

NEURO

PHOTO

THERAPY



A

SELF- EVALUATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

They say it takes a village to raise a child, but I say that it has to be the right village. I want to thank all those who found themselves in the wrong village and worked to build neurodivergent community. Pre-internet we couldn't see or find one another, but the world wide web has connected us. Now our grassroots movement is breaking through into mainstream culture. This is a moment to be cherished as we continue to build a better future for neurodivergent people. Without community my Neurophotoherapy project would not exist and I would remain a village-less child.

With special thanks to my beautiful neurodivergent family, my guru and mentor Brent White, my collage mentor Miranda Millward and collage care icon Laurie Kanyer.

Thanks also to participants and contributors, including Alex Forshaw, Chloe Farahar, Jennifer Gilbert, Maddy Kidner Morgan, Dr. Chloe Lawson, Dr. Dawn-Joy Leong, Dr. Joanne Limburg, Naomi Morris, Helen Robson, Prof. Nicola Shaughnessy, Ann Tutt and Sonja Zelić. Gratitude also to project partners Birmingham Open Media, Disability Arts Online, Playing A/Part, and to Arts Council England for believing in me and funding this project.

INTRODUCTION

I've been exploring a new model of creative practice for people who discover their autistic identity as adults.

Neurophototherapy was inspired by an existing practice of photo therapy. Photo therapy is a hybrid form which spans both therapeutic and visual arts practices. My purpose has been to develop a new way to support autistic people with the identity transition often needed to assimilate autistic identification late in life. Currently, this need is not adequately recognised or supported, and this project (among other initiatives led by autistic people) is pioneering and paradigm-shifting research.

During the project I made a deep investigation of the collage form and Laurie Kanyer's collage care methodology. Project activity was shared on my Instagram account @s_boue and my website www.soniaboue.co.uk

Neurophototherapy was live between February and December 2021. Arts Council England granted a time extension of 3 months due to changes in circumstances and the impact of the pandemic on my neurodivergent partners and participants. I also needed more time to process findings, which indicated a need for key adaptations to the Neurophototherapy concept.

ACTIVITY

I hit all my targets excepting the publication of my Neurophototherapy guide, which was shared with participants and focus groups. It will be published on further development.

My online exhibition Origin Story was well received by all neuro-types. I wrote audio descriptions for my images and made sound files for my text. I experimented with a soft launch for my exhibition, receiving in-depth feedback from key contacts. This was followed by a promoted Instagram Origin Story takeover, curated by Maddy Kidner Morgan.

I planned to make 16 works but made more than 224 (archived for future collection). I exceeded my projected audience figures and gave 4 more talks than expected. I fell in love with collage and connected with vibrant online collage networks across the globe.

I read key texts and made a research trip to the Jo Spence exhibition Fairy Tales to Photo Therapy, at the Arnolfini Gallery. My research focused on collage care, inspired by collagist and collector Laurie Kanyer's practice.

I responded to feedback from neurodivergent participants. Project writers became participants and co-researchers. Most participants engaged hands-on, and we quickly identified workshop potential for this model. Enthusiastic responses to Neurophototherapy have produced a team of co-researchers for the follow-on bid.

PROJECT FINDINGS

All feedback suggests a profound resonance with the most urgent needs of autistic people across multiple demographics, including young adults (art foundation students).

Sharing my work has supported individuals and communities in identity transition. Crucially, the project has also assisted people to identify as autistic. Furthermore, it has the potential to support those unable to access formal diagnosis due to social inequities and underfunding of services.

Community feedback helped me stand back from my own practice, which is often playful. However, support for autistic identity transition must allow for high levels of co-occurring trauma. I had intended to create an off-the-peg resource, but this research indicates the need to consider options for interpersonal supports.

Neurophototherapy supports autistic unmasking, which is a delicate and highly individual process. A pioneering model within a rapidly emerging cultural movement, Neurophototherapy is a practice still in development. It represents a vital contribution to a pool of knowledge which is building self-recognition for neurodivergent people and our communities. The project now needs to progress as a research group at follow-on.

AUDIENCES

The project reached audiences via talks, conversations, print press, and multiple online platforms. An interview and photo shoot for the New York Times boosted my audience figures, but I also encountered prejudice and exclusion. Instagram collage communities were warm, inclusive and generous. Neurophototherapy was supported by mainstream arts organisations within my current networks. Key audiences were neurodivergent research and advocacy communities, disability arts, global supported studios networks, and arts and health forums. I received Arts Council England's promotional support and in-depth feedback from my Relationship Manager.

PRACTICE FINDINGS

The neurodiversity movement is rapidly emerging from grassroots activism into mainstream discourse. This is a moment of great cultural significance for neurodivergent people. Neurophototherapy adds to my track record of Arts Council England funded research dating 2016-2021, exploring how to be an autistic artist.

Neurophototherapy is also a step-change for me. Previous projects focused on access behind the scenes, but this project has sought to foreground my autistic identity as my subject, and address the impact of autistic masking with creative practice.

The project resulted in a love affair with collage, I found a new visual vocabulary and created an archive of works. The cultural significance and future legacy of this archive should be of interest to both public and private collections, alongside a groundswell of neurodivergent projects reflecting this moment.

Centring autistic identity has been game-changing. I can identify more appropriate opportunities and environments for my neurology and my work, because my relationships are now based on authenticity and a more congruent practice.

It has been my experience that gaining traction in the Arts implies assimilating unhelpful neuro-normative values. Professional progression can lead to disorientation and burnout, and disablement may be deferred but not overcome.

I encountered unexpected disablement and exclusion and had to adapt my project. I experimented with a soft exhibition launch to accommodate my introvert needs. I found a profound affinity with Hamja Ahsan's work and the Shy Radicals Manifesto. System change has become a key concern for my advocacy.

The response to my work was deeper than I expected across all neuro-types. It worked well to produce an exhibition for arts audiences and a PDF guide for neurodivergent communities. For many neurodivergents, I've found that process *is* practice. We therefore face additional barriers in presenting our work. A shift is required in how the sector perceives our cultural outputs, and in how documentation is valued, curated and collected.

I also developed a hypersensitivity for safeguarding the lived experience. The sector needs to develop new accessible and ethical frameworks for neurodivergent artists who require safe spaces for their work. Genuinely enabling platforms for showing works are urgently needed and current gatekeepers need to decentre neurological bias. Neurodivergent creatives must lead in developing new paradigms for our emergent work and practices.

HEADLINES

- Foregrounding autistic identity in my practice was a profoundly transformative and joyful experience, but I experienced ableism. We need system change rather than a 'sticking plaster' focus on accommodations.
- Neurophototherapy changed lives by helping people identify as autistic and engage in creative practice. A high number of creatives identified as autistic while the project was live. There is an urgent need to further develop this project.
- This model both supports individuals *and* contributes to the self-recognition of neurodivergent communities. It now requires development with a multidisciplinary group of autistic co-researchers, including artists, writers and participatory specialists.
- Supporting autistic identity transition ethically must allow for co-occurring trauma. This requires responsive and relational approaches, including 1-1 mentoring and support groups.
- The pandemic disproportionately affected neurodivergent participants. This represents an additional barrier to participation.
- To capture this moment, collectors and art institutions must look to supported and self-led neurodivergent projects at this time of neurodivergent emergence into 'mainstream' culture.



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