

Oddments and fever dreams: notes from the field - 2012-2022

Preface.

*I could while away the hours
Conferrin' with the flowers,
Consulting with the rain;
And my head I'd be a scratchin'
While my thoughts are busy hatchin'
If I only had a brain.¹*

At the time of writing, I'm COVID-positive and Boris Johnson has rushed back from the Caribbean to troll the Tory leadership contest. We have long crossed the Rubicon. I may have brain fog, but 2022 is a fever dream and all I have to offer are a series of fragmentary thoughts and recollections of a fast fading decade. Life before 2020 is a bygone era.

I got stuck in a loop, turning these oddments over in my mind. What do they add up to? I don't have an elegant argument to make, but why would I? It's not possible to crowbar ten years of life on the axis of a paradigm shift into so few words.

Covid puts you off everything. The term neurodivergent is suddenly aversive and I can't look at a tomato. This helps me recall how long it took to get used to the word in the first place. It gives me sympathy for those who get confused or simply prefer to say (quite wrongly, in terms of grammar), that they are neurodiverse. The language about us is far too complicated. I tell myself that I don't have to love it. I also have a recurring doubt. From my perspective it is other people who are different, making *them* divergent. Touché.

These are oddments, but let othering and its opposite be my thematic glue. If I have adversaries (and believe me I do), they are neurological hegemonies and 'the establishment voice'.

My attention has veered erratically across zones of neurodivergent activity, from adult self-advocacy to supported practice. There is no coherence; as a people we are a diverse and motley crew, and the point of us is to defy definition and break free from convention. We are everywhere and, as yet, not fully recognised.

If this article finds me gloomy and focused on enduring hazards, forgive me. We have made extraordinary inroads, but I am weary, and change is a long, long road.

- *Let's talk about brains, baby. Let's talk about you and me.*

I'm hyper-logical. I love how most people act like they don't have a brain, by which I mean it's not the first thing on their minds. Some of us don't have that luxury, but not being scarecrows, we do all have a brain. The rest is numbers, and things called 'norms'. Diverging from a 'norm' is (by

¹ Songwriters: Harold Arlen / Yip Harburg

definition) a minority pursuit (as intimated above), which is how I came to be neurodivergent in 2016.

Unbeknownst to me (until quite late in life), fewer people think like me or approach the world as I do, due to *their* neurological difference. Who knew! People can be illogical, sometimes foolhardy and often inconsistent. Now I understand that they are ‘neurotypical’² and can’t help it. By definition, these people are in the majority.

Some people prefer to use the terms neuro-majority and neuro-minority. I like this too.

- *Held together by the world wide web.*

Neurodiversity is a political idea generated by autistic advocates. In the late 1990s the term emerged as the name for a rights movement powered by global online activism. The adoption of neuro- as a prefix for diagnosis or identity was neither foreseen or intended.

Ours is an ad hoc movement, a global network without power structure or hierarchy, held together by the world wide web.

Right on! Neurodiversity is an idea anyone can run with. This is why our movement has grown, but our visibility can also lead to othering and exploitation.

I joined in on the cusp of 2012. We reached across cyberspace to form ad hoc communities, which seeded grassroots initiatives across the globe. In 2015, the landmark publication *Neurotribes* by US journalist Steve Silberman was a runaway success, becoming a Sunday Times and New York Times bestseller. A meticulous rewriting of the history of autism, it de-pathologises us as a people. As its pages circulated, self-discovery went on the rise, and with each new member we chanted *welcome to tribe!*

- *“Biography is complicated.”*³

As time is elastic, I include a cultural event from 2011. *The Museum of Everything’s* 4th Exhibition at Selfridges was billed as the first global survey of supported studios⁴. An Aladdin’s cave of wonders, this was a curatorial smorgasbord in the unlikely environs of a department store. I didn’t see the accompanying retrospective for Judith Scott, at the Old Selfridges Hotel, but *The Culture Show* feature⁵ about Judith and her work is still available on YouTube. This allows us to look back with forensic attention.

² I use this term because it is familiar to many, but it is becoming outdated. Later in my text I will use the term neuro-majority.

³ James Brett <https://youtu.be/46LdVzWoNhl>

⁴ I have altered this language as website notes read: Back in 2011, The Museum of **Everything** presented **Exhibition #4** at **Selfridges**, the first global survey of studios for self-taught artists with developmental disabilities.

⁵ <https://youtu.be/46LdVzWoNhl>

Miranda Sawyer speaks slowly and earnestly to camera, *can something be art if it is made by someone who doesn't call themselves an artist, or even know what art is?*

This is a car crash. Is that soundtrack a musical box? The tune is eerie, childlike and slow. The Museum's curator, James Brett seems passionate and thoughtful. I feel he's sincere, but the programme has veered off the road. It is as if there is only one way of knowing what art is; as if making is not in itself a form of knowing; as if, somehow, in the absence of speech, or the ability to form words, the artist is not entirely sentient. This othering wears earnestness as a disguise, but we are witnessing a display of false semantics. Normative culture swallows up what it can't know.

In 2016, an article in *OutsideIn* suggests the possibility that process mattered more to Judith Scott than the work itself, and that communication could be the function of her making.⁶

'Mainstream' culture interprets mystery through normative social lenses.

- 'Unexpected item in bagging area. Please remove item.'

Fast forward from *The Museum of Everything* at Selfridges, in 2011, to the meteoric rise of *Project Art Works*, 2020-2022.

The extraordinary break through to Turner Prize nomination (on the back of decades of solid practice) caused some establishment consternation. Prejudice can pass as critique.

"The reason they are included, however, is as patronising as it is doubtless well intended: PAW exists to support artists of neurodiversity."⁷

What? Exit stage left, bewildered art critic.

This is why I am wary and concerned whenever we are not the authors of the words used about us, whenever we are not in the room, and where the language used is alien to its subjects. There is a problem in the way our practice is framed.

Postscript

Rishi Sunak is our Prime Minister and I am still COVID-positive.

In a parallel existence I might have written another version of my text - perhaps reclaiming Agnes Martin and Yayoi Kusama, following their Tate Modern retrospectives in 2012 and 2015? Someone needs to critique the Tate Modern website notes for Yayoi, and also make a comparative study with those for Agnes.

⁶ <https://outsidein.org.uk/news/news-reports-exhibitions/judith-scott-communicating-through-art/>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/oct/03/turner-prize-2021-summer-exhibition-2021-review-there-can-be-no-winner>

I could have written about Joseph Cornell, his world building, and the intensity of his 'imaginary' relational world.

I should have name checked so many self-led projects and contemporary practices, like my own NUNO Project, 2019⁸ and work by Anna Farley shown in 2022, at Documenta 15.⁹ Someone needs to make a literature review of our practice. Someone should capture and frame this decade of our arrival.

⁸ <https://www.soniaboue.co.uk/nuno>

⁹ <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/rethinking-labels-in-art-institutions/>

