnose of Aspergers. So I went and I worked and I made music. It was really important actually because a lot of autism researchers don't meet autistic people to talk to. They meet them as subjects, or clients, as patients. So it was equally as good for them to talk to an autistic person as it was for me to talk to them as researchers. And in the end I made some video with a good friend of mine, and I made another music from an analogue synthesiser that was a representation of systemizing, and we did a performance live in London and also I made music from a MRI machine noise, as you do. I was learning, there was very little difference between doing a performance piece and doing a talk.

So this is 2013 and Simon, as he always does, introduced me to someone. Late 2013, he said "my friend's writing a play, I worked with him twenty years ago on a play, he would like to meet you, he's seen your writing." Because I documented the whole of that project in poetry on a-n's website, about 45,000

words. And two days later I found myself sitting in front of Mr. Peter Brook, thinking “what do I say to this man?” Because I’m shy. And I said... we went over to, after the introductions, we went over to a little restaurant and we sat down the three of us at a four seat table and I looked at this chair and immediately felt empathy for it– you know that’s synaesthesia– and I broke the silence by saying “an empty chair is often more alive than the person who sits in it” and he just lifted his hands.

D: That’s amazing.

J: That was it. So he wanted me as a subject to talk to and to learn from, because of the way I thought. Again he’s another person– I had to think logically about this, you know, I had to think– there’s 2 people, they’re very famous, they’re very well known and they’re very clever. They want to know how I think because they’re interested in the difference. Now I had to put that against a lifetime of people telling me I think wrong, and weigh up who was right. And it’s still difficult to do that.

So I met him a couple more times and then I started meeting with some of the actors. It was a follow on from his play with Oliver Sacks’ book *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. I never got to meet him unfortunately, but Peter conferred it with him and I worked with two of the actors Catherine Hunter and Marcello Magni. Peter was encouraging me to do more writing and perform. I was very lucky, I got to go out to Paris for a couple of rehearsals and feed into that and then to see it on stage, part of my contribution in a Peter Brook play. It was called *The Value of Astonishment* and on the second night we did the Q&A on stage and I have an immediate friendship with Peter and his writing partner Mary-Hélène, and they’ve encouraged me to write more and do more. At that point I was going through a bad situation with the PTSD, it got worse later in the year. They both encouraged me to write a play about synaesthesia. Now, I thought I’d do something a little bit different. I thought I’d write something about my working with Peter, about being told, you know almost like a documentary but as a play.

And then I got mixed up with the PTSD and other stuff and it was forming in my head and I was writing notes. And then I met someone, I wouldn't go out, but then I bumped into someone who I had worked with before and they asked "what are you doing now?" and I said "doing this...I've been told I should do performance stuff." "Oh that's interesting," they said, "would you consider doing something for us?" and I said "oh yes okay, it's always good to have an excuse." And he said "how about writing something about crossing boundaries?" Now when you say something to an autistic, Aspergers, Dyslexic, neurodivergent person, that triggers a lot of things. We're not good at blank sheets of paper.

D: Yeah

J: You know, you can probably understand that

D: sure...

J: But you give us a piece of paper with three dots and a line...

D: ...yeah....

J: ... and we're triggered. Give us a, you know... *crossing boundaries*. The immediate thing that came to my head was "someone got inside my head, crossed my boundary and triggered a sun that burns that I can't put out." So I started from that point and then I looked at the... You know we go off on all sorts of tangents and angles so I wrote this piece. It wasn't just a straight performance piece but a series of sixty short parts that intertwine, one for each minute of an hour. So it starts on the hour: one minute past, two minute past, three minute past. But each of those times a different day, different events. Some from me, some from other incidents. And I used the Japanese tsunami as metaphor throughout the whole thing. My uncle was sunk in the Second World War on a ship, HMS Cornwall 1942, it was the most accurate aerial bombing of a ship ever, it was about 95-100% accuracy. You know not

every bomb hit, but every bomb caused damage or landed close. The second bomb did for my uncle, he was very badly hurt, burnt, someone carried him up put him on a raft and pushed him off. So I thought well, he had PTSD for the rest of his life so I thought I'd interweave the story with that but I'd tell it from the Japanese Pilot's point of view.

So I wrote it, sent it off, they liked it, I said "Where am i doing it?" and they said "Venice Biennale" and I thought, "oh okay." So I'm unwell, I'm going to Venice. So I went to Venice, did it, it went well and I thought "I want to do more of this." And they said when they commissioned me, they commissioned me for a performance in Venice and in this country. It was part of a Venice Agendas, Mark Segal and Terry... they said "you're gonna do it at Turner Contemporary," now at the same time I changed it. I didn't change it as in the written statements, but the first time I performed it I just read it and then I thought, "okay, the second performance is at Turner Contemporary as part of their Risk season, what's the biggest risk an autistic person can do? That's look someone in the eye."

I put a circle of rope on the floor and a chair– that I've been taking photographs of because of the metaphor of "the chair is more alive than the person who sits in it"– and a series of just small props. They hadn't seen it but then I got people to stand around and I read each card into peoples faces and that's the version I do now. I've only added a bit of sound to it, I did it in a theatre, we're doing it in a couple weeks at Festival by the Sea and then taking it on tour the next year, but I enjoyed it.

D: What's the reaction to that been like?

J: It's been really really positive.

D: Great.

J: Had some lovely comments. And I've also written performance number two

which I did in Brighton, which was 45 statements about maths and synaesthesia to a load of mathematicians who laughed. Play numbers three and four, performance pieces three and four are on their way, being devised. So the crosses between artistic performance and.... relevant story... but I'm just learning. And the whole thing about acquiring PTSD and the difficulties autistic people have in the arts and our invisibility has, enabled me to set up a project. I was taken on by a theatre, as an associate artist, about three years ago – mainly because of the music and stuff – but they liked the performance work and encouraged me to do it. They are more 'play' than artistic performance, for example Blue Sky performance which I'd like to know more about, but they're encouraging and they've provided a little bit of sponsorship. Everybody has a project, so some of the theatre groups have plays as projects and mine was *Games of the Water Horse*. Water horse as in hippocampus, as in in your head, as in the place where PTSD rests and water horses coming out the sea take you and drown you. So its those games, the games you play with the stuff in you head and with the people trying to drown you.

I started up something called *Flow Observatorium* with them and it really started just as a project. When us aspey's get something a bit between the teeth, we want to change things. You know there's an absence of understanding. It was around the same time I met Steve Silberman and at the same time I was asked to be a creative ambassador for the NAS. Meeting Steve settled it in my head "this is what I want to do". And I realised– there is a lot of autism politics– a lot of people have said awful things about Steve because he is not autistic so how dare a non-autistic person write about autism? But why not? You know? And there's one reason I think he's done it so well, because he understands the barriers that we face as autistic people. He's a gay man, and if you consider the gay rights movement in the last thirty years and where they've come from and where they've been. You know autism is innate. I'm not broken, I'm just human, I'm just a variation, you know, I'm neuro-diverse, I'm neuro-divergent rather. Neuro-diversity is all of us, neuro-divergent is people who differ from the majority. It's about me, it's

the same as being a gay person. You know it's them it's not something you can separate. I hate the term "a person with autism." I'm not with autism, I am autistic. You know I don't live with autism, I live with my wife and two cats.

[laugh] I live with PTSD, I keep trying to evict it but some bugger keeps giving it a backdoor key. You know that there are these little things that make a difference so as a gay man he knows the barriers, that as a way of life you face in an hostile world, where there's people who don't accept things. And I thought "Well we need to take that metaphor and move it forward." It's not really about disability, the disability comes when you need to meet expectations of other people. It's not innate within us. Like I said we don't need a cure, we're not broken, we face difficulties. We need support, but we need a different kind of support. So I thought "Oh well I'm gonna start this up" and campaign. And it's going really well.

D: Great.

J: I can't reveal an awful lot more I've written a huge article for the Arts Council that may have come out by the time that you do this. But things are changing for us, you know. If we expect the disability world to understand us we're on the wrong foot. In the Arts Council article I argue that we need organisations run by neurodivergent people for neurodivergent people because they are the only ones that understand us fully. You know I can't... neuro-typical people can't understand what goes on in the head of someone that is neurodivergent. Why should they? Why would they? You know... You're only used to the way of thinking that you have. You see the world according to the way you think, through your filters. And in the same way that you can't be expected to see in my head, I can't be expected to see in your head and experience the world through your eyes. I can do a damn good guess. And as autistic people we're pretty good at it because all our life we've had to pass as... and I hate the word normal, normal is a setting on a tumble drier [laugh]...but you know we had to pass looking as if we were not different. Because at school you get teased or in later life you get told that you're not worth as much and it's about understanding not awareness. So, I would not

be without my neurodivergence, it gives me an edge and if you want to see work that is truly and utterly different then you need to commission people who see the world very, very differently, but you need to think differently about the way you commission and the way you work with them and that's the change that's needed. The disability arts world ignores us, the mainstream world doesn't ignore us because they don't know we exist. They see our work but they don't know about us. But we make good work, we make good performance strangely enough.

D: Why do you think that is?

J: I think it's because... A lot of us are polymath, a lot of us cross a lot of boundaries in the work we make because we see the world so differently we don't see it in categories. This is strictly painting, this is strictly performance, this is a play, this is poetry. You know we see the world as one, it's very holistic. So I think when people say "can you do this?", "no, but we're gonna give it a damn good go." It's about being let out of our shell. I'm not going to use the oppressed word... or actually I think I will because we've been invisibly oppressed. Because we've been told we can't. We're not very good at self-advocacy, we need people like Steve to stand up and talk out for us. Not talk for us, there's a difference. People speaking out about us and for us and treating us as peers and standing with us. You know people who speak for us and they assume what we want—that's wrong. I've seen projects for autistic people, devised by neuro-typical people, who haven't got a clue what they're up to. We should be doing that. And I think one of the ways of expressing the wealth and the richness that is in our heads is through performance. It's not spinning a story, we're spinning about our lives. It's about the innateness within us.

We're not telling stories, we're enacting them. And I don't see any difference between walking down the street and seeing things and making work about them. Or whether I have an audience for that or not, it doesn't matter. You know, it's part of life. And like I said I'm new to performance, but I think that

neurodivergent bit in us gives us a bit of an advantage, we just need bringing out of our shell, we need making visible and to get the appropriate support. And the appropriate support only comes from people understanding. Awareness isn't good enough. There are a lot of places that are autism friendly, there are a lot of organisations that say they're autism friendly, but they're friendly on their terms they're not friendly in autistic people's terms. They should be autistically enabling, not just autism friendly and that's hopefully where *Flow* will push for this. And you know, hopefully people when they want to know more on how they can run and work with neurodivergent people, won't just go to the nearest disability organisation because they won't find the answers there, they need to ask us, join with us, show our work. But do it in a way that encourages us to show our work.

D: I think I'm really hoping that one way that this Study Guide gets used is by people who run festivals and producers to think about how they can make their, how they can do those things you were talking about. A few people I've interview have spoken about the difficulties of applications and how that seems to be an odd...

J: ...it needs changing...

D: ...yeah. Just wondered if you had some... what would you say to people who were looking for advice?

J: If I was a neurodivergent person listening to this and I had never told anyone or explained it to anyone before, I would say "you'll find where you are, keep chipping away, but find your tribe, start talking to other members." You know, I'm fifty-six. I've met people who've been surprised that there's an autistic person at fifty-six. No, you don't grow out of it when you leave school, hello! [laugh] Do you grow out of this and that...? You know a lot of people are in isolation and a lot of people find it very difficult to break it into the arts because they're not very good at social networking, which is a huge issue. You know you're expected to put a smile on and say hello to everyone, where

as an autistic person that is quite difficult or as a dyslexic person who's been shunned—that's incredibly hard. You know most people will have depression or have other mental health issues that have been imposed on them because of the way they've been treated. And autistic people go into shut down we don't wanna talk, it takes a lot of effort like, 90% of you brain power to sit in front of someone and talk. It's like asking a computer that is doing a virus check update to then open photoshop, you know it'll crash. So we face that difficulty for a start and hopefully that'll get better the more people speak out and say— this is where we need support.

Applications are difficult for the reasons I gave earlier. We have it in our head, we just can't get it out in the way that other people need to see it. Now, either we need appropriate support to do that... It's not just an admin thing with dyslexia, it's more than that. It's a teasing out, a drawing out and hopefully we can campaign for changes. There's methodology and practicality in application processes like, the Arts Council needs to address certain things in the issues in the way you apply for Grant for the Arts. We're not brilliant at the admin, we need admin support. We're brilliant at the art bit. But then you trust someone to help you with the admin, then they shaft you, that can lead to a lot of disappointment and a lot of issues.

Describing in words what you see and taste and smell in 3D— it's difficult. To write something minimalist is harder than to write a lot. To get something where you explain to someone what's going on in your head in 50 words on a piece of paper, I think there need to be alternatives.

D: Some festivals like Buzzcut and a few other festivals offer the option of sending a video instead.

J: That's good. It is good. But as I say, don't be shy talking about your work. If you're going to do a video for someone...yes, make it succinct, don't just waffle, the worst thing you can do is waffle. But also show them in your voice, let them taste how ardent you are, how good you are and how different you are. You have to win them over, and in some ways doing a video is harder.

None of these are easy options in some respects. I prefer, and the reason I got my chance to do things is because I sat in front of people. You know give me a 10 minute pitch, and I prepare beforehand and I use simple metaphors very quickly to bring people on side. But that doesn't come along all the time. In fact, it comes along very rarely because more often than not you've got to fill something in and apply for it just to get a flipping interview— so you're stymied from the start. And it is the applications and social networking. As an artist you're expect to be out there and talking. As a neurodivergent person that is very different and very, very, difficult. I don't join in with things unless I'm invited. I don't just turn up at stuff, like a lot of other people do. And we're very honest, sometimes that honesty can get us into trouble. Sometimes it can perform miracles, but most of the times it gets us into trouble and it's hard for us to discern. I'm not mildly autistic, you're either autistic or you're not. But I've learnt tricks on how to be in front of people, but then when the depression bites you can't even do that. So people have to understand that not although you see the world differently, the world has always seen you different and there are consequences.

D: Great. Fantastic. Just final thing is if you've got anything that you feel that the Live Art Development Agency Study Room would really benefit from, if people want to find out more about Neurodiversity or about more about performance in relation to that?

J: Firstly, if you are going to do lots of searches there are probably neurodivergent artists out there, who don't know they're neurodivergent. A lot of people who are autistic and dyslexic don't want to define as disabled. And this is where the disability politics come in because at the moment if you want to get support you have to put your hand up as being disabled. I don't want to do that. And you know until the options change, which we're working on, until that changes it's very difficult. I would look at other people's work just through the eyes and see if you can see any autistic traits, or any Dyslexic traits, or anything like that. When you've lived a little bit that'll become obvious. But don't copy people, do what's inside you. Yeah, it'll be different but you're right.

You don't have to mould your work to what other people expect. It goes back to, you see the world very differently so don't try and be clever. Just portray your work, the world through the work, the way you see it. You know, I did a sound installation in the Tate. It was a playday, arranged through a project and every time I've gone in the Tate I hear seagulls because of my synaesthesia in the space. Couldn't explain why, don't want to know. So what I did for that day was I just played the sound of seagulls in there so that other people would hear what I've heard. "How did you think of that?" "Well I didn't. It's me" So I would say, go with what you are. Don't try and be clever. There's enough neuro-typicals out there trying to be clever. And you know, be authentic, be honest to your own voice inside you. And you can spot that in people, you can spot that in work. That's why some work stands out and some doesn't. It's not contrived. You know who's the best expert in yourself? You are. Who's the best expert in the way you see the world? You are. Use it.

D: I find it really brilliant as an approach. I mean I think any approach is great but rather than making work about synaesthesia, synaesthesia is just part of the methodology, part of the form.

J: You've hit it on the spot. This is why I kind of fell out with the disability arts world, because they make work about being disabled. I don't make work about being disabled. Yeah in my early days I produced a periodic table of 'disenablement.' That's a piece of disability arts, it's about it, but you don't have to make work about synaesthesia to show your synaesthesia. You don't have to make work about autism to show the talent and creativeness that comes with autism. For some people autism is very difficult, some people with autism have very difficult communication issues. It's a wide spectrum, some people aren't able to voice what's going on in their head and we have to respect that too. But it is yeah, use it. And a really silly analogy is like the force really I guess isn't it? You know the more you try music the less you'll be able to be, you just have to lean back and do it.

**Conversation 2: Jessica Thom (Touretteshero)
I can't really get away biscuit from the impact of how my brain works**

Link to Audiofile

Introduction: 2

Key Quotes: 3

Full Conversation: 6

Jess Thom – Introduction

Jess is co-founder of Touretteshero. She is an activist, artist, theatre-maker, writer, and playworker.



Examples of Jess Thom's work in the study room are:

Welcome to Biscuit Land: A Year in the Life of Touretteshero (Publication, P3441)

What's Changed (Publication, P3089)

Unlimited 2016 Programme (Publication, P3046)

Jess Thom has had tics since she was a child, and was diagnosed with Tourettes in her twenties. Her performance works include *Backstage in Biscuit Land*, which had a run at the Barbican, toured, and was on BBC2 as part of *Live From the Television Centre*; and a neurodiverse performance of Samuel Beckett's *Not I*. Touretteshero's website and blog is a great resource on Tourettes, disability arts, advocacy, activism, and neurodiversity - www.touretteshero.com. She has also written a book on her experiences as a theatre maker and activist living with Tourettes called *Welcome to Biscuit Land: A Year in the Life of Touretteshero* (P3441).

Key Quotes

If you click on these quotes it will take you to the corresponding place in the full transcription. To skip straight to the full transcription click [here](#).

What does neurodiversity mean to you?

For me neurodiversity means taking into account that peoples' brains work in different ways biscuit and that biscuit there's not one type of way of thinking or way of doing stuff or way of processing information. Neurodiversity is about cele... for me is a term that positively frames difference and particularly includes conditions that might historically be just considered within an impairment model and re-casts them as differences that might be positive and celebratory and interesting and leads to biscuit different outcomes. Biscuit.

I think neurodiverse is a useful term because it challenges assumptions within language. Language is important because it binds people in how you think about something and it's interesting because it helps reframe that, but it's not a replacement for interesting practice and so I think it is a useful way of pointing at an element within in a practice, but I don't think it is descriptive of the practice biscuit, because actually, fundamentally, we are all neurodiverse – we are a diversity of something – innately everybody's minds and brains work differently – neurodiverse is short hand for saying somebody has a condition or you know, or that I can identify a condition that means that, that that, there is a fundamental difference between them and how I would be.

How does neurodiversity manifest in your practice?

Well I can't really get away biscuit from the impact of how my brain works and how my brain works differently from how other peoples' works, because it's biscuit linked with every aspect of my life and inevitably within every aspect of my performance

I'm neurologically... at a neurological advantage in terms of my creative practice because I have ticks to draw on as a resource and I have access to that spontaneity and I have no option but to acknowledge, embrace and work and play with that within what I do.

I'll also just reflect on the, a little bit on the idea of sort of the educational context. I think for me – rather than simply wanting to educate it's more about contextualising biscuit my ticks and Tourettes. And I think that yeah, that has an educational benefit but I think the reason that I do it is because to be able to play freely and to really go in interesting directions or let my biscuit let my ticks tell interesting stories or go in interesting directions that has to be put in a context of understanding.

I think, for me, in my practice, I'm interested in making people feel more comfortable with difference.

On Collaboration

... firstly I tend to work very collaboratively. So I've got a long term collaborative relationships with Matthew Pountney, who's the co-founder of Touretteshero. But also we work collaboratively with loads of different people from different disciplines biscuit, so including visual artists and performance artists and scientists and researchers and academics biscuit in lots of different fields and I think that's key to our approach.

It is really important for me to trust in those relationships and feel... and them be genuine. Biscuit. The way that my brain works and the fact that I have Tourettes means biscuit I do need some support with some aspects. I can be... my ticks can be distractible biscuit, but they also call things out. If there was tension or animosity Tourettes will call that out in a way that I wouldn't choose to – and that can be quite challenging. So it's really important that people understand... have an understanding of the condition, have an understanding of my support – of access needs – but also are fully on board with our mission to embrace the humour and creativity and do that in an accessible, interesting and hopefully assumption-busting way.

Other artists referenced

Jane Gauntlett
Katharine Araniello
James Vacuum Cleaner
Jess Mabel Jones
Access All Areas
Cian Binchy
Robert Softley Gale – *Birds of Paradise*
Francesca Martinez

Advice for producers/ facilitators/ programmers/ funders

I think in terms of resources I'm really interested in how access can be integrated as a creative tool and how that can be creatively integrated into the work we make and Unlimited has produced some amazing resources that enable producers and artists and directors to start to consider that within their work and I think that the more that artists feel confident thinking about access provision as a creative part of what they do rather than something that happens to their piece of work afterwards will lead to really interesting outcomes.

I'm really keen that venues or programmers think about invisible barriers. I think if you haven't had direct lived experience of a disability or neurodiversity or difference biscuit then it is very easy to not be aware of how inaccessible your work is and that biscuit and that's not always about physical access, people are often super aware of – no not super aware – more likely to be aware of whether they are performing in an accessible, physically accessible space – although you'd be surprised lots of people when asked is it accessible don't quickly know the answer to that, but I think there's physical

barriers – and I think they're more easy to think about and discuss – but my experience is that there is a lot of invisible barriers that are about peoples' assumptions about who has permission to be in what sort of spaces.

... but I'd really like other venues to think more, to think more about those and to try and consider what sort of messages they might be, might be putting out, invisible messages, unconscious messages that might be being about the spaces that they have and who you'll be excluding or putting off and to try and think of ways to create warm invitations to see work to be in those spaces or to programme work that perhaps relates to that. For example as someone who makes constant noise – I am, I historically find it really difficult to access spaces that are perceived as quiet and even though I make lots of work within theatre spaces, I'm still very protective of that, my confidence, access to performance

Advice for other Neurodivergent Artists

.. I think that people making work about subjects that they don't have direct experience of – when it relates to impairment and disability is... can be challenging. And so I would encourage people to be making or be thinking about the issues if they... if it relates to their experience of... relates to elements of their practice, where they have a strong affinity.

...my advice to somebody else thinking about making that work would be to be open, challenge yourself, be ready to get it wrong, but also think about what change you want to sustain or create.

On Disability

I'm aware that within this discussion that I've used the term disabled a lot, and I think that there maybe some people, particularly non-disabled people that find that quite challenging because they understanding it in a negative context, but for me I understand disability in the social model, which says disability is caused by a failure, a collective failure to consider difference in how things are set up

FULL DISCUSSION

Jessica Thom: Hedgehogs cats

Daniel: Ok, so first question is – what does (J: biscuit) neurodiversity mean to you?

J: Biscuit. For me neurodiversity means taking into account that peoples' brains work in different ways biscuit and that biscuit there's not one type of way of thinking or way of doing stuff or way of processing information. Neurodiversity is about cele... for me is a term that positively frames difference and particularly includes conditions that might historically be just considered within an impairment model and re-casts them as differences that might be positive and celebratory and interesting and leads to biscuit different outcomes. Biscuit.

D: Great (J: hedgehog). How do you feel your own (J: biscuit) performance practice relates to (J: hedgehog) neurodiversity?

J: Biscuit. Well I can't really get away biscuit from the impact of how my brain works and how my brain works differently from how other peoples' works, because it's biscuit linked within every aspect of my life and inevitably within every aspect of my performance because I have Tourettes and therefore biscuit biscuit my ticks are audible and visible biscuit in an inescapable way biscuit. But it's also part of my practice biscuit biscuit biscuit and part of how I make or think about work biscuit means I can access that spontaneous creativity, that Tourettes means that I have more readily available biscuit than perhaps someone without the condition biscuit. So actually, I feel that my ... I'm neurologically... at a neurological advantage in terms of my creative practice because I have ticks to draw on as a resource and I have access to that spontaneity and I have no option but to acknowledge, embrace and work and play with that within what I do. Biscuit.

D: Great. Because I think (J: biscuit, hedgehog) I really appreciate the way that you (J: Biscuit)... in your show¹ you give a kind of access to the experience of Tourettes (J: Biscuit) and you tell your story and it kind of has this educational aspect to it (J: Biscuit) and then also, as you say, Tourettes has this kind of (J: Biscuit) ... it's kind of part of the process or part (J: Yeah. Biscuit) of the way you put it together, could you talk (J: Biscuit) more about the process and how you make shows?

J: Yes biscuit, and I'll also just reflect on the, a little bit on the idea of sort of the educational context. I think for me – rather than simply wanting to educate it's more about contextualising biscuit my ticks and Tourettes. And I think that yeah, that has an educational benefit but I think the reason that I do it is because to be able to play freely and to really go in interesting directions or let my biscuit let my ticks tell interesting stories or go in interesting directions that has to be put in a context of understanding. And we are not in a position

¹ *Backstage in Biscuit Land*, The Pit, Barbican, Sept 2015.

where that can be assumed and so it's important that people hear my perspective, my experience, from me in a way biscuit that feels relevant to my work so that they are then in a position where they can understand, enjoy, feel comfortable or challenged or excited by biscuit the place that we go, rather than just being straightforwardly confused (*laughs*). Biscuit. And I think it can take people from feeling frightened or awkward or uncertain to feeling comfortable, excited and enjoying that experience. And I think, for me, in my practice, I'm interested in making people feel more comfortable with difference.

D: Great

J: But perhaps also if there's discomfort to be found within my work I want that to be about people reflecting on assumptions or views that might be held biscuit, but in a friendly and non-confrontational way. Biscuit.

In terms of how biscuit how Tourettes and my ticks ... are used within biscuit my work biscuit: firstly I tend to work very collaboratively. So I've got a long term collaborative relationships with Matthew Pountney, who's the co-founder of Touretteshero. But also we work collaboratively with loads of different people from different disciplines biscuit, so including visual artists and performance artists and scientists and researchers and academics biscuit in lots of different fields and I think that's key to our approach. Biscuit. When we come to making stuff biscuit whether that's particularly relating to a sort of text or video or audio biscuit or shows biscuit we often let my... Ticks are quite suggestible biscuit so they can be provoked, we can biscuit we can generate text using the ticks. So some examples of that - we wrote a play called *Light of my Life* biscuit which was a relay play commissioned by the Nightingale Theatre in Brighton as part of their host strand biscuit and I wanted to address an aspect of Tourettes that is perhaps not obvious and I chose to choose this strange relationship that I have with the lamppost that I can see outside my bedroom window biscuit. And we don't mention Tourettes explicitly in that but we use lots of the ticks that were generated through the one sided conversations I have with the lamppost within that text and combining that with storytelling and light to have interesting exchange between two people, biscuit, but also for the piece that we did for [Live from the Television Centre](#), which was the BBC's experimental night of live theatre at the end of last year... at the end of 2015 biscuit. We had the opportunity to biscuit pull together the whole finale for the end of the evening for the whole two hours and we let my ticks basically conduct that. It was a tick driven finale, so we have a lot... Matthew creates a lot of provocations for my ticks and for my brain which were like 'the host', 'the finale', 'the this', 'the that' - and it was me like biscuit - and then I involuntarily responded to those prompts - because I'm not capable of not - and then that generated really interesting suggestions - some absolutely ridiculous suggestions about what should happen and some that we went with like dancing biscuits and biscuits in builder's hats and... yeah lots of those elements were present that came from working and playing with ticks as generators for ideas, language and content. Biscuit. Hedgehog. Fuck.

D: Great. And so (J: Biscuit) with your collaborations (J: Biscuit), especially the people that you collaborate with that are on stage with you or that are part of the creative process... do you think there are particular skills that they need to have (J: Hedgehog)? What do you look for in those kinds of collaborations? (J: Biscuit)

J: Biscuit. It is really important for me to trust in those relationships and feel... and them be genuine. Biscuit. The way that my brain works and the fact that I have Tourettes means biscuit I do need some support with some aspects. I can be, my ticks can be distractible biscuit, but they also call things out. If there was tension or animosity Tourettes will call that out in a way that I wouldn't choose to – and that can be quite challenging. So it's really important that people understand... have an understanding of the condition, have an understanding of my support – of access needs – but also are fully on board with our mission to embrace the humour and creativity and do that in an accessible, interesting and hopefully assumption-busting way.

D: Yeah (J: biscuit), so is improvisation sort of an important part of that?

J: Yeah biscuit I think it is. I think it's a natural skill – like Jess Mabel Jones – who I co-perform with in back stage in biscuit land – she said it was like a crash course. It was like the most extreme crash course in improv – and she hadn't got that as a natural, as a previous part of her background. But it's certainly something she is very skilled in and also very natural – I think some of those... I'm really interested in conversations with people who are used to honing improvisation skills and spontaneity. The thing with Tourettes is it does seem to work in a slightly different way, drawing on anything that comes. There are some patterns, some ways that improve works and Tourettes doesn't necessarily follow, follow those patterns, so yeah, having been flexible and adaptable and being ready to go with the flow are important qualities in our collaborations. But not everybody has to be, not everyone we work with has to be excellent at being biscuit improvisers. But I think they certainly have to be open to the unexpected biscuit hahaha. Cats Aladdin fuck it. Biscuit and I hate geranuims essentially I hate geraniums. That's not as important.

D: Ok

J: Ok (*laughs*)

D: So I guess one of these things that we were talking about, that come up at Long Tables a lot is, quite often, is the idea that there are potential limitations of neurodiversity as a concept or there are things to be wary of, I guess – when we are thinking about or talking about, or celebrating neurodiversity – do you think there are any?

J: Fuck – I think biscuit I think there's limitations, challenges or limitations about anything when you think about it really binary or dependent, in a dependent way. I think neurodiverse is a useful term because it challenges assumptions within language. Language is important because it binds people in how you think about something and it's interesting because it helps reframe

that, but it's not a replacement for an interesting practice. I think it is a useful way of pointing at an element within a practice, but I don't think it is descriptive of the practice biscuit. Because actually, fundamentally, we are all neurodiverse – we are a diversity of something – innately everybody's minds and brains work differently – neurodiverse is short hand for saying somebody has a condition or you know, or that I can identify a condition that means that, that there is a fundamental difference between them and how I would be. And unfortunately how the standard way of thinking might be... if we get to a situation where difference is more readily biscuit accepted and understood within our society it will be a less relevant term, because those disabling barriers that have existed for people who think differently or whose minds work differently biscuit ... hopefully if there is a culture of being inclusive that will less... there will be less disabling barriers because of that. Biscuit

D: Great

J: Fuck – I don't know if that quite answered the question or not.

D: No. No it was good

J: Hahaha biscuit I don't see, I don't feel that the limits on the term I don't feel any limits by identifying as you know diverse I don't feel there... I don't feel like yea – I don't think it is a limiting a word, I think if it was the only word we use then it would be boring.

D: Yeah, yeah sure – I think that's great – that really (J: hedgehog) makes sense. I think we were talking about the idea, or the term neurotypical and whether that's a useful term or a playful term or...

J: I think it's a playful term and I like that there are some words that I like because they gently eschew the current assumptions, so I like neurotypical. I like mainstream, because who wants to be mainstream, who wants to be typical? And it's like, I like them because they do something interesting. At the moment within language and within disability culture I don't know if that's always going to be the case because I hope that those ingrained assumptions will change and peoples' viewpoints will change and then it won't be gentle and playful it will just be a bit weird. But at the moment I really like that because it turns things gently upside down and just biscuit will make people will do something to people – to non-disabled peoples' internal thinking that is subtle, but will be noticeable. I think, it's like "fuck! Typical". "Oh is that what I am, I'm neurotypical?" Biscuit, hedgehog, fuck.

D: Do you.. Could you recommend any other neurodiverse artists or artist that work with neurodiversity that we might look at as part of the...

J: I think [Jane Gauntlett's](#) work is really interesting, I don't know if you've come across Jane. She is a performance and live artist, probably, immersive theatre performer and film maker who makes, [who has an acquired brain injury](#) who makes really interesting work called [In My Shoes](#) which allows people to look at different perspectives... whether that's related to disabilities

or not ... she's making really interesting work. Biscuit I think really interesting work is that of the theatre company [Access All Areas](#), who are a company who works with learning disabled artists, who collaborate with learning disabled artists and – [Cian Binchy's](#) [The Misfit Analysis](#) came out of Access All Areas and was an interesting show and I think they are a really interesting company to watch and to be aware of... who else cats you know you've talked about [James The Vacuum Cleaner's](#) work and [Katherine Araniello](#) who has been making, amazing and thought provoking and excellent and challenging and funny work for a long time

D: Yeah

J: Fuck yeah biscuit I'm also interested in the work that [Robert Softley Gale and his company Birds of Paradise](#) are making and more recently a show called [Purposeless Movements](#), which I haven't seen but I'm really excited about

D: Thanks. Ok. Any kind of resources that you think would be useful for the archive – books or anything?

J: Biscuit hedgehog – I'm not very good at these things unfortunately thinking off the top of my head. I think Francesca Martinez's book *What the Fuck is Normal?*² is an easy read and is a good read for people who are thinking about perspectives on difference and it's a very accessible read in terms of how it's written. I think in terms of resources I'm really interested in how access can be integrated as a creative tool and how that can be creatively integrated into the work we make and [Unlimited](#) has produced some amazing resources that enable producers and artists and directors to start to consider that within their work. And I think that the more artists that feel confident thinking about access provision as a creative part of what they do rather than something that happens to their piece of work afterwards will lead to really interesting outcomes. Fuck.

D: So if there was say a programmer or a producer or someone who runs a venue looking at this study guide and you wanted them to think about something in terms of say accessibility... let's say for artists... or programmers programming is there any advice that you would give or anything you would like them to think about?

J: Hedgehog. I'm really keen that venues or programmers think about invisible barriers. I think if you haven't had direct lived experience of a disability or neurodiversity or difference biscuit then it is very easy to not be aware of how inaccessible your work is and that biscuit and that's not always about physical access. People are often super aware of – no not super aware – more likely to be aware of whether they are performing in an accessible, physically accessible space – although you'd be surprised lots of people when asked is it accessible don't quickly know the answer to that. But I think there's physical barriers – and I think they are more easy to think about and discuss – but my

² Francesca Martinez, *What the Fuck is Normal?* (London: Virgin Books, 2014)

experience is that there is a lot of invisible barriers that are about peoples' assumptions about who has permission to be in what sort of spaces. And they're assumptions and permissions that I'm really interested in playing with in my work. But I'd really like other venues to think more, to think more about those and to try and consider what sort of messages they might be, might be putting out, invisible messages, unconscious messages that might be being about the spaces that they have and who you'll be excluding or putting off and to try and think of ways to create warm invitations to see work to be in those spaces or to programme work that perhaps relates to that. For example as someone who makes constant noise – I am, I historically find it really difficult to access spaces that are perceived as quiet and that and even though I make lots of work within theatre spaces, I'm still very protective of that, my confidence, access to performance and so to – that's not something that every... lots of people would automatically think about within their work... Thinking about how – thinking about who your audience is and what they might need to be able to access your work. But also how you can, yeah how you can be playful and creative with that.

It's not a straight forward answer biscuit – I biscuit fuck biscuit – I think the other thing that I'm really keen, the other thing that I'm really interested in, particularly venues and programmers to think about ... disabled people face so many barriers and systemic barriers in their life – and in creative life that it can mean lots of experiences are harder to access in the first place and I think sometimes when venues and programmers are looking, particularly if they're looking at lots of application for a particular programme or opportunity it can be easy to straight forwardly think about people's experience in terms of how they compare this to other people, other applicants. And particularly if venues or programmers have existing relationships with artists that means that they're more open to them. Some of the barriers that exist for disabled artists are then magnified. That lack of opportunity or how much harder it is to get experience so you might fight and get one experience, but if a non-disabled person has very easily managed to do three of four things in that same space of time. I think being aware of those and actually acknowledging that quality of work doesn't necessarily... it , you know thinking really broadly about how that might be weighed up, who might be accessing those spaces because visibility of difference and visibility of disabled culture within our disabled spaces is really important. I think lots of people – I think it's sometimes missed in wider conversation around diversity. I think it's increasing, I think lots of people would feel comfortable saying celebrating multicultural diversity is positive, celebrating the experiences of people of different genders, with different gender identities is really positive. But I think for lots of people saying, acknowledging or saying we are celebrating disability culture would still feel a bit odd and possibly uncomfortable because disability is widely known and understood in a negative context, rather than the fact or understanding that we all have different minds and bodies and think about things in different ways.

D: Yeah

J: Hedgehog, biscuit, sorry a little bit rambly.

D: No

J: Hedgehog cats fuck.

D: And then I guess my final question which sort of feels slightly odd asking this question – through your experience of making work and again this has got a vast range of differences here – but if someone was wanting to make work based on their neurodiversity would you have any advice for them?

J: I would firstly say like check that you identify as a neurodiverse person, check that you're, check that.. I think that people making work about subjects that they don't have direct experience of – when it relates to impairment and disability is... can be challenging and so I would encourage people to be making or be thinking about the issues if they... if it relates to their experience of... relates to elements of their practice, where they have a strong affinity. I would also encourage people to talk, be open, challenge their own thinking biscuit and think effectively about the language that they use and if they are not happy with the way that someone is being described explore that within their work. But also think about the potential for what we make – I'm really interested in how art and creativity can be a spark for change, and can be a catalyst for social change and attitude change and something, so I'm really interested in how we can put some of that – use high quality work to really spark ideas in other people – so I think my advice to somebody else thinking about making that work would be would be to be open, challenge yourself, be ready to get it wrong, but also think about what change you want to sustain or create.

D: Anything else you think it's important to say?

J: Biscuit biscuit no I don't think so I'm... in fact I mean, I'm aware that within this discussion that I've used the term disabled a lot, and I think that there maybe some people, particularly non-disabled people that find that quite challenging because they understanding it in a negative context, but for me I understand disability in the social model, which says disability is caused by a failure, a collective failure to consider difference in how things are set up – and that people who have an impairment, like Tourettes, or anything other condition are more or less disabled in different circumstances unless something has been set up to consider them. For me acknowledging that I am a disabled person and that I face those barriers is important – both for acknowledging my own experience, but also being part of finding solutions.
Hedgehog Cats

D: Thank you

J: I love beans fuck it. Fuck eggs.