

Neurodiversity

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Neurodiversity is a radical social movement, grounded in the idea that natural variations in the human genome (as well as acquired characteristics) position us all on a nuanced neurological spectrum. We are not, as previously envisaged, consigned to one or other side of a binary divide, distinguishing the 'normal' from the 'abnormal' or those with a 'disorder'. We are simply within the *neurotypical* [NT] or *neurodivergent* [ND] range, potentially combining characteristics of both. No longer viewed as a deviation from the norm, neurodivergent experience such as autism may now be espoused in its own terms, as a positive identity. Yet the term 'neurodiversity' (coined by Judy Singer in 1988) has taken thirty years to permeate mainstream consciousness. Its radical implications are still to register in a culture where neurological difference, like mental illness, is deeply stigmatized.

Autism activist John Elder Robison highlights the scale of the task:

"campaigns to accept diversity in race or orientation were simpler...With neurodiversity we must change beliefs at the same time we find ways to solve significant functioning problems."

But who defines a functioning problem? The neurotypical body, associated with certain capacities and sensitivities, is marked outwardly by certain kinds of behavior and self-regulation. Its pre-eminence has been ensured by constructing every possible social system to accommodate such a body—and with a sleight of hand that makes it appear as if the NT individual is neither helped nor privileged but is instead a model of self-sufficiency, gliding effortlessly through social spaces without need for special provisions. Yet as any neurodivergent learner knows, systems and practices, buildings and public spaces are designed quite specifically to facilitate the neurotypical—not necessarily the smartest, most sensitive or creative but the *normalized*, to whom the rituals of sitting, attending, engaging and reciprocating come easiest.

Sensing relatively little, tuning out background noise to attend to single channel, verbal communication with reassuring amounts of eye contact, the neurotypical, we are led to believe, excel at so-called 'social-emotional reciprocity'.

But only with those of similarly narrow perceptual range. Like any unchallenged elite, neurotypicals have little insight into the lived experience of others. As the autistic blogger, Mel Baggs points out:

"Because language has mostly been created by nonautistic people, there's not necessarily an easy way to show the things that autistic people are better at perceiving and prioritizing than nonautistic people are. Because there are often literally no words for the experiences until we invent them".

Hence, the greater sensory-perceptual range and intensity that characterizes the mental life of many autistics is perceived as a failure of attention. Body styles or behaviours that appear oblivious to the NT social world are perceived as maladjusted. Autism advocate, Dawn-Joy Leong makes a point of calling this the neurotypical empathy deficit in tribute to the theory that labeled autism with this deficit.

Dawn is an autistic artist. Think for a moment (given the above) about what that entails:

"there are often literally no words for the experiences until we invent them"; "campaigns to accept diversity in race or orientation were simpler"; "we change beliefs at the same time we find ways to solve significant functioning problems..."

Neurodiverse arts are, by such measures, always radical. They invent languages to convey diversity of perception and embodied experience. They find ways to communicate across a spectrum of difference. They politicise that difference, which is to say they challenge the assumptions and privilege of NT culture. They activate new environments and social settings. They create spaces in which people can function better; what Dawn calls 'clement spaces' in the midst of inclement sensory environments. They establish the foundations of the neurodiverse-city.

It is the unique potential of such art to simultaneously imagine, invent and intervene in the interests of social change. It is the potential of institutions and wider publics to be transformed in this process.