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#ADHDwomen making #ADHDart to widen the discourse on ADHD, neurodiversity and mental health

by Kai Syng Tan

ADHD Awareness Month

Think Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and you'd probably picture hyperactive boys, bad parents, Big Pharma, criminals or Olympian Michael Phelps. But did you know that women also have ADHD? Are you also aware that a few of these women are using their creative work to make us think twice about what we thought we knew about ADHD? Through these [#ADHDart](#) by [#ADHDwomen](#), could we think about what could art *do*, *do for*, and *do with* ADHD and, by extension, issues surrounding neurodiversity, disability and mental wellbeing?

Art with Heart's Declaration. Photograph by Sam Riley.

Declaration

'I've always felt different – but never wrong', declares Sarah Emmott of the Salford-based Art With Heart, in her autobiographical play [Declaration](#), which was on tour throughout the UK in 2018. Powerfully-portrayed and littered with evocative imageries (including that of 'ADHD squirrels'), *Declaration* was personal, funny, angry and full of hope, all at once. As Sarah states, art can help us 're-focus on the human'. As part of the tour, Art With Heart partnered with the ADHD Foundation and ADHD Solutions to deliver ADHD Awareness Training in Leicester, London and York. In one of the London performances in October, there was also an all-women panel discussing ADHD in women.

#MagicCarpet

Two weeks before that, I'd stood in front of 500 ADHD researchers and invited them to think about how the arts can complicate the construct of '(ab)normality'. This was the 5th European Network for Hyperkinetic Disorders Conference (EUNETHYDIS) in Edinburgh. I also exhibited a tapestry art installation from my project [#MagicCarpet](#). The tapestry shows a fantastical landscape about and imagined by my restless mind. Featured is a 'safari' of what I call my 'ADHD beasts', including an octopus with the head of a pussycat, which I, unoriginally, name 'Octopussy'. Rather than standing behind a barrier to admire it, people can sit on the tapestry to make drawings about the animals of, or in, their mind, and chat about differences, disorders, disagreements and common grounds. #MagicCarpet was itself my process to open up a conversation with Professor of Psychiatry Philip Asherson. I approached the world authority on adult ADHD as I wanted to find out more about (my) ADHD. Thus began my artist-in-residency at the Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre at King's College London. Our interactions of the past year have influenced Philip in his programming of EUNETHYDIS 2018, which included panel discussions on how ADHD relates to creativity and women.

This photo shows artists, scientists and people from different walks interacting with my tapestry art installation #MagicCarpet at the iconic Art Workers' Guild, 2018. The photo, taken by Marco Berardi for #MagicCarpet, is part of a photo collage that has just been awarded the National Coordination Centre for Public Engagement NCCPE Images Competition 2018 Award for 'Culture Change'

Guardian writer Frances Ryan has observed that [disabled women are made to feel invisible](#). If that is so, then women with invisible disabilities are *doubly* invisible, [as I have previously pointed out](#). Isn't it, thus, time to highlight ADHD in women as a hidden problem - *and a hidden resource*? Could the arts be enlisted to help *visualise* ADHD and make ADHD *more visible*? By that I mean that ADHD could be more seen, more heard, more talked about, and not avoided, not dismissed, not spoken about in hushed tones, not just a specialist subject for or by experts, and not only spoken ill of, because there is more than one side to any story. This discussion is timely also given the recent interest in neurodiverse conditions in women, seen for instance in the bid in ['finding the female face of autism'](#), and how, as pointed out in an article in the Conversation, how [we have been underdiagnosing girls with ADHD](#). Of late, [researchers are also interested in the upsides of ADHD](#). And, as the 2017 All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Report states, art can 'stimulate imagination and reflection' and 'inspire change and growth'. Art is no magic bullet. Yet, with its propensity for play and ambiguity, works like *Declaration* and #MagicCarpet can open up an engaging and accessible space for people of all walks – including researchers, professionals, people who don't care about, or don't 'buy' the concept of ADHD and think that it is something made up by the pharmaceutical industry – to ask new questions about ADHD, and how we think (differently) about our different body and minds, and our health and wellbeing.

Let #ADHDwomen and #ADHDart help open our eyes and mind, and take our health in our own hands. Join in and widen the discourse now.

[Dr Kai Syng Tan](#) FRSA SFHEA is an artist, curator and academic. She is concerned with the body and mind in (com)motion in a world in (com)motion, and straddles between the art world and academy. Known for her 'eclectic style and cheeky attitude' (*Sydney Morning Herald*) and 'radical interdisciplinarity' (Dr Alan Latham, UCL), she has shown at the South London Gallery, MOMA (New York), Royal Geographical Society, 8th ASEAN Para Games, Biennale of Sydney, BBC Radio 3 Free Thinking, *Guardian* and Fuji TV. Recognition includes San Francisco International Film Festival Golden Gate Award. Collections include the Museum of London and Fukuoka Art Museum. Her PhD is from the UCL Slade School of Fine Art. She is also Director of RUN! RUN! RUN!, Peer Review College member for UKRI and AHRC, Selection Panel member of Unlimited and Research Committee member of UK Adult ADHD Network. She works with PsychART on an advisory capacity.