



OPINION

What else could 'neurodiversity' look like?

February 19, 2018 - by [Kai Syng Tan](#)

Share on

Kai Syng Tan is an artist, curator and shapeshifter. Performances and exhibitions include Biennale of Sydney, Documenta, Royal Geographical Society and MOMA (New York), and permanent collections include Fukuoka Art Museum and Museum of London. Here, Kai considers widening the visual lexicon and imagination of how we are wired differently through a photographic essay on ADHD.



Making Mind wandering Visible: Photobombed I



Making Mind wandering Visible: Photobombed II



Making Mind wandering Visible: Running into a Fellow Mind wanderer.

Faces/Facets of Neurodiversity

Think 'neurodiversity', and what do you picture? Is it the autistic human calculator portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* (1988), or the small boy wearing not-so-small headphones in *The A Word* (BBC One 2017)? Or does *Harry Potter* star Daniel Radcliffe, who 'suffers from dyspraxia', pop up in your head? Perhaps it is Richard Branson, whose teacher had assumed to be 'lazy and dumb' because of his dyslexia? Or is it broadcaster Chris Packham, who outed himself in *Aspergers and Me*, or comedian Rory Bremner, in his *ADHD and Me* (both BBC2)? Maybe it is another 'ADHD-er', swimmer Michael Phelps, who was diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder as a child — while breaking a national record for the 100-meter butterfly?

Diversifying Neurodiversity

Hold on a second. Where are the women? Is 'neurodiversity' the reserve of men and boys? Following good old-fashioned tropes, are women and girls plainly hysterical and barking mad? Savants, tycoons, celebrities and highly-decorated Olympians with a propensity for breaking records aside, *how else* could neurodiversity look like?

A framework that regards, according to one definition, 'atypical neurological development as a normal human difference', neurodiversity is a loaded and contested term with equally diverse definitions and controversies, evident perhaps from this paradoxical definition itself. If neurodiversity is a 'more humane and accurate lens' with which to understand autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and synaesthesia, as argued by leading autism expert Simon Baron Cohen, my questions as an artist are: What are other images and imagination of neurodiversity? Is there room to enliven the scene? What are its everyday quirks, and non-quirks.



ROAM! ROAM! ROAM! Running into a Fellow Mind wanderer



ROAM! ROAM! ROAM! Disdain

ROAM! ROAM! ROAM! Let's Feel Good.

Badge-Wearing Mind wanderer in Action

Upon receiving my unexpected diagnosis of ADHD alongside dyslexia and dyspraxia two years ago, I googled 'ADHD', as you do. The images that popped up were unimaginative. Think sad, ugly, lazy word-art type graphics or photographs, depicting a boy, male criminal, or a boy who grows up to become a male criminal, in a state of confusion, chaos and distress, in anticipation for a life of calamity. And oh, there are women. We are the concerned teacher, parent, or partners, comforting or looking after these disturbed males. (Don't we know that females are very caring. I'm *exceptionally* caring – just ask friends and family I haven't been in touch with for decades).

Neither a male or a child, and as a visual artist, academic and life-long sceptic, my diagnosis (or discovery) generated questions, not clarity. Affecting around **2.5% of the population globally**, ADHD is **characterised** by high levels of hyperactive, impulsive and inattentive behaviours beginning in early childhood, persistent over time, pervasive across situations and leading to impairments. Leading adult ADHD expert Professor Philip Asherson argues that **excessive mind wandering may be a distinguishing feature of ADHD**. An invisible or hidden condition, it is also hidden from public discourse and imagination. If at all mentioned, we speak ill of it or mock its existence.

I decided to make my own images and raise my questions aloud. The photographic tableau, entitled *Badge-Wearing Mind Wanderer in Action*, is as much a portrait and performance of self as it is of my home/place/city of London, and (my) ADHD. In each picture, I wear a badge. Drawing on the 'Baby on Board' badges that pregnant women wear on the London Underground, mine read 'Mind wanderer Overboard'. Since I love overdoing things, I made five badges. The others say: 'ROAM! ROAM! ROAM!'; 'Come Ride with Me on my Magic Carpet'; 'Mind Wanderer in Action' and 'Making Mind wandering Visible'. I thus 'out' myself as a 'badge-wearing mind wanderer' and by extension, 'ADHD-er', that is, someone with ADHD. Garish and at 72mm each, they stick out, so that they can kickstart discussions and disagreements about the lines between 'normality' and 'abnormality', being non-neurotypical and having a disorder, wellness and illness. People I interact with earn badges. After all, everyone's mind wanders.



Mind wanderer OverBoard/Overbored: An Eye for An Eye



Mind wanderer OverBoard/Overbored: Handbook for ADHD in Adults.

The badges did become catalysts for small talk when I gallivanted around London last Autumn. I captured my action adventure on camera, and seen here is a selection. Each image embeds within it yet more images, layers, references and red herrings, either staged or serendipitous, or both. Aesthetically, I draw from British photographer Martin Parr, known for his distinctive 'uncanny in the everyday' approach. I also referred to Russian collective AES+F, with their highly-stylised, staged scenes reminiscent of classical painting and contemporary fashion alike. Roaming physically and mentally, I ran into humans and non-humans, including ducks at Hyde Park, along the way.

There was also an unplanned image. The scene? A shocked crowd in an area cordoned off by the police. A car had rammed into crowds just outside the Victoria and Albert Museum. The photographer and I had just finished our lunch. At that point, it wasn't clear if this was another terrorist attack. Like many, I was furious and perplexed. My mind was racing. Who are the cowards? How dare they? Who have they hurt? Should I Skype my parents? Where can I get Wifi? Should we wrap up? Should we run? Have we paid for our lunch? It turned out that it was a traffic accident. All this while, my photographer snapped away. Should we use the photograph? But isn't this the reality today? So, here it is. The *Body and Mind in (Com)motion in a World in (Com)motion*.

We resumed our wandering and filming.



Body and Mind in (com)motion in a world in (com)motion (London 7 October 2017 incident)



ROAM! ROAM! ROAM! (Portals and Potterings)



Come Ride with Me on My Magic Carpet (V&A Tapestry Room)-

Widening imagination of how we are wired differently

With #MeToo exposing how women's bodies, minds and mobility have been policed, [women are fighting back](#) in visible and vocal ways. Yet, as [disability writer Dr Frances Ryan](#) points out, 'disabled women are rarely featured in the media: even in campaigns or content that are purposely striving to include marginalised women routinely miss out those with disabilities'. The effect? By excluding 'women like me', we are 'made to feel invisible'. And if disability is the 'last frontier of inequality', as argued by Ryan, it can be argued that *hidden* disability in women is something that needs to be especially highlighted.

Badge-Wearing Mind wanderer in Action is my process of inquiry and intervention. My images are a feminine and feminist performance of autonomy and agency. It aims to irritate existing popular consciousness about ADHD and, by extension, neurodiversity. Infiltrating everyday life as a badge-wearing ADHD-er, it complicates ADHD's limited and limiting representation, focus and expression by sceptics ('[not ill, just naughty](#)') and experts ('[the most powerful predictor of violent offending](#)') alike. Through the images, I embody, personify and give form to (my) mind wandering.

In visualising (my) mental restlessness, I want to invite viewers to think about ways to make ADHD and neurodiversity more visible, that is, more seen, more heard, more talked about, not avoided, not dismissed, not spoken about in hushed tones, not just a specialist subject discussed by experts, and not only spoken ill of, because there is always more than one side to any story.

My *mise-en-scenes* are mundane as they are off-beat, and slightly off the beaten track. Their impact lies in the fact that they are banal. In neither caricaturing nor romanticising what neurodiversity could look like, it avoids demonising 'neurotypical' and mainstream perspectives. They are specific to myself, yet also commonplace. In short: this is what being non-neurotypical could also look like. Yes, there are impairments, challenges and struggles. No, I am not 'suffering'. This is how I am and how I go about life. Yes, I also have loads of fun along the way. You could try it some time.

The work joins in the efforts of other colleagues who have been enriching and challenging how we understand neurodiversity, as well as intersectional neurodiversity, that is, how neurodiversity comes into play with gender, class, race and sexual orientation.

They include Jessica Thom, aka Touretteshero who is '[changing the world one tic at a time](#)', activist Michelle Beckett, who has been [lobbying MPs to form the first All Party Parliamentary Group to address issues for both adults and children with ADHD](#); Art with Heart, a Queer-led community interest company in Salford with a focus on, amongst others, ADHD, and black gymnast Simone Biles who has [talked about taking medication for ADHD and that it is 'nothing to be ashamed of nothing that I'm afraid to let people know'](#).

Just as the concept of biodiversity allows us to '[recognise the importance of respecting our environment, with the rich diversity of life forms that inhabit it](#)', states Baron-Cohen, '[neurodiversity is just the next step in this more respectful way of thinking about our planet and our communities](#)'. Widening the visual lexicon and imagination of how we are wired differently is part of the process of augmenting our mind about how human beings relate to one another.

Badge-wearing Mind wanderer in Action (MIA) by Kai Syng Tan. Producer: Alessandra Cianetti. Photographer: Enamul Hoque.

Kai Syng Tan completed her PhD at the Slade School of Fine Art, and is currently [Artist in Residence and Visiting Researcher](#) at the [Social, Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry Centre \(SGDP\)](#) at King's College London. *Badge Wearing Mind wanderer in Action (MIA)* is a part of a 1.5 year project in collaboration with [Professor of Psychiatry Philip Asherson](#) at SGDP. Entitled [We sat on a mat and had a chat and made maps! #MagicCarpet](#), this is an [Unlimited commission](#) which is funded by Arts Council England. The project is also part of King's Artist in Residence programme supported by Cultural Programming and SGDP. kai@kaisyngtan.com @kaisyngtan @wesatonamat wesatonamat.weebly.com

Related Content