



# The Ableism of Networks

Some days I cannot string a sentence together, I cannot put one word after another. People encounter me on these days. I try to speak, I struggle, I fail. Some days I head out to an event, a talk, an opening, something. I get half way or even reach the door then turn back. The anxiety of being there is too much. I try to go, I struggle, I fail.

It's not the people, it's the dynamic of the situation that holds me back. The art world is full of these dynamics. They form the economy of its circuits. For those of us who cannot plug in, whose own circuitry follows a different design, these dynamics are disabling. The ability to be part of the art world requires the ability to perform and be present in its networks. To capture and exploit their flows. The networks are not neutral. They are governed by tacit protocols that select, filter and exclude. Those who know how to play the protocols will flourish, those who don't, those who cannot even read them or who struggle to perform them, are placed in permanent error.

Failure is our connection. Double-empathy our protocol. Spoon the network.

# Stimwork

## Movement

The close of a Gorgie tenement is cold yet clean enough and holds a still, quiet air. My brother's friends lived on the second floor. They had left school and taken on a rented flat. I would arrive there on a Saturday afternoon, having wandered across town. Sometimes they were in, sometimes not. I would sit outside their door and wait. Sometimes two hours, sometimes three. I would read but mostly I would draw. I had a small notebook, stitched together from found paper. I would draw small, repetitive patterns alongside, parallel to, the edges of the page. Their shapes were those of architectural ornaments, like those I passed on my way across town. When my brother's friends arrived they would send me to the shops to buy alcohol.

At a young age my daughter would sit at her infant table and happily fill stacks of paper with lines and colour. These were not random squiggles. These were not pictures. These were formations. Each had a distinct rhythm and balance. They were formations of a presence in the world. A change, however small, in the matter, light and colour of her environment that echoed back to her. Her hands, the paper and pencils, put into action as a making, a doing of “here”.

As a child I had an affinity with walls. I would sit on my knees, alongside, parallel to the wall, feeling the space between us as though it were a substance. One that I could gently squeeze and release through subtle movements of my body. I could feel the wall through my cheek held a few centimetres away from it. At other times, my relationship to walls was more percussive, banging my head against it again and again and again to shake loose the burnt-out wiring of my brain.

My grandfather had an affinity with walls. My mother's father. An ordered, dapper yet stern man who never spoke directly to me his entire life. A man who had worked his way from apprentice electrician to senior advisor on some of the biggest construction jobs in post-war Scotland. He could walk around a building and estimate the cabling required to an almost exact measure simply by imagining the wiring running through its walls.

My mother had an affinity with machines. In this time before electronic computers, the company she worked for used Burroughs Adding Machines to do their accounts. She punched in numbers and cranked the cogs into calculations. When they jammed or broke, she could repair these intricate devices. To this day, the motions of the machine are etched into her body and she can trace the gestures of computation in the air.

## Stimming

Stimming is the name autistics have claimed to describe the actions that clinical texts call “repetitive motor behaviours”. The word comes from the phrase “sensory self-stimulation” but means much more than this to autistics. To stim is to flap, to rock, to jump, to rub, to hum, to sing, to click, to bang, to spin, to dance, to draw and catch rainbows sparkling through our fingers. Whether we are always mute, sometimes mute, or never mute, stimming is our voice, our language, our enunciation and conversation with the world. This conversation is not always peaceful. Stimming can be a reaction to stressful situations or difficult sensory environments. We can also be hurt or feeling broken and sometimes our stims are self-injurious, like head-hitting, skin-picking, hair-pulling and biting. But stimming can also be a state of sensory conviviality or pure aesthetic joy. Some of my happiest moments as a child could be when I was rocking back and forth watching dust-motes caught in sunlight as they slowly moved upon the edges of air currents across the room.

Despite the claim to interpret stims as psychological gestures, as attempts to block

out an exterior world that the child refuses to accept, the medical and therapeutic treatment of stims has largely been conducted through an economic lens. Stims are often described as without purpose, meaningless, an excess, distractions from whatever non-autistics consider as worthwhile effort. Ole Ivar Lovaas called stimming “garbage behaviour” and devised intensive training based on crude regimes of punishment and reward to rid us of these actions and make us “normal”. Elsewhere, physical restraints and shock therapy are used. At the Judge Rotenberg Center in Massachusetts, a residential facility for children and adults with developmental disabilities including autism, devices are strapped to children's bodies that administer electric shocks throughout the day to control and modify behaviours deemed undesirable. Many of these are recognizable as stimming. A disproportionately high number of residents subjected to this treatment are Black, African American and Latin. This is not treatment but rather a punishment on those whose bodies are considered an economic burden on society.

The advent of autistic-led research and care has changed how stimming is understood and helped challenge such abusive behaviour. It is increasingly recognized that stimming is a natural and necessary expression. Stress-related and self-injurious stims are best treated through an understanding of their sources and replacement through more positive alternatives. To suppress stimming in general is harmful to autistic well-being.

## Thinking

When allowed to develop positively, stimming is not directed towards blocking the exterior world but rather towards a creative engagement with it. The repetitive quality of stims creates patterns in the world. As such they help structure experience, they help us perceive, filter, think.

Stimming creates a form of homeostatic relation with our environment within which the intense focus and attention characteristic of many autistic people can flourish. Whilst distinctive, this is in no way unique, as it is analogous to the experience many people have of finding it easier to think when you go for a walk. It is not only that the fresh air and clear skies help feed the brain and unclutter the mind, but also that the regular rhythm of the walk itself provides a form of patterned vestibular stimulation similar to that created by gently rocking the body.

This quality of intense attention and singular focus is known as *monotropism*. A concept developed by Wenn Lawson and Dinah Murray, monotropism provides an account of autistic characteristics that emphasizes their positive aspect and is a theory of autistic experiences that has developed from autistic people's own accounts. Stimming and monotropism are inherently linked.

Simon Baron-Cohen has argued that this combination of repetitive action and intense focus is comparable to a form of intuitive experimentation on the world which may account for why some autistic people become talented scientists and engineers. But Baron-Cohen's account is a partial one at best, one that assumes an overly cerebral form of thinking, of a subject acting on an objective outside world, a process he calls *systematizing*. What it fails to recognize is that our thought is in and through the stim itself rather than some secondary process. Indeed, even though he casts autism in a positive light, Baron-Cohen's framing of stimming and monotropism in terms of systematizing is not that far removed from Lovaas' evaluation of what he called “garbage behaviour,” for, from this perspective, it is only those whose behaviour can be capitalized upon in service of scientific and technological innovation that are of value.

## Ornament

Despite attempts by certain business sectors to cash in on the “Autistic Advantage”, the stimming body remains a troubling presence

in relation to notions of human worth. Whilst advice to employers of neurodivergent staff may recommend accommodations such as ear defenders and quiet spaces, there is little support given for staff to flap or rock or hum. The assumption remains that productive hands are quiet hands and that loud bodies need not apply. There is a particular aesthetic of the body embedded in modern labour that the stimming body defies. One that is based upon the economy of movement encapsulated in Taylorist production management and time-and-motion studies. Like the machines my mother worked upon. In contrast to the sleek lines of the assembly plant or bland minimalism of the open-plan office, the stimming body evokes an efflorescence of energy that cannot be captured as capital. A seemingly exotic yet worthless ornament.

It is precisely in this relation of stimming to the ornamental however that we can properly understand its role as a form of thinking-in-the-world rather than an escape or empirical abstraction from it. Within the development of Western thought and aesthetics, the ornamental has come to be shunned and distrusted as mere surface effect, an unnecessary distraction and waste of resources. Yet, it is within the ornamental that the basis of material pattern-making emerges and develops. This decorative pattern-making is an “impulse”, as David Brett describes it, “not unlike the capacity for language or counting; as an innate propensity that is part of our being as a species, preceding historical culture. It is a capacity that helps us make perceptual sense of the world we have made, which includes the sense of our own bodies.”

This thinking-in-the-world is not the grand contemplation of “Being” that a philosopher such as Heidegger might propose. Indeed, the stim as language runs counter to Heidegger's notion of language as that which separates mankind from nature and animal life. The stim is more metabolic, an exchange of energy that embodies our reciprocity with the other-than-human world as Mel Baggs (aka Amanda Baggs) explains and demonstrates in their film *In My Language*. The pattern-making of stimming creates small changes in our environments which in turn feed changes within ourselves. This is not only a means through which we self-regulate when overwhelmed by senses or emotions but is also the means through which we learn, grow and mature. Contrary to the medical stereotype of stimming as a fixed, compulsive action, stimming is often fluid, it changes in different situations and over the course of an autistic person's lifetime.

## Stimwork

One of the most interesting approaches to stimming to recently emerge has been that of autistic and neurodivergent artists exploring the transitions between stimming as intuitive pattern-making with more conscious creative expression. These include Sam Metz's *Drawing as Stimming* project and choreographer Riah Person's *Stim Dancing* practice. To some extent, these echo Walter Crane's argument that it is through the ornament as pattern that intuitive gesture becomes aesthetic form, that which “once found ... is repeated,” in which the body “grows accustomed to it, takes delight in it, and expects its recurrence.” These works proudly foreground the gestures of the autistic body as a source of joy and aesthetic pleasure.

Such *stimwork*, as it might be called, presents a mode of, what Naomi Schor calls, “reading in detail” of autism, for much of this work evolves from the more subtle forms of stimming that are often overlooked, particularly in autistic girls and women. As autism advocate Sara Jane Harvey (aka AgonyAutie) argues, much stimming, such as flapping, twirling and spinning, coincides with gendered notions of “girly” behaviour and, as such, may draw attention as abnormal when evident in a boy but is ignored in girls. This, combined with a greater tendency amongst girls and women to mask their autism, is a factor in autistic women being so often unrecognised and unsupported. This

gendering contradicts that more commonly assigned to autism as inherently masculine, such as Simon Baron-Cohen's alignment between systematizing and, what he calls, the “deep male” brain. It has often been assumed that autism is a primarily male condition, a mostly white and middle-class male condition. Our growing awareness of the importance of stimming and the sensory world of autistic people has largely come from those who fall outside such narrow models. Indeed, the non-conformance of many autistic people to established categories of gender makes a mockery of such simplistic conventions. The life-stories and writings of Donna Williams, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Anand Prahlad teach us far more about what it is to be autistic than any number of lab tests and media stereotypes.

Throughout its history as a medical concept, autism has been stalked by eugenics. Eugen Bleuler, who introduced the term, actively supported enforced eugenic sterilization of those he called “the more severely burdened” in society. Hans Asperger, who provided one of the first in-depth studies of autism, and after whom a sub-type of autistic diagnosis was once named, was a doctor in Nazi Austria who actively participated in the consignment of disabled children to extermination programmes. More recent research has focused on genetics as the clue to unravelling the “mystery” of autism. This has often gone hand-in-hand with the interests of those who wish to eradicate autism through pre-natal testing and those who, like Asperger, believe that they can distil what is “good” in autism from what is “bad”.

The notion of the mute autistic body as a substance to be moulded by others runs through much scientific and popular discourse, from the re-civilizing of autistic feral children, to the genetic engineering of autistic savants, and the “precogs” of *Minority Report*. Lovaas described the autistic child as a blank slate, the “raw materials” that could be shaped under the therapist's will. The stimming autistic body stands – flapping, spinning, rocking, jumping – in opposition to all such fantasies and projects. In the eyes of many, it epitomizes all that is “wrong” with autism, a body that is too alive and out of control. Yet stimming – whether joyful, positive stimming or quiet, contemplative stimming – is not dysfunction but rather our own functionality and pattern of life. Stimming is the work of making, doing and being autistic. It is the work of attention and discovery, of recovery and rest. Stimming is the autistic self at work, in and of itself, and it is not for others to etch their desires upon us or re-shape us in their chosen form.

Simon Yuill, September 2021

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*The Ableism of Networks* was originally published as part of *Not Going Back to Normal*, 2020. <https://www.notgoingbacktonormal.com>

*Stimwork* was originally commissioned and published by Collective, Edinburgh, as part of *Acts of Observation*, 2021. <https://www.collective-edinburgh.art/programme/simon-yuill>