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# TRANSCRIPT: Too Much/ Not Enough 'Neurodiversity' in UK art & academia?

It's been 1 year since my #MagicCarpet was launched at the Art Workers Guild, when we unpacked the term 'neurodiverse art'. Since then, there's been a mini-explosion of activities tagged 'neurodiversity' in UK arts & academia, but, or hence, the term remains contested.

Academia Creative Industry neurodiversity

The following is the edited transcript of my opening provocation, exploring recent interpretations of 'neurodiversity' in the arts and academia, for the event Too Much or Not Enough: Neurodiversity and Cultural Production (http://www.bcmh.bbk.ac.uk/2019/05/10/medical-humanities-at-birkbeck-arts-week-20-24-may-2019/). The event consisted of a film screening and discussion with myself, curator Alessandra Cianetti, and literary researcher Dr Sophie Jones, exploring the aesthetics of neurodiversity and the place of invisible disabilities in the cultural industries. It took place on 21 May 2019 at Birkbeck, University of London. The evening began with the provocation, followed by the premiere of my film, Brisk/Risks (https://vimeo.com/336958029), which explores risk-taking within and beyond ADHD. This was followed by further responses and provocations by myself, Cianetti and Jones and a discussion. Associated with the event was a 5-day exhibition (http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/2019-may-birkbeck.html) of my #MagicCarpet in Room 106, which was also artist Vanessa Bell's studio. Bell also worked in tapestries, and was also the sister of Virginia Woolf, both of the Bloomsbury Set. The exhibition and event were part of Birkbeck Arts Week 2019 (http://www.bbk.ac.uk/annual-events/arts-week/arts-week-2019). The podcast of the evening can be accessed here (https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2019/05/too-much-not-enough-neurodiversity-and-cultural-production/). This event is funded by a grant from the Birkbeck Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund. Read the transcripts of 2 of the presentations at Brisk/Risks here (https://mind-the-gap.live/2019/06/19/risk-taking-and-adhd/).

Too Much or Not Enough: Neurodiversity and Cultural Production – now that's a mouthful! Have we taken on too much for one evening?

It's been one year since the tapestry of my art-science project #MagicCarpet (http://www.wesatonamat.weebly.com) was launched at the Art Workers Guild, during which we unpacked the term 'neurodiverse art' (http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/2018-april-24-launch.html) in relation to, and beyond, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and debated the politics of labels. Since then, there seems to have been a mini-explosion of activities tagged 'neurodiversity' in the arts and academia. But, or hence, the term remains unstable, contested and controversial. It popped up in a grant proposal to the Arts and Humanities Research Council that I was asked to review a few weeks ago, which explores dyscalculia through cinema. This sort of work builds on that of Nicola Shaughnessy



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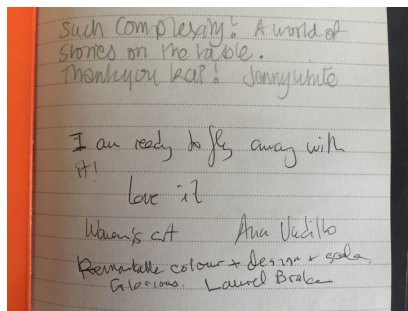
@kaisyngtan www.kaisyngtan.com magiccarpet@kaisyngtan.com Dr Kai Syng Tan FRSA SFHEA is an artist whose artistic and curatorial practice, teaching, writing and research straddle within, between and beyond the art and academic worlds. Known for her 'eclectic style and cheeky attitude' (Sydney Morning Herald), 'radical interdisciplinarity' (Dr Alan Latham, UCL), her installation, film, text and performances have appeared at Documenta, Royal Geographical Society, Biennale of Sydney, MOMA, ZKM, ICA and LADA Study Guide. Recognition includes San Francisco International Film Festival Golden Gate Award and Artangle Open 100, and collections include the Museum of London and Fukuoka Art Museum. Since 2014 Kai is known as someone 'instrumental in the UK and lots of other contexts' 'to start to form what might become to be called "Running Studies"' (Professor Gregg Whelan 2015). Of her RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale, the Guardian urges academics to 'take a leaf out of its book' (2014), and she was heard on BBC Radio 3 on running as an artistic discourse (Free Thinking January 2017). Co-created with disabled colleagues, the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 8th ASEAN Para Games (for which Kai was Visual Director) was applauded by the Singapore Prime Minister as 'spectacular'. Kai completed her PhD at the Slade School of Fine Art as a UCL scholar, and has taught in the practice, history and theory of fine art, media art, film and art education in higher institutions in Australia, Singapore, Tokyo and London. Currently Visiting Researcher and first Artist in Residence at the Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry (SGDP) at King's College London, Kai is working on an Unlimited commission funded by Arts Council

England that explores mind wandering. She is also Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University and UCL Institute of Advanced Studies, as well as Director of RUN! RUN! RUN! International Body for Research and RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale, and Arts and Humanities Research Council Peer Review College member. RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale [www.kaisyingtan.com/r3fest#MagicCarpet](http://www.kaisyingtan.com/r3fest#MagicCarpet) commission: [@wesatonamat](mailto:@wesatonamat) <http://www.wesatonamat.weebly.com>

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Caption for top image: Kai opening event. Photograph by Alessandra Cianetti. Caption for this image: some of the feedback for the evening.

Yet, diagnosis is such a can of worms. I was at Hamja Ahsan's talk (<https://pumphousegallery.org.uk/programme/scenes-of-the-world/shy-radicals-the-black-panthers-for-shy-people>) at the Pump House Gallery which raises questions of membership in different ways. Hamja talks about "Aspergistan", a state that he's set up for people who identify as autistic, like himself – although he says that he's diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Neurodiversity is commonly related to other neurodevelopmental conditions that affect motor function, learning, language and non-verbal communication like dyscalculia, ADHD, dyslexia and of course autism and Aspergers. These are also often related to other conditions, including bipolar. Then, there's mis- or under-diagnosis (which the NICE guidelines (<https://www.nice.org.uk/news/article/look-out-for-people-at-risk-of-having-adhd-diagnosis-missed-says-nice>) has stated affects women and girls when it comes to ADHD), and not having access to diagnosis altogether. For artist Aidan Moseby neurodiversity encapsulates (<https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/aidan-moesby-the-art-of-conversation/>) 'mental health problems' at large. This Thursday evening, I'll visit Hart Club (<https://hartclub.org/>) at Waterloo which 'champions neurodiversity in the arts'. There will be a new show – on dementia, a neurodegenerative condition. This makes me recall a conversation I had with a colleague Ben Platts Mills a director at Headway East London, who argues that 'neurodiversity' should include people with brain injury.

Sure, these various claims and takes of neurodiversity help to, and here I borrow the words of philosopher Mohammed Rashed (<https://academic.oup.com/jmp/article/44/2/150/5077410>) in relation to mad activism, 'widen our repertoire' and 'enrich' the current 'impoverished' discourse about how we think about ourselves and others. But regarding neurodiversity, Mohammed also challenges the assumption that autism, ADHD and so on can be traced back to a shared 'neurology'. Indeed, we talk about how when you meet one autistic person you meet one,

you haven't met the others, every autistic person is different. yet, as Mohammed asks, why do we assume that all 'normals' share one neurotype? We dislike being misunderstood but as we identify as neurodivergent, do we demonise and caricaturise 'neurotypicals'? Many may reject the medical model (<https://www.shapearts.org.uk/news/social-model-of-disability/>), sometimes without fully engaging with the concepts and practices, so is there the risk of being reductive, and hence alienating these very systems which are powerful? And is 'neurodiversity' a cover for the tired trope of the artist as mad, suffering genius? Yes, so-called 'mainstream' society have traditionally use this as an instrument to other and marginalise the arts. But do artists claim labels to self-mythologise and romanticise as an attempt to appear different, radical? And, as blind theatre practitioner Amelia Cavallo (<https://www.extraordinarybodies.org.uk/cast/amelia-cavallo/>) states in a recent conference (<https://weareunlimited.org.uk/integrart-2019-being-alive-is-a-form-of-resistance/>) in Zurich, people like us gathered in such space talking about disability or, in our case, neurodiversity, are privileged. Indeed, we're articulate – even if it means reading my script from my iPhone – with a certain level of education. But as Amelia argues, there are many people who refuse to identify as disabled, including artist Ryan Gander (<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/mar/18/ryan-gander-on-the-hell-of-selfies-the-world-has-gone-mad-me-myselfie-and-i-bbc>). Those who can chose labels are, by and large, a privileged bunch, with agency and voice, and the ability choose our battles. Isn't *choosing* to ignore the fact that many people actively choose to *resist* the label *arrogant*? In the case of neurodiversity, what about those who are non-verbal, or have intellectual disability (<https://www.spectrumnews.org/opinion/viewpoint/autistic-people-intellectual-disability-often-excluded-studies/>) for instance? And are there hierarchies of 'normality' within the 'community'? And are we so tribal within certain sectors of the sector, that, while we borrow languages and tactics of queer activism and civil rights movements, we make no qualms about duplicating the very same oppressive systems that we are criticising on those without 'membership', and even 'members' who're not *pure* enough – such as someone with a presentation of both autism *and* ADHD, which are highly co-morbid (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23673307>) – or not angry enough, because we dare to reach out to colleagues in the medical sector, or are flirting too much with the 'mainstream'? And my key question, always, in such gatherings are, yes we are here as people who are concerned, and as so-called allies (<https://www.seattleglobalist.com/2016/07/14/accomplices-vs-allies/53654>) or accomplices (<http://www.indigenouaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/>), which are problematic terms in themselves, but *so what? What next?* How to reach out to those who aren't in the room, for whom diversity let alone *neuro*-diversity doesn't matter? How to not just moan, but translate to something positive, or into action?

So, back to the question: is all this *too much*? Well, maybe we aren't doing *enough* – we aren't asking enough or better questions, *we haven't done enough?*



(<https://www.a-n.co.uk/media/52561734/>)

Kai, Alessandra Cianetti and Dr Ranjita Dhital lying on top of the tapestry entitled *I Run and Run, Let Out an Earth Shattering Roar and Turn Into A Giant Octopussy* (2.9mX1.45m, wool, cotton, table. Kai Syng Tan 2018), in Room 106, Birkbeck. Photograph by Andre Schimdt

\*See film trailer version of the film *Brisk/Risks* here (<https://vimeo.com/336960401>). \* See 15-minute film with BSL here (<https://vimeo.com/336958029>). \*See gallery and feedback of *Brisk/Risks* here (<http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/2018-dec-4-open-mic.html>). \* See transcript of 2 of the open mic's presentations here (<https://mind-the-gap.live/2019/06/19/risk-taking-and-adhd/>).

\*See images and feedback of premiere of the film at Birkbeck, University of London, on 21 May 2019 here (<http://wesatonamat.weebly.com/2019-may-birkbeck.html>). The film premiere was part of *Too Much/Not Enough: Neurodiversity and Cultural Production*, of the Birkbeck Arts Festival, The evening featured 2 new provocations by Kai, including one on the contested term 'neurodiversity', alongside medical humanities scholar Dr Sophie A Jones and curator Alessandra Cianetti. \*Listen to the podcast of the entire evening here (<https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2019/05/too-much-not-enough-neurodiversity-and-cultural-production/>) of the evening. \*Access edited transcripts of the evening's discussions here (on 'neurodiversity' (<https://www.a-n.co.uk/blogs/transcript-too-much-not-enough-neurodiversity-in-uk-art-academia/>)) and here

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Find out more about #MagicCarpet here (<http://www.wesatonamat.weebly.com>)

\* *The Conversation* article by Tan and Asherson: On the salience of high (<https://bit.ly/2BaPUFd>) quality art in mental (<https://bit.ly/2BaPUFd>) health (<https://bit.ly/2BaPUFd>)

\* *BMJ medical humanities* article: On thought-leadership of arts & (<https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2019/05/15/effecting-change-in-perspective-is-a-challenging-and-hence-critical-endeavour/>) philosophy in (<https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2019/05/15/effecting-change-in-perspective-is-a-challenging-and-hence-critical-endeavour/>) culture (<https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2019/05/15/effecting-change-in-perspective-is-a-challenging-and-hence-critical-endeavour/>) change (<https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2019/05/15/effecting-change-in-perspective-is-a-challenging-and-hence-critical-endeavour/>) (review of Mohammed Rashed's book on mad activism)

\* *Disability Arts Online* article: On neurodiversity & women (<http://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/else-neurodiversity-look-like/>)

\* *PsychART* article: On #ADHD women making #ADHD art (<http://www.psychart.org.uk/index.php/blog/23-adhdwomen-making-adhdart-to-widen-the-discourse-on-mental-health>)

\* *A-N Artists' Information* article: On mind wandering: Best Friend/Worst enemy (<https://www.a-n.co.uk/blogs/mind-wandering-best-friend-or-worst-enemy/>)

\* *KCL Culture story*: On being (<https://bit.ly/2KbyYCP>) the first artist-in-residence, Social (<https://bit.ly/2KbyYCP>), Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry (<https://bit.ly/2KbyYCP>) Centre (<https://bit.ly/2KbyYCP>)

#### ABOUT #MAGICCARPET

The open mic and film are part of 'We Sat On A Mat and Had a Chat and Made Maps! #MagicCarpet (from 2017), which is an art-science exploration which gathers diverse and divergent bodies (and bodies of knowledge) to explore difference and (neuro)diversity, with ADHD and how it relates to mind wandering as a starting point. #MagicCarpet was a 2017 Unlimited commission funded by Arts Council England, with additional support by King's College London. Thus far, #MagicCarpet has reached more than 9000 people, including through Arts in Mind and Unlimited Festivals. Venues include Science Museum, Southbank Centre, South London Gallery, Art Workers' Guild and the Peter Scott Gallery (Lancaster). Publications include an article that was read 2000 times within 2 days of publication in *The Conversation* (10.6 million readers) and a top 2018 editorial on neurodiversity and women in *Disability Arts Online*. 100% of the feedback for an event stated that the work has challenged their understanding of how the arts and science can collide and create new insights. AHRC reviewers have described a proposal of next phase of the work as 'exciting and innovative'; 'already leading the way' and 'with an impressive track record'. #MagicCarpet was awarded a prize for 'Cultural Change' by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2018). Dr Kai Syng Tan FRSA SFHEA was the project's lead and the first artist-in-residence at the Social, Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry Centre. An artist, consultant, curator and academic, Tan is best known for gathering diverse and divergent bodies and bodies of knowledge to engineer spaces of 'productive antagonisms' (Latham & Tan 2016) across disciplinary, geopolitical and cultural boundaries, in what she calls an interdisciplinary 'ill-disciplined' approach (Tan & Asherson 2018). Marked by an 'eclectic style and cheeky attitude' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2006), 'radical interdisciplinarity' (Alan Latham 2016) and 'positive atmosphere' (*Guardian* 2014), she is recognised as 'absolutely central' for the emerging 'Running Studies', and was Visual & Communications Director for the £4m Opening and Closing Ceremonies of 8th ASEAN Para Games (2015).



Kai Syng Tan (<https://www.a-n.co.uk/person/kai-syng-tan/>)



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