

# Neuro Photo Therapy

Playfully unmasking with  
photography & collage



Sonia Boué

*For Daphne and José María whose  
unconditional love has seen me through*



# Neurophototherapy

*Cover photograph: José García Lora, 1966*

*Opposite page: Sonia Boué, In among the ivy, photograph, 2023*

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*Neurophototherapy term and concept © Sonia Boué 2021*



# Neurophototherapy

Playfully Unmasking with  
Photography & Collage

Sonia Boué

# A book about using collage and photography to unmask and explore identity

Devised for neurodivergent creatives and other humans

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**Lucy Barker**

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*Sonja Zelić*



*Lucy Barker*



*Naomi Morris*



*Helen Robson*



*Lauren B*

# Acknowledgements

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I'm also grateful to our focus group, Lauren B, Lucy Barker, Chloe Lawson, Naomi Morris, Helen Robson and Sonja Zelić. They are the beating heart of this publication. Their wholehearted engagement with the project has produced beautiful collage works and important community insights.

Writers, Dr. Joanne Limburg and Prof. Nicola Shaughnessy's reflections have proved vital in navigating this pioneering terrain of identity transition work for late discovered neurodivergent (ND) people. Their writing serves to frame and anchor Neurophototherapy to give the work context.

Artist and Learning and Engagement specialist, Miranda Millward has been a key influence and support in my decision to extend the practice of Photo Therapy to include collage making. Miranda has also brought her mentoring and access knowledge to the project, proving (as ever) a stalwart freelance collaborator.

I'm profoundly honoured by support from the Doug + Laurie Kanyer Art Collection for our Neurophototherapy mission - to promote self-discovery and enable neurodivergent (ND) people to access collage for self-support.

I'm also indebted to our project partners at Autograph, Crafts Council, NSEAD and Wellcome Collection for so many important conversations and the opportunity to share our work. My special thanks to Zoe Dennington, Livvy Murdoch, Sophie Leach, Associate Professor Claire Penketh and Selene Burn.

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A special thanks to Sonja Zelić and my beautiful ND family for additional support.



*"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time"*

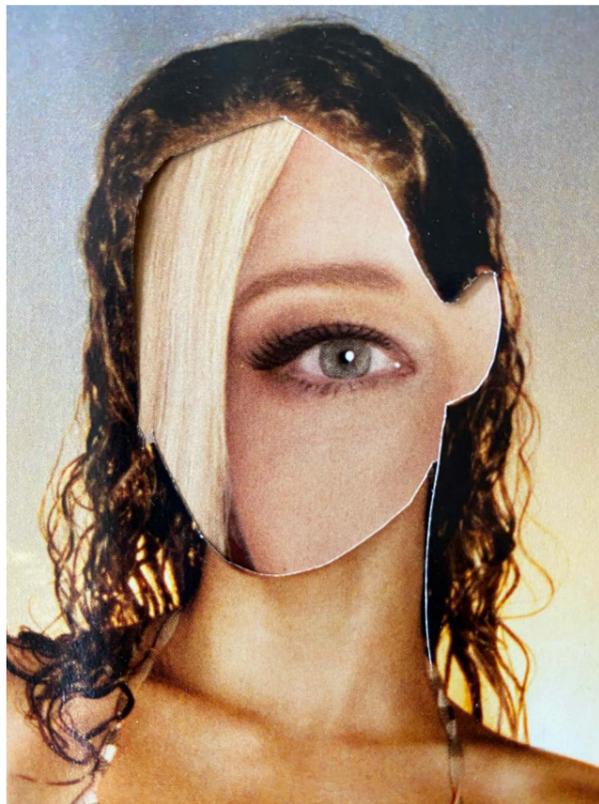
**from "Little Gidding" in Four Quartets, T.S. Elliot**

# A brief note about masking

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**M**asking describes a complex form of social 'camouflaging' many NDs instinctively adopt to avoid the harms of stigma, bullying and discrimination. We may not be aware of it before we discover our ND. As a survival mechanism it helps us get through certain situations, but it can be harmful in the long run. This is because masking is exhausting; it is hard to sustain and can cause anxiety leading to burnout. You can end up feeling like you don't know who you are.

Neurophototherapy seeks to nurture and empower you to develop a more secure sense of ND identity through playful unmasking.



*Sonia Boué, A brief note about masking, analogue collage, 2023 © Sonia Boué 2023*

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## Foreword

**N**europhototherapy was conceived at home during the first lockdown in 2020, and as I began to share images on Instagram it felt like a 'coming out' party. I'd been 'openly autistic' since 2016, but I was still masking because I simply didn't know how to unmask. It turns out there is a world of difference between talking about being ND, and being true to yourself in asserting your everyday needs. As ever, actions speak louder than words. With the pandemic, everything shifted. I turned to self-documentation and Neurophototherapy came into being. Communication began to feel more seamless - things happen when you know who you are!

In 2021, I launched Neurophototherapy, as a solo project. It was funded by Arts Council England (ACE) to develop as a creative tool for neurodivergent women and marginalised genders. I received further ACE funding in 2023, to develop the project with a small focus group of ND participants. This book is a guide to the method and includes insights from the focus group.

I will use the word discovery in place of diagnosis/self-diagnosis, and ND and NT for neurodivergent and neurotypical. I will also use the term neurotype, meaning neurological type. Although it's been developed by and for ND women and marginalised genders, this method can be used and enjoyed by anyone seeking to explore their identity.

Late discovery refers to people 18+, but Neurophototherapy can also be used by parents and educators to support teenagers and young people to explore earlier ND discovery, at home or in educational settings.

Please note that Neurophototherapy is a self-help method and is not a substitute for counselling, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis or any other professional relationship-based therapies.



*Me, still exploring making ND self portraits in 2023*

# Welcome!

**N**europhototherapy is a love letter to late ND discovery! It is the culmination of a lifetime of learning and many years of dedicated practice research. You will find that it is at heart a simple method, and I hope that the ideas in this book will inspire you and bring you joy!

ND discovery is a significant life event and a cause for celebration. It is also challenging because there is no road map and often little support. It takes time to peel off layers of NT social conditioning to be able to claim our birthright - to live authentically and unapologetically as ND.

Neurophototherapy is a gentle and playful practice, which can be used at any time and enjoyed at your own pace. In these pages, late ND discovery is reconsidered as recovery from a lifetime of misidentification as an NT person. Many of us will need to engage in a programme of reparative self-care. We've found that Neurophototherapy can also be used effectively to compliment any number of supports including yoga, psychotherapy and nutritional therapy.

Neurophototherapy draws on the inherent benefits of creative practice for self-reflection and affirmation. It combines mentoring insights with ideas for exploring your ND identity unmasked.

# Navigation tip

There is no right or wrong way to read this this book!  
You might like to dive straight into the Examples or read through some of the tips and guidance first.  
Butterfly minds - feel free to flit about as you wish!



Sonia Boué, Butterflies, digital collage 2022 © Sonia Boué 2022

## Before we begin

Let me plant the seed of an idea. We found one striking commonality on the project - the importance of nature in relation to ND identity. Nature featured in our imagery, both as a multi-sensory environment and through an affinity with animals. A bond with animals is a well recognised characteristic for many autistic/ND people.

Yet, I feel something more particular to the project has come into focus. It is as if, through reconnecting with childhood memories and photographs, we experienced a psychological rewilding.

I've come to feel the concept of restoring our neurological ecosystems - rewilding - can provide a compass for unmasking and feeling more at one with ourselves in the natural world.

I believe that inside all of us is a sassy 'wild child' just waiting to come out and play.



Lauren B, She has a little cat, analogue collage 2023 © Lauren B 2023



Lucy Barker, analogue collage, 2023 © Lucy Barker 2023

## Things you need to know

**T**hey say it takes a village to raise a child. I say that it has to be the right village, one which validates ND. Many of us miss out on this validation due to late discovery. What follows can be a longing to find our 'tribe'. Without knowing it, we've hungered for community wisdoms that speak to our neurotype!

The following section offers such community wisdom from our focus group. Here you will find guide ropes for following the method and company for the road. If feeling confident and proud feels a million miles away right now, we hear you. You're not alone. Let's take this one step at a time.

# 1 Creating a neuroverse

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*"Neurophototherapy is the most emotionally immersive and satisfying thing I've ever done. I now know I need to put creativity at the heart of my well-being."*

**Chloe Lawson**

**N**europhototherapy is immersive and each of us chose to create a particular space and atmosphere for our Neurophototherapy work. You can think of this as creating your very own neuroverse.

A spare room was adapted as a sanctuary, a living room was entirely taken over with making, and I lent my studio when no other space felt right. One of us visited a close friend to make collages with their toddler (a perfect playmate!). Collaging in bed with an adapted table was an accessible and cosy solution during a period of ill health.

You may need company to keep you grounded or prefer to be alone - roll with it. Feeling secure is what counts. Listening to familiar voices on the radio or revisiting a favourite childhood tv series helped us access childhood memories and enter into immersive ND flow.

Our focus group taught me that finding a secure environment is central to the method. This makes sense from a therapeutic perspective, but also relates to the autistic/ND need for 'monotropic flow'. By which is meant a flow state accessed through a sustained single focus of attention. Filtering distractions by creating a neuroverse is an act of self-care. Your bed, a duvet, and a tray to work on can be enough. There are no set rules - only your needs and preferences matter. Use whatever works!



Sonja Zelić, digital collage, 2023 @ Sonja Zelić 2023

## 2 'Working with safe things' (compartmentalising)

**W**orking with safe things' is a phrase suggested by group member and art therapist, Helen Robson. It speaks to the core of Neurophototherapy - working with positive associations, and the insights they bring. 'Working with safe things', acts as a brilliant aide memoire to work securely with childhood memories by being purposively selective. Indeed, selecting and filtering source materials is the basis for the method. By asking their family to provide only photographs of them having fun as a child, one participant felt joyful and free. This led to a series of playful explorations, actively helping to counterbalance psychotherapy sessions to manage past trauma.

We found that carefully filtering family archives allowed forgotten yet powerfully affirming memories to surface. It was also possible to compartmentalise more difficult memories by being gentle and taking time. Concerned about stumbling on a difficult memory, one group member decided to be proactive, reclaim the memory and transform it. Ripping out used pages of a notebook associated with a bad experience proved cathartic. Covering the book with positive images felt like a "little act of defiance".

Being intentional about what we work with - to repair negative memories - can also be therapeutic and empowering.



Helen Robson, Photo protection equipment, assemblage, 2023 © Helen Robson 2023

### 3 Memory retrieval - working in stages

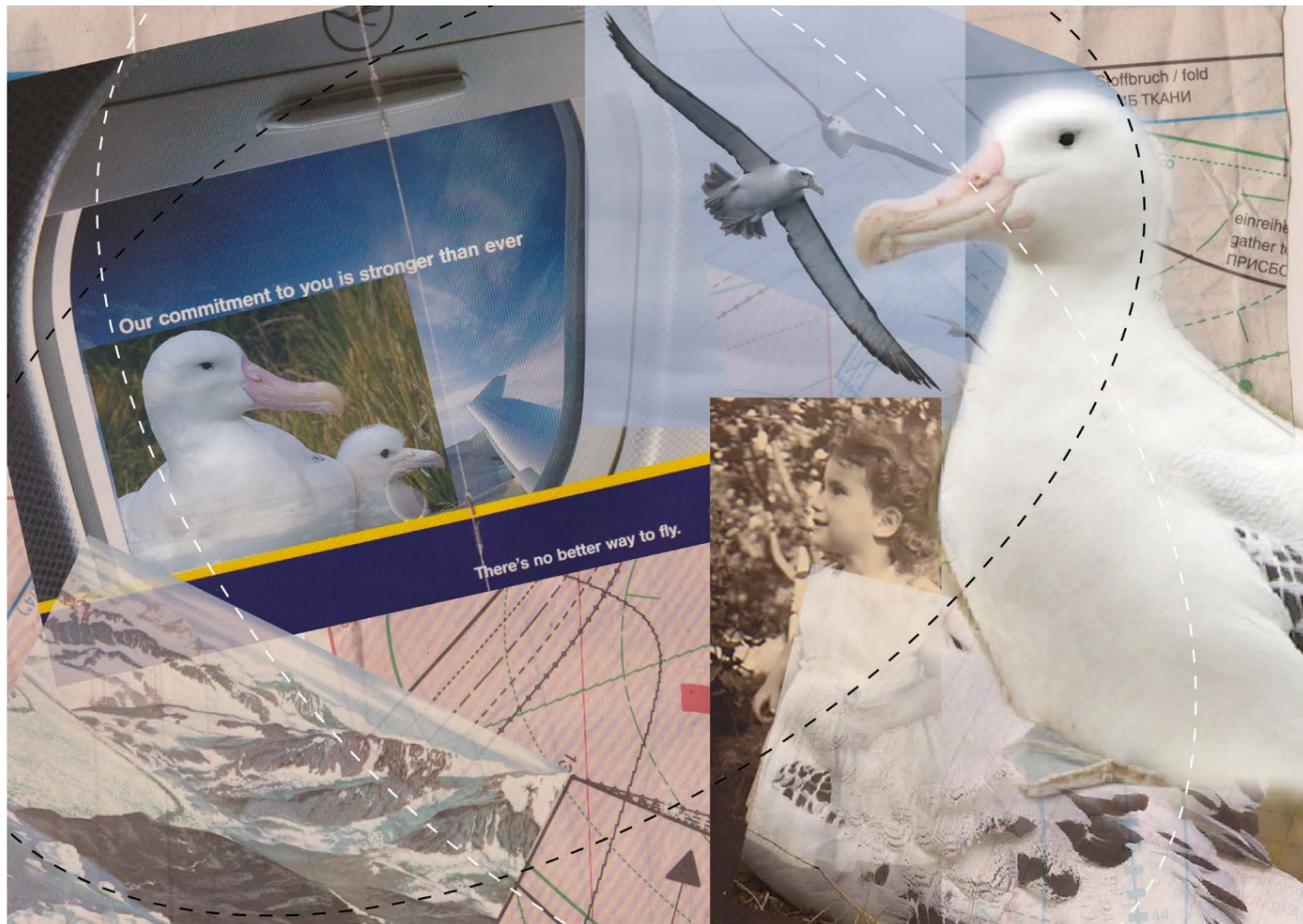
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It was thrilling to see the level of reconnection the group experienced through working with selected childhood photographs and ephemera. Unearthing forgotten memories also brought self-recognition and moments of self-acceptance in which it was possible to counter negative self-talk.

The group also taught me that it might be necessary to work in stages with childhood photographs, and some experienced mixed emotions. You may need to pace out the process of gathering the image sources you choose to work with. Spend as much time as you like! This stage of the work can be immersive and even rapturous, as you spend time gazing at your primary sources - whatever they may be. Visual clues are there to be absorbed and reclaimed in childhood photos and much loved story books, for example. You will doubtless find reflection and insights that can help you begin to pick up the threads.



Chloe Lawson, photograph, 2023 © Chloe Lawson 2023



Sonja Zelić, *There's no better way to fly*, digital collage, 2023 @ Sonja Zelić 2023

## 4 Seeing autism — photographs and self-recognition

**E**ach member of our group chose to work with childhood photographs. I know that for some people this could be impractical or emotionally challenging, and this is why some Neurophototherapy Examples offer alternatives. However, time spent absorbed in childhood photographs proved as joyful and validating for the group, as I had found it to be during the R&D phase. If you have access to childhood photographs and feel ready for this kind of exploration, it appears effective and empowering.

That said, you may need to be ready for some mixed emotions. There can also be some sadness in the often observable contrasts between early (unmasked) photos and later (masked) ones. Many of us may notice a certain awkwardness or discomfort in the images of ourselves as children. There are many photographs in my collection where I can now see that my ligaments were loose (I do strike some extraordinarily contorted poses). I also appear to be wriggling due to scratchy clothing (a tight woollen coat) and obligatory hand holding! The camera doesn't lie. There's bound to be some tenderness to this work - this is why pacing and filtering can be helpful, as we reconnect with our pre-masking selves.

## 5 Suspending judgement 'raw and cooked work'

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**N**europhototherapy is judgement free. Our goals are to practice self-acceptance and unmasking. Yet, I know this can sometimes cause tension when it comes to art making. Many of us will seek to take pleasure in our work and may worry about it not being 'perfect'.

To help unknot tensions between the expressive and the aesthetic, I like to work with the concepts of raw and cooked art work. What do I mean by this? Raw work is made for the purpose of self-expression without formal aesthetic criteria. Cooked work is subject to a process of 'refinement' according to formal considerations, such as line, shape, space, form, tone, texture, pattern, colour and composition. Formal criteria can sometimes get in the way of self-expression. A bit like the saying that our heads rule our hearts.

What matters is to accept whatever you produce as a reflection of where you are and what you need in that moment. This can include aesthetic satisfaction, because raw and cooked approaches can be blended. Only you can know what feels authentically you. This project included professional artists and those with no fine art training - each took an individual approach to the issue of raw and cooked work.

It may help to remember that you can keep your work to yourself, and even shred it when it's served its purpose. I have a stash of 'keep or chuck' works to sort through when a little time has gone by. You'll know what feels right.



*Lucy Barker, analogue collage, 2023 © Lucy Barker 2023*



Naomi Morris, Photo re-enactment, photograph 2023 © Naomi Morris 2023

## 6 Facilitating connection with others

Communication doesn't come easily to many ND, as there can be key differences in the way that we process language and experiences. Therefore, it can be hard to talk about autistic/ND identity, especially when we are newly discovered. A key feature of Neurophototherapy is the autonomy and control it offers, which can be vital if you prefer to work alone. Yet, we found it can be a shared experience in unexpected ways. Time alone mattered greatly to some of us, while others enjoyed involving friends and family. Talking about the method with loved ones was part of the experience for some. Family and friends were also called on to help source images, take photos and stage re-enactments. One group member found it empowering to make social media posts as a means to share aspects of ND identity with their family, when talking about it had felt impossible. Neurophototherapy thus emerged as a potential connector in the process of unmasking. Seeking technical support, sourcing materials, and sharing both the process and the works, are all ways in which this method can support unmasking.

## 7 The benefits of not sticking things down

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Using paperclips to attach collage elements is suggested in the method, because it allows for experimentation and defers decision making. If you find it hard to make choices and/or you love to try things out ad infinitum, not sticking things down could be for you!

We found this technique also worked brilliantly as an access measure for brain fog and physical pain. Armed with a smartphone and the practice of not sticking things down, one group member was able to gently 'power through' and produce 161 images during the project!

The adaptation also offered a heightened sense of freedom and playfulness, while deepening her understanding of her artistic practice. Having someone else pre-cut image sources to avoid the pain of using a cutting knife or scissors removed a further access barrier.



Lucy Barker, analogue clipped tape transfer, 2023 © Lucy Barker 2023





Naomi Morris, *Into the woods*, film stills,  
2023 © Naomi Morris 2023

## Things to think about

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**N**europhototherapy is intended to be playful and gentle but you may worry about encountering painful or traumatic memories because it focuses on early childhood. The following section has been co-written with our focus group to help you think about what you might need in order to feel more safe and secure.

There are four main areas you might want to think about. You will find a list of things you can work through, if you wish. In many ways these bullet points provide a summary of the previous section, 'Things you need to know'. They can act as a prompt, a check list and a confidence booster where needed. They can also guide you towards other areas of self-care you may need to consider.

## Discovery time

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- Discovery is ongoing.
- Time can make a difference to how you feel about trying this method.
- The number of years since an ND discovery will matter for some but not others.
- If it's early days you may need a little more time to feel ready.
- You'll know when you're ready and you can stop at any time if in doubt.
- It's never too late to try Neurophototherapy!
- Additional support could be helpful when trying this process.
- We found this method worked well with yoga, nutritional therapies and psychotherapy etc.
- Consider reading and absorbing the method before you try it.
- Think about what else might be going on in your life which might affect your emotions or capacity for self-exploration.
- There's no pressure, you can return to this method at any time.

## Support

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- Do you have access to supportive people in your life who understand ND?
- If you're feeling alone with things, previous experiences of therapy or counselling can provide a helpful grounding.
- Neurophototherapy can be used with the support of a professional therapist. Finding a network of late discovered ND can also be extremely helpful.
- You can try this method with ND friends (if you prefer this to working alone) and find ways to support each other.
- For example, we worked as a group via WhatsApp and video calls. Some of us also chose to involve family and friends.

## Safe things

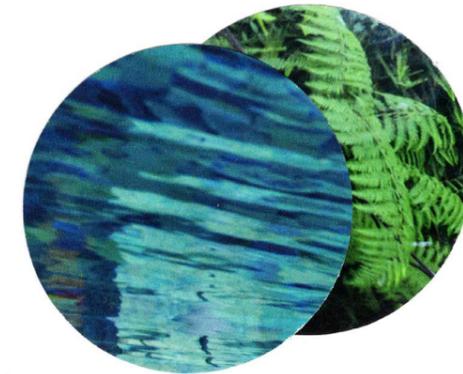
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- Do you have 'safe things' to work with?
- 'Safe things' refers to memories and materials (photos, ephemera, keepsakes).
- Remember that the key to this method is working with positive associations and the insights they bring.
- Carefully Selecting and filtering memories and the image sources you use is also essential and can help you to 'compartmentalise' and feel secure.
- If you had significant trauma in childhood this method may not be suitable without support from a professional trauma therapist.

## Environment

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- Do you need to make a space or create an atmosphere to engage with Neurophototherapy?
- Feeling secure, private and free from distractions mattered to our focus group. Creating such a space for yourself can be simple. It just has to feel right for you. You can think of this as a neuroverse.
- Your neuroverse can be at your kitchen table, in a spare room, at your studio if you have one, or under the duvet if you prefer!
- Immersing yourself in multi-sensory memories can enhance this process. This could be photos, ephemera, audio and/or screen based.
- Feeling playful may come more naturally in your neuroverse.



## How it works

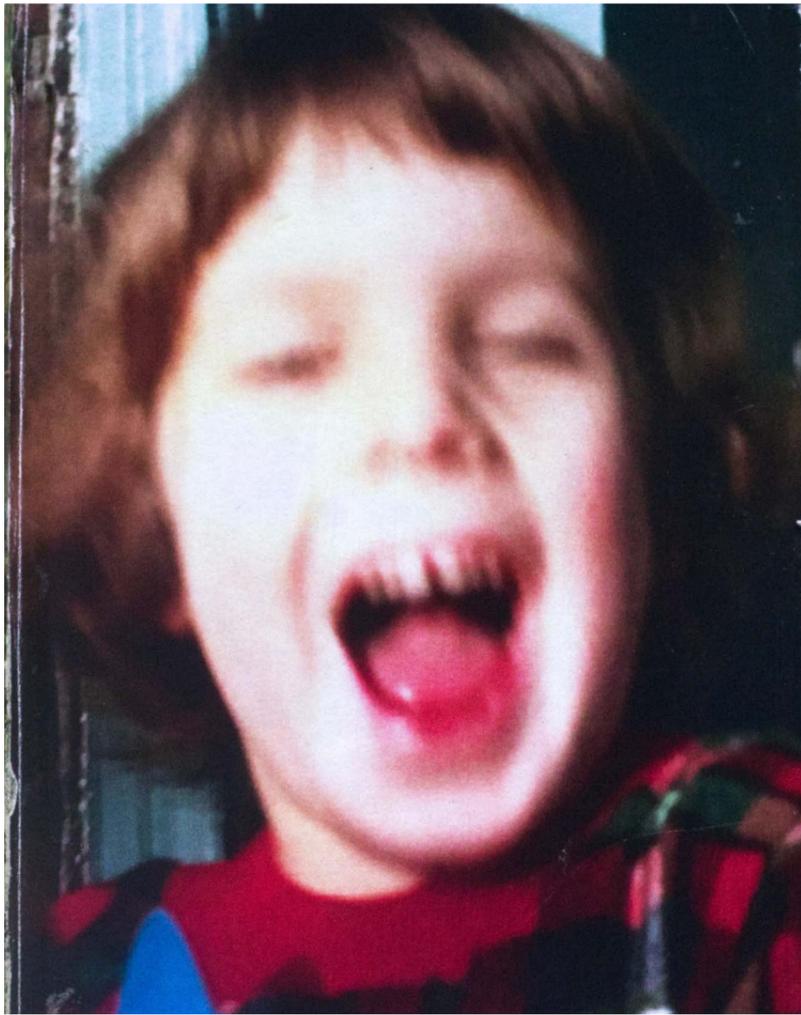
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*"It's a complicated process to unmask and there's no doubt that the creative tools contained in Neurophototherapy enable this to happen iteratively, flexibly and intuitively."*

**Professor Nicola Shaughnessy**

**T**his section describes how Neurophototherapy works to support a process of unmasking following a late discovery of autism/ND. As Prof. Nicola Shaughnessy puts it (in her second essay for this publication) when the moment of discovery comes it can feel as though we have forgotten our lines and our clothes no longer fit us. Without knowing it, we've been performing an identity. Here, learning how to be truer to yourself is deconstructed.

There are eight ways in which Neurophototherapy can ease this rite of passage and set you on your way.



## Reconnect

It can be magical and empowering to reconnect with the sparky kid who didn't mask their autism/ND. I use old family photographs, but there are many ways to do this. The idea is to recover and affirm our most natural instincts through positive associations, and the insights they bring. Identifying memory hotlines to our pre-masking selves makes early childhood our focus.

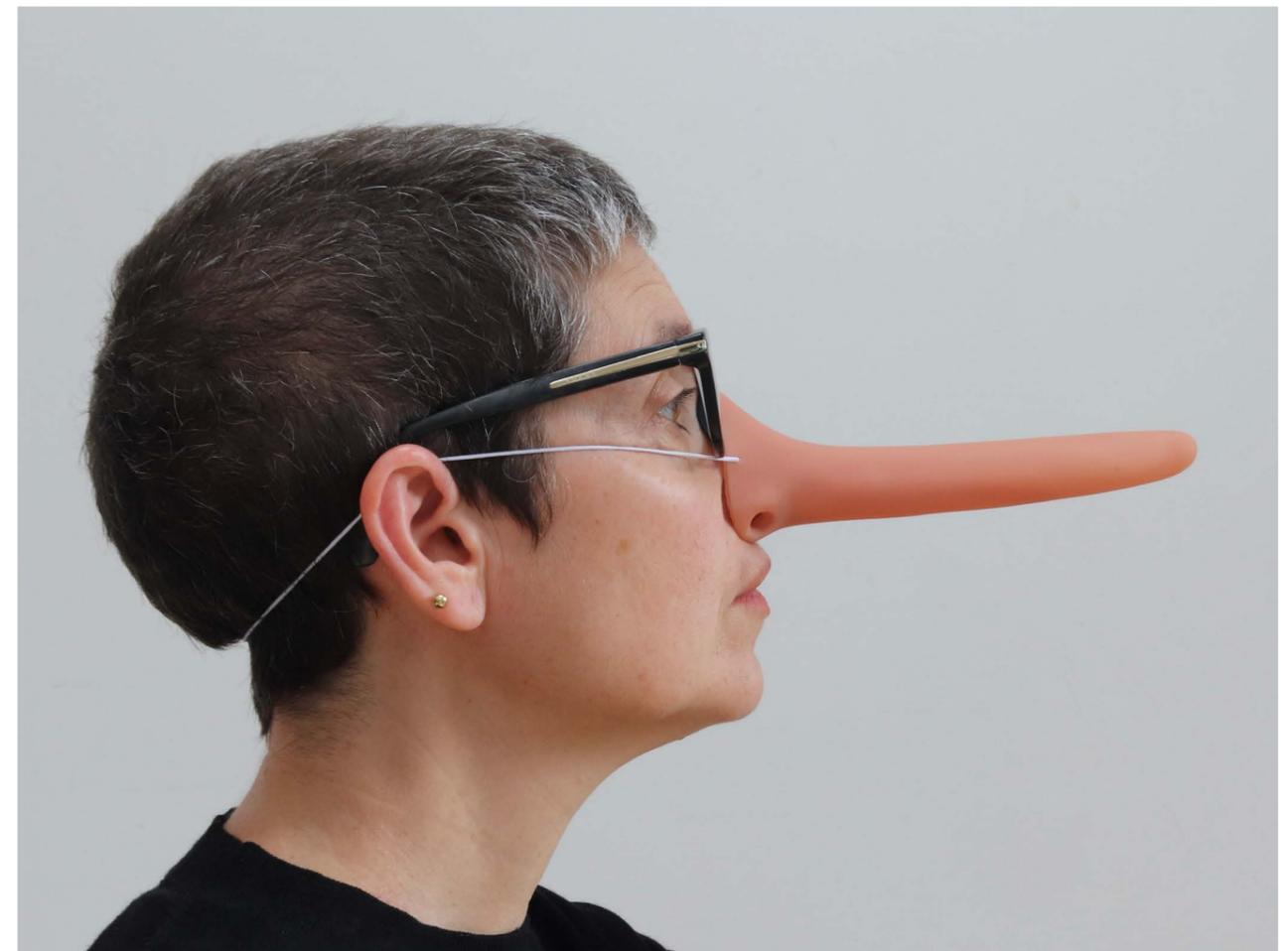
If childhood photos aren't available or appropriate for you, working with fictional characters, places, or objects you strongly identify with your childhood can be wonderful alternatives (see Example 1).

You can begin by collecting images, or make new photographs including selfies (if you're comfortable in front of the camera). You can also take cuttings from magazines and collect ephemera. Having a bank of images is a great way to begin this process. Take as much time as you need.

## Follow your nose

Your instincts are perfect, they've just been misdirected for the longest time. There's no right or wrong way to practice this method. Neurophototherapy celebrates ND creativity in all its colours! Pull faces at the camera, keep your photos to yourself, start at the end, begin in the middle, pick a page at random, let your imagination fly! You don't have to please anyone but yourself.

I followed my nose (literally) by wearing false noses. I discovered my funny bone and devised this project. What will you discover?





## Take control

**N**europhototherapy was inspired by the artist, Jo Spence. Jo explored her identity as a working class woman using Photo Therapy techniques, in collaboration with Rosy Martin. They developed this work together through a previously existing co-counselling relationship.

My method differs in this respect. I control the camera, make all the creative choices, and decide whether to share or keep images private. My collaboration is with the camera lens, my editing software, scissors and glue. I see this as a key ND adaptation for unmasking.

You can - of course - work alone or collaborate, the following note on unmasking may help you decide. We tend to be autodidacts (self-taught or independent learners) and can be misdirected by others, unless we can genuinely unmask. You can also begin by working alone and collaborate (if and) when you feel ready.

## Unmask

**M**asking plays havoc with our boundaries, to begin with we may not know where masking begins and ends. What no-one tells you is that it takes practice to work this out. It's like learning to drive, with all the kangaroo jumps and gear crunches.

Neurophototherapy is a creative test centre where you can practice (without traffic!). Unmasking to yourself can help you to develop clearer boundaries. As this process of unmasking develops, you can begin to gain confidence and experience more authentic connections with others.

Neurophototherapy doesn't do away with masking - I'm not sure this is possible. Masking is highly complex and situational. There will always be times when masking is useful and even necessary. Unmasking can also sometimes backfire. We mask for good reason because stigma is real. What this method seeks to help you nurture, is a playful unmasking you can build on and which you can control.





## Therapeutic objects

**N**europhototherapy draws on a basic principle of art therapy - that artworks made in therapy (therapeutic objects) act as a mirror to the self. In art therapy, insights and reflections are shared in conversation with the therapist.

Neurophototherapy is a playful conversation with the self, and our photographs and collages can also act as mirrors. This is valuable because as NDs we have so often lacked visibility and genuine reflection in the NT world. We need to integrate sensory feedback and process our emotions - this can be achieved through the images and objects we create. Without accurate ND reflection, how can we place ourselves in the world? As the saying goes, we need to see it, to be it.

Neurophototherapy has anchored me. The more I see myself reflected authentically in my works, the more empowered I become, and the more 'real' I feel. This is why I want to share my method with you.

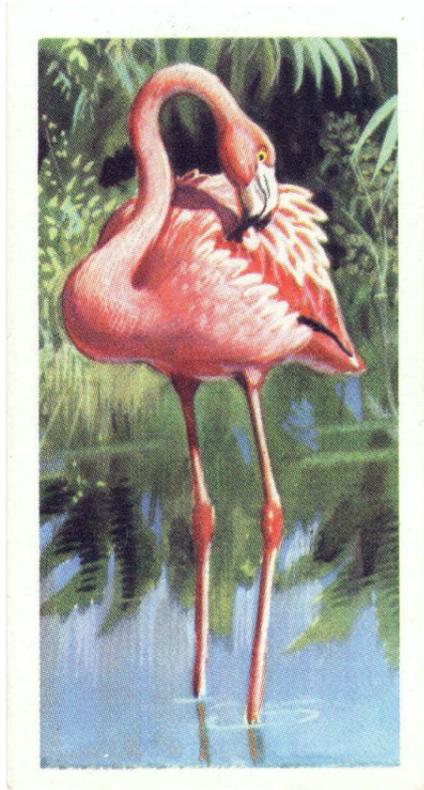
## Self-talk

**N**D discovery can make us feel vulnerable. Other people can also find it hard to adjust to you, as you begin to unmask. Finding some headspace for self-talk by making images and objects can offer a mental health life-line.

I use self-talk creatively, and I also really do talk to myself to counter negative voices in my head. Doing so is a great example of unmasking! The benefit is that I no longer spend sleepless nights trying to process ill-fitting NT social expectations. This simple brooch is my self-talk keepsake, subtly critiquing normalcy. I've found that with practice, unhelpful social messaging seems to slip away. My brooch always gives me a boost, and when I wear it I gently unmask. Tellingly, this object goes unnoticed in NT spaces, and is met with delight in ND ones. It acts as my talisman and totem.

Oh, how I love a secret signal! Making self-talk objects you can take with you or wear in NT spaces can be gleeful and empowering.





## Flipping the narrative

**A** late ND discovery prompts us to see our lives through a new lens. We will probably need to counter internalised stigma - the awful idea that we're broken and need fixing. We're not broken, and we don't need fixing! What we need is to live authentically and without apology. For this, it helps to flip the narrative. I also describe this as push-back - a term I love!

Origin Story - the online exhibition I created for the R&D project - does exactly this (see pp.74-83). In it, I weave a biographical fable relating to a series of anecdotes from birth to the present day, to make sense of my late discovery. I paint a picture of myself as a whole and harmonious being, who knew exactly who she was before social conditioning got in the way. Reworking your life story creatively can be a powerfully self-healing process. You can do this with one image or a series. I found writing a narrative to accompany the images enhanced its power and effect.

It's an opportunity to celebrate yourself and focus on your triumphs. We were never meant to be NT. We are perfect NDs.

## Resetting your compass

**T**he less time we spend masking, the more energy we can devote to our wellbeing. This shift may take you in new and unexpected directions as you work your way to congruence.

I think it helps to understand that discovery is a beginning, and usually not an end point. So take your time, and be self-forgiving. It's not possible to untangle it all in one go. Neurophototherapy is one self-help support which could ease you on your way alongside other forms of wellbeing practices and self-care.

As you grow in confidence, elements of your life (within your control) can be shaped more comfortably around you and your needs. The blog section of the Autistic Health and Wellbeing website offers information about wellbeing practices that others have found beneficial from a lived experience perspective (<https://autismhwb.com/>).



## Examples

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## Where do I begin? (for those who need structure)

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Neurophototherapy is a practice without rules! The following suggestions may help if you need a starting point and ideas for creating a structure.

- Use a notebook to make a list of relevant preparatory actions - for example, preparing a neuroverse and filtering your memories and image sources.
- Gather what you think you might need before proceeding to the exercises - be as methodical as you like with your prep!
- When you're ready, you can either work through the exercises in sequence, or mix it up. There is no set order. Also, do feel free to skip any exercises that don't feel right. Make sure you feel comfortable enough to explore, but don't go beyond your comfort zone.
- You can make a note of tasks, actions and goals as you work through each exercise, if this helps you keep on track.
- Adding visuals to your notebook is something to consider - you could add the images you plan to use and practice layouts, if that suits your style.
- At the end of each exercise, you can make reflective notes to enhance your Neurophototherapy process - what did you learn, how did you feel, what actions might you take?

# Basic equipment

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## COLLAGE

- Scanner - I like to scan at high resolution for print outs, but scanning at low resolution is also fine.
- Xerox printer - I use Xerox (laser) prints and magazines to make tape transfers. Unfortunately, inkjet printed materials tend to wash off the tape in the water. 'Our Upcycled Life' on YouTube has a video tutorial for this technique called - 'The Great Packing Tape Transfer Hack.'
- Sharp scissors - I have several pairs of scissors in various sizes. Use what works for you for the job at hand and the scale you like to work at. You can also rip and tear paper to get some interesting textures in your collages.
- Cutting knives and a cutting mat - I use these all the time and have a variety of cutting knives which are easy to source on the high street and are also inexpensive. The trick is to replace the blades frequently to maintain an accurate cut.
- Glue sticks - I prefer Pritt, but any brand will do - although they do vary. I've found that some of the bargain glue sticks are prone to peel off!
- Clear packing tape - for tape transfers. I like the Gorilla brand but it is quite pricey and heavy duty. Scotch tape and other home brands also have great packing tape which is lighter duty.
- A bone folder - I use this letter opening tool for burnishing (rubbing down and securing layers to a collage surface after gluing). You can also use the back of a metal spoon!

## PHOTOGRAPHY

- DSLR camera - I love my DSLR camera, but these days a smartphone camera will have many of the same features. A smartphone camera has the advantage of more accessible and intuitive in-camera editing software.
- Editing software - I use Affinity on my iMac rather than Photoshop, but you can simply edit on your phone, if needed.
- Tripod - I use one for performance photographs, but it's not essential.
- White walls - I prefer a clean background for my images, but any background you prefer will do as long as the light is good.

# Example 1

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## Working with a fictional character

An alternative to working with childhood photographs.



Illustration source: *Mrs Pepperpot and the Magic Wood* was written by Alf Prøysen and illustrated by Berg Bjorn, 1973.

It is logical that our natural interests and likes will reflect our ND. For the project, I reconnected with a much loved childhood friend, and rediscovered a universe entirely relatable in the present moment. I felt at once enveloped by and reflected in Alf Prøysen's Mrs Pepperpot stories. I was surprised to find Mrs Pepperpot has been the subject of academic study and emerges as a proper ND role model! There is a powerful message of universal acceptance and connectedness to the natural world in these magical pages.

In many ways, recovery is about hunting for clues to our lost identities. I hope you too will strike gold!

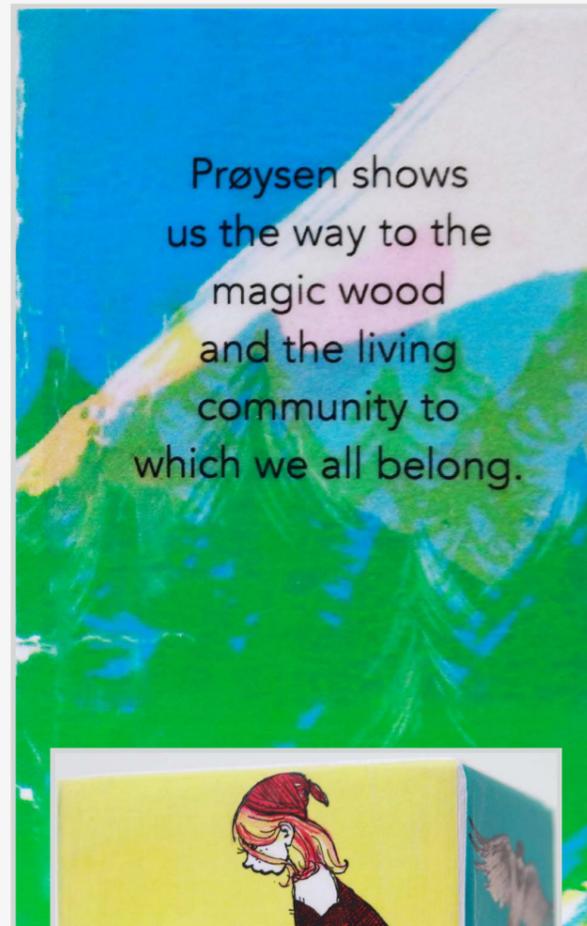


Illustration source: *Little Old Mrs Pepperpot* by Alf Prøysen was illustrated by Berg Bjorn, 1974.

Simple objects such as blocks, cards and card holders can be transformed with basic printouts and tape transfer layers. Here, I chose to make some affirmation cards by harvesting Mrs Pepperpot's characteristics from academic papers and layering them over Berg Bjorn's sumptuous illustrations. So many of these qualities speak to unmasked empowerment.



## Example 2

### Performance photography/collage

Since discovering I'm ND, I've found my way back to performance, having been stage shy all my life. This kind of performance photography helps me feel whole and in harmony with myself while communicating wordlessly. Bliss!



During the first lockdown I began making images in which I cover my face - a great option for the camera shy! Paradoxically, I found that covering my face enabled me to unmask. Using performance photography, I can play out my fantasies and stay in control. Despite being heavy, this typewriter is what I'd love to wear to parties, when I'm feeling shy.



Simple analogue cut and paste methods can also be incredibly effective in enacting powerful imagery. I like to build up layers (here a magazine, printed and cut out bird wings and a home printed photograph), and use paperclips so that I can change my mind and keep experimenting. As mentioned earlier, the benefits of not sticking things down are endless - a quick photographic capture seals the image for you.

Performance photographs can thus be easily transformed with collage elements. I love how Neurophototherapy allows me to blend performative images with collage elements to create simple yet effective photomontages.

## Example 3

### Taking Neurophototherapy for a walk

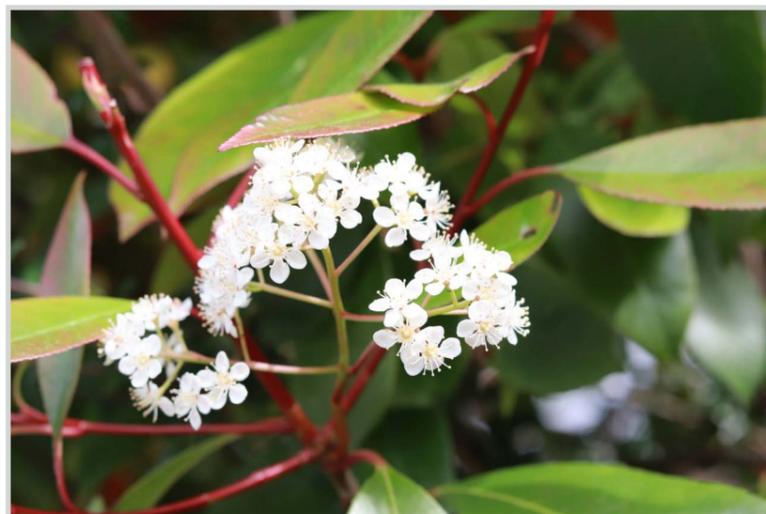
I was inspired to think about using Neurophototherapy outdoors by Dr. Dawn-joy Leong's research at the R&D stage of this project. One of her participants in Singapore used the method to dress up in a disguise and go to the zoo. This struck me as a genius move. What if this method could support someone experiencing agoraphobia, like myself and many other NDs during the height of the pandemic?



I decided to take Neurophototherapy outdoors to support my anxiety and help me connect with the outside world. Guess what? Focusing on photography helped me filter harsh sensory environments and I could shop in my own way. I began not to care who might be looking. I was too busy embodying iconic street photographers like Vivian Dorothy Maier. I still imagine I'm on an assignment when I hit the streets with my camera and my anxiety fades away.



A further benefit is that playing with reflections feels mirroring and affirming. This is a form of unmasking too.



## Example 4

### Working with objects

Objects are forgiving and friendly - I wonder if you will identify with objects too?

Since developing Neurophototherapy, I'm bolder about many things - including asserting my ND identity in my creative work. Unmasking has helped me to link my (rapturous) feelings about the important objects in my life to my ND. Working with objects summons the inner child whose best friends often were objects. I loved their stillness and reassuring presence. I still do!



Objects can be so quirky and charismatic that they speak an entire language of their own. I love to photograph the objects I collect in my studio. In many ways, my studio is a living self-portrait. Therefore, each object I photograph in it seems to capture a facet of unmasked me. When I work with objects I feel viscerally connected to the tiny person who hadn't yet learned to mask!

For example, I was fascinated and overjoyed to spot that this vintage doll seems to make a thumbs-up gesture or is trying to hitch a ride! Others have told me that the dolls hand is moulded in this way so that it can suck its thumb! Aha! ND me saw something else, because the thumbs-up emoji is my favourite emoji, and emojis are my go-to communication (particularly when I'm feeling overwhelmed). These images of the doll's thumb - of which I took dozens - reflect my need to capture my ND sensory world. They are a subtle form of covert unmasking. I find them entralling and quite beautiful, sharing them is empowering and gives me so much joy.

I wonder what kind of objects will fascinate you and bring you joy?



## Example 5

Collaging objects



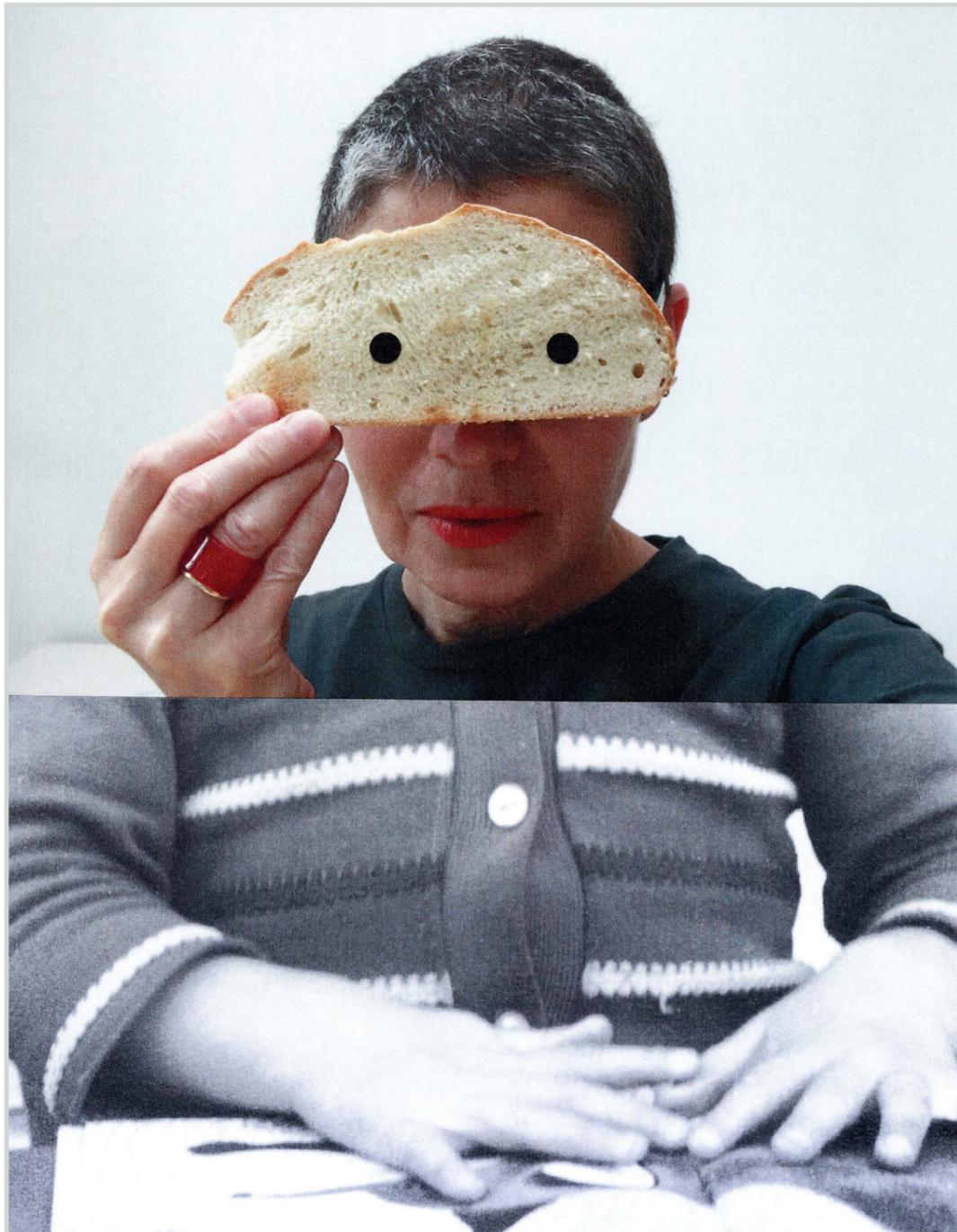
With Neurophototherapy, self-affirmation can be powerful yet simple.

Working with a set of vintage toy blocks proved a versatile and deeply satisfying way to reconnect with mini unmasked me. You can collage any surface of your choice - I went to town covering thimbles, vanity sets and jiffy bags with images of my face at all stages of my life. I couldn't get enough of it! Reclaim space and make yourself visible on any kind of object you please. In my fantasy world, I would commission Sonia Boué stamps, paper money and coins. Why not?



## Example 6

Collaging past and present

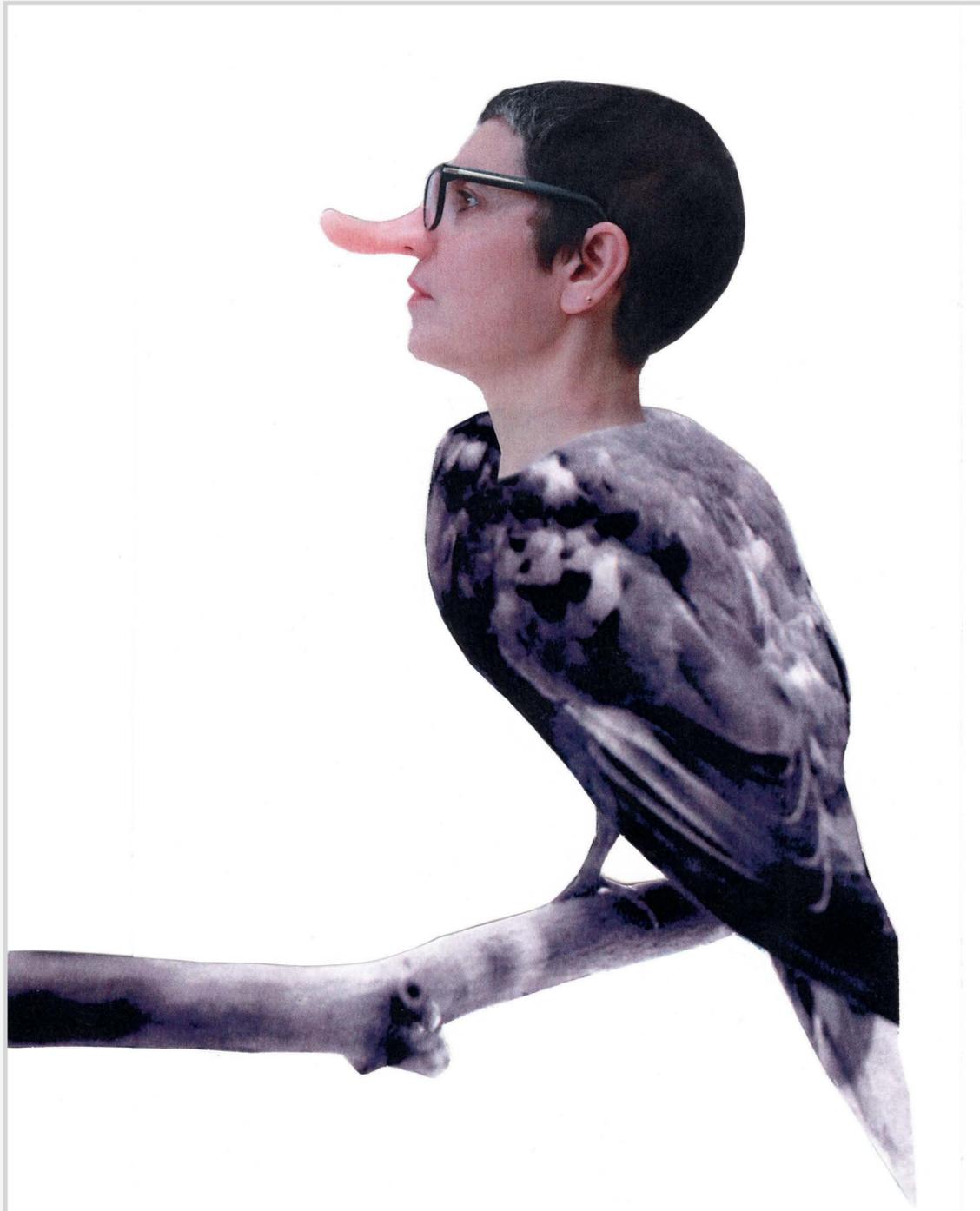


Recover, and reclaim! Collage provides us with a wonderful metaphor for recovering a fragmented identity. Through this practice we can discover that we were never broken versions of NT people. What we needed was the opportunity to 'regroup' our identities as ND people.

Through the simplest collage technique in the world - splicing two images together - I've found a way to connect past and present. I call this particular Neurophototherapy process 'meeting myself in the middle'. It is almost impossible to put into words how important it felt to match my features from a school photograph taken when I was 13, to a contemporary shot of myself as the artist I am today. My gaze is constant and I can join up lips and noses, despite differences in scale. In affirming this, somehow my ND identity locks in. I feel the warm rush of congruence.

## Example 7

### Being more you



In many ways, ND discovery is a process of unlearning and becoming. As we reconnect with our pre-masking inner child, we may also begin to redefine who we are now, and how we want to live.

For me, this has involved exploring my affinity with birds. One of my earliest memories is of drawing birds in my first years of primary school. It remains a vivid sensory recollection of deep pleasure and pride - I was on the cusp of masking but still free.

Neurophototherapy has enabled me to inhabit and explore this connection to the early me, who loved to draw birds, by working with collage, performance photography and photomontage.





Being more me means being more bird and allowing time to spend in ways that make me feel free from NT expectations. I wonder what being more you means?

## Example 8

### Re-enactment/dressing up to reconnect

There is something magical about a re-enactment photograph. You will have spotted Naomi Morris' striking re-enactment photograph in the 'Things to know' section. Re-enactment involves a visceral revisiting of the past through recreating a childhood photograph. In so doing, there is an opportunity to reconnect with our former selves. Naomi chose to make her re-enactment photograph as accurate as possible. You can also stage a looser re-enactment using collage. In the absence of an original photograph, I drew on memory and used performance photography and tape transfer collage elements to reembody a ballet scene from my childhood (p.72).

It may help to know that you can interpret re-enactment work in many ways, you will know when it feels right. You can re-enact a memory, in any way you choose, if you don't have a photograph to guide you.





Dressing up also formed a huge part of my early childhood. It has therefore been a powerful way for me to embody my inner child and bring her to the fore of my consciousness. For the R&D, I commissioned some costumes, inspired by my mothers dressmaking and the wonderful dressing-up box she made for tiny me. Shop-bought stand-ins are equally powerful, I find, and sourcing affordable dressing-up items at charity shops is one of my greatest pleasures. Often, found items of clothing conjure an atmosphere I want to recreate in a photograph - and like objects, clothes represent a language of their own.

# Origin story

Origin Story is an online exhibition published on my website in 2021, ([www.soniaboue.co.uk](http://www.soniaboue.co.uk)).

It is a great example of 'flipping the narrative' - it reinvents my life story as a fable told from a neurodivergent perspective using primary sources from my family collection, including a tutu and bedroom curtains made by my mother. A contemporary tutu and coat dress were made by Ann Tutt.



*Sonia Boué, Birth Tree, photograph, 2021 © Sonia Boué 2021*

I grew up under a tree in a prop department. My mother made the costumes while my father acted, directed and wrote plays. He said I should be on the stage as I showed an early gift for slapstick and other comedic arts.



Sonia Boué, *I am I because my little dog knows me*, photomontage, 2021 © Sonia Boué 2021

In Mexico City in 1964 at the age of two, I let go of a beautiful red helium balloon to see what would happen, having been told not to. Devastated when it floated away, I recovered my composure by swallowing a burst balloon and two pesos. I also enjoyed talking to dogs.



Sonia Boué, *Nose Tree*, photomontage, 2021 © Sonia Boué 2021

They called me the earthquake because I could literally shake the room. This innate ability lay dormant when school intervened.



Sonia Boué, Flamingo, photomontage, 2021 © Sonia Boué 2021

I had two left feet and famously froze in my debut performance of Winter Wonderland for the Woodland's School of Stage Dancing in 1971. This was unfortunate because I had mastered 'flamingo' in Mexico after seeing my first flamenco performance. In my mind's eye, I am full of grace.



Sonia Boué, Pink Panther, Photomontage, 2021 © Sonia Boué 2021

I adored our colour TV and the Pink Panther.



*Sonia Boué, Nosey, Photomontage, 2021 © Sonia Boué 2021*

I must have been wise beyond my years. My grandfather remarked I was the only one who understood 'la cosa', meaning the thing. He never elaborated, but I knew grown-ups told lies and seemed utterly silly. I developed a parallel existence, and as a child I often found my sensory acuity to be at odds with my surroundings. I now have a fascination for noses.



*Sonia Boué, At the Picasso Museum, Photomontage, 2021 © Sonia Boué 2021*

At an early age I was overcome at the Picasso Museum in Barcelona. Impressed by the cubist portraits, I determined to be an artist.



*Sonia Boué, A watch, two cats and some trees, Photomontage, 2021 © Sonia Boué 2021*

I peaked at the age of 5 with my narrative painting about finding my mother's gold watch winder in the thick pile carpet of our apartment, when the grown-ups had long given up. It was a triumph of determination later undermined by my 'education'.



*Sonia Boué, Untethered, Photomontage, 2021 © Sonia Boué 2021*

Untethered from my dreams, I became invisible. It took many years to find my way back to my origins with a camera, scissors and glue. What had felt so remote had always been within reach. It turns out my grandfather was right. I was the only one who understood the thing.

A is the first letter of the alphabet and A is for autism.

## Essays

The following essays written by Dr. Joanne Limburg and Prof. Nicola Shaughnessy were commissioned for both the R&D and follow-on Neurophototherapy projects. To my delight, they have approached the Neurophototherapy method with a participatory spirit and thus they have both contributed to it and enriched our understanding.

These essays are themselves exercises in unmasking and collage - traversing both written and visual forms to deconstruct the method and ND identity transition and make new meaning out of the process. Replete with academic knowledge and references, they are also generously auto-ethnographic (in that they connect personal experiences to wider cultural and social meanings). Their close attention to the text manifests as an act of care both moving and redolent of autistic/ND culture itself. I couldn't ask for a more perfect accompaniment to this work.

The essays are presented here to provide conceptual nourishment and further examples of community engagement from two writerly and learned perspectives. I'm awed by what they have produced in response to the Neurophototherapy method.

I believe that these essays will be of interest to the lay reader and academics alike, and that they point to further iterations of Neurophototherapy.

Please note there are references to suicide on pages 87-88 and 117.



# Dr. Joanne Limburg

## NEUROPHOTOTHERAPY AND SELF-RECOVERY

As more women and people of marginalised genders receive late diagnoses of autism, they join a growing pool of adults who are faced with the task of re-interpreting the events of their earlier lives and, in the process, re-configuring their sense of self. When I was diagnosed at 42, I was able to fall back on my established practice as a poet, and wrote *The Autistic Alice*, a sequence in which I took a lifelong interest of mine, Lewis Carroll's Alice books, and combined them with fragments of memory to write poems which re-cast my developing self as an 'Alice', who has to learn to navigate a world which seems to her to be both capricious and nonsensical.<sup>1</sup>

I was fortunate that my writing practice was available to me, and also grateful that I was able to use social media to draw on the support of other late-diagnosed autistic women and non-binary people. One of the women I met on Twitter was the visual artist Sonia Boué. Boué is currently developing Neurophototherapy, which she has defined as 'a creative practice based self-recovery tool for late-discovered autistic women and marginalised genders'.<sup>2</sup> Although I work with words rather than visual images, 'self-recovery' through 'creative practice' would be an accurate way of describing what I was doing with my Alice poems, and at the same time Boué's own autobiographical images, like the poems, use seemingly incongruous collage elements to articulate aspects of self for which the non-autistic culture has given us no direct means of expressing.

The idea that one could reintegrate aspects of a fragmented self through creative practice was also familiar to me from the research into literature and trauma recovery which I had undertaken as part of my PhD. As Neurophototherapy is still in its early stages, I have decided to take another look at trauma theory and figure out if it might offer anything that

could be useful in conceptualising this developing practice. As autistic self-recovery tends to go hand-in-hand with the working-through of complex trauma, it seemed very likely that I would find something worth keeping there.

### Trauma, Autistic Experience, and the Unspeakable

One recurring theme in the literature on trauma is the impossibility of giving voice, coherently or intelligibly, to traumatic experience. There is something in the nature of this kind of experience that baffles both language and representation. It could even be argued that trauma, being incoherent and unintegrated, is not even available to be experienced, since the idea of experience assumes a level of psychic cohesion which trauma, by definition, disrupts.

This definition of trauma, from the psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell, conveys some idea of how fundamental this disruption is:

*A trauma, whether physical or psychical, must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss. The severity of the breach is such that even if the incident is expected, the experience cannot be foretold. We cannot thus make use of anxiety as a preparatory signal. The death of a sick relative, the amputation of a diseased limb may be consciously known about in advance, but if they are to be described as traumatic then the foreknowledge was useless. In trauma, we are untimely ripped.<sup>3</sup>*

I would assume that the 'usual mechanisms' of processing experience include those which relate to representing that experience coherently to oneself and others, and integrating it into an unfolding narrative of the self (something which you cannot do if you have been ripped out of time). One thing that becomes clear from trauma theory is that 'self' and 'others' can't be entirely separated in this process. The resources we have as individuals are drawn from a common cultural pool, and when we recount our experiences, our audiences are usually able to understand us because their interpretations of what we tell them are drawn from that same shared pool. My research into trauma was prompted by my own experiences after

the suicide of my brother, and I remember the chilling sense of isolation I felt when someone would say, well-meaningly, that they ‘couldn’t imagine’ how I must be feeling. When most members of a society cannot imagine an experience you have, because the common cultural pool does not contain the resources with which to represent it, then that experience places you outside society. This, of course, compounds the trauma.

I think it’s fair to say that the common cultural pool lacks the material necessary for representing autistic experience. Where autistic experience is also trauma, it could be described as ‘unspeakable’. But it would be a mistake to think that autistic experience is synonymous with trauma. There is also autistic joy, autistic creativity, autistic relating, autistic just-getting-on-with-it. These aspects of experience are not unspeakable because they are wounds in the sense of self, but because they are aspects of the self that have never been acknowledged or received by the social and cultural world around them, and which have therefore never been represented back to the individual concerned. We’re not talking about a fractured self, but a self which has yet to be assembled. You cannot put yourself together without a mirror to show you where everything should be.

As Lacan suggests in his conception of the Mirror Stage, an infant which has never learned to identify itself in the mirror has missed out on a crucial stage of becoming a person. Here’s what should happen, according to Lacan:

*This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infant stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. 4*

In order to become an integrated individual who can communicate with others, we must first be able to imagine ourselves to ourselves, represent ourselves to ourselves. Literal reflections play a part, but so do the reflections we might find or fail to find in the way others react to us, and in the kinds of selves society presents to us as imaginable.



*SAFE AS HOUSES series 2020, Commissioned for the Online Exhibition Thresholds at MIMA © Sonia Boué 2020*

It makes sense that in our autobiographical artistic projects, both Boué and I make use of mirrors. In my case, the mirror is Alice’s looking-glass, a symbolic membrane between two realities, two different versions of self. Boué has produced a series of pictures which feature her holding a hand mirror. In the picture above, she is holding the mirror up to her face, but reversed so that all it shows to the camera is the reflection of the opposite wall. In this way, Boué is blanked out. If we think of the mirror as the realm of what can be imagined, both individually and collectively, in which Lacan’s infants learn to recognise and assemble their coherent selves, then this picture conveys what happens when that realm offers you nothing that corresponds to your sense of self in any comfortable way. You can then either assemble a copy of what you see others making, or you can fail to appear in the mirror – the Social Imaginary – at all. The assemblage of a copy is what we call masking; the parts of us which fail to appear will remain unimagined, unspoken, unthought.

#### **After Diagnosis**

When we seek – or come to – a diagnosis late in life, we hope that the diagnosis will allow us to sort through our identities and narratives, discarding what we can now recognise as borrowed and inauthentic, while



recognising and assimilating those parts of ourselves which can now be named and represented. We look for ourselves in our diagnostic notes, in popular fictional and non-fictional representations of autistic people, on the websites of autism charities and research institutes. And generally, if we are women or of a marginalised gender, or do not present in the way autistics are assumed to present, or both,

then we will find that the same factors which delayed our diagnosis are now preventing or at least complicating the assimilation of that diagnosis. Because autistics, as represented using the common pool of resources, are not the autistics we experience ourselves as being. And so we have to make our own mirrors, or adapt them, source and assemble our own resources.

Sonia Boué's online exhibition, *Origin Story*, is both a narrative and an act of such retrospective self-assembly. In this multi-media autobiographical work, Boué narrates a version of her early life over a series of images, collages of old photographs, objects and performance art. The photograph, 'In the Picasso Museum' is a good example. The accompanying text reads: 'A shot of adult Sonia Boué from the waist up, wearing a very colourful floral dress with large blue lapels. Her face is entirely covered with a collage made with spliced photos of her face as a young child.'<sup>5</sup> Boué takes these fragments of herself, her narrative and her identity, which have been separated by time, by context and by medium, and assembles them into a new integrated version of self.

When I consider this image, I'm reminded again of ideas I've encountered in trauma theory, in this case in the book *Shattered Subjects*, where the literary critic Suzette Henke explores the work of writers such as Janet Frame, Audre Lorde and Sylvia Fraser. Henke examines autobiographies and autobiographical novels by these writers and shows how they could be read as attempts to address traumatic experience.<sup>6</sup> In Henke's account, each writer is occupying three different

subject positions in the course of their work: the writing self, which is engaged in the work of re-collection, repair and reconstruction; the earlier, fragmented self, which she seeks to redeem through a process of 'narrative recovery'; lastly, the later, unified self, which is the result of her work. The writer's task is twofold: first she must express and testify to the fragmented nature of the earlier self, and then she must unify it. Through her writing, she is then able to render her traumatic experience thinkable, knowable and speakable.

If I apply this model to Boué's image, I believe I can identify three such subject positions: the cut-up photograph represents the earlier, incoherent, unmirrored self; the full image, which brings earlier Sonia and later Sonia together through the practices of performance art and collage, represents a re-assembled, unified self; Sonia-the-artist is the subject who has brought this transformation about, and she is present implicitly as the unifying force, but also explicitly, as the adult woman in playful costume. To my mind, the costumes and mirrors in Boué's work have their own redemptive power, as they reclaim the act of masking and assembling performative selves as a conscious, joyful act of play.

There is a dynamic relationship between these three subject positions: in the process of making art, the artist is able to bring different parts of the self into communication with each other. Neurophototherapy is, as Boué says, 'therapy with a small t', in that it is practice devised for use without a therapist or co-counsellor present. The participant is at once the client, the therapist and the medium for the therapy. Working at their own pace, with their own materials, participants may then 'benefit from a gentle 'life review'/journaling at their own pace and with all the elements of the process within their control, choosing whether and when to share images.'

### **Sharing images, sharing practice**

Boué writes that one of the benefits of Neurophototherapy for her has been that it 'has enabled me to articulate my neurological being as a 'congruent entity'. Creating and sharing my images has been empowering. I experience a more authentic and seamless connection with the neuronormative world.' I have suggested that one thing which traumatic experience and pre-diagnosis autistic experience have in common is their resistance to conventional forms of articulation. In Boué's work, we can see

an artist re-purposing and re-combining what the world has offered her – photography, the practice of collage, stock images, props, Photo Therapy - to first articulate herself as a ‘congruent entity’ and to then communicate that entity to the ‘neuronormative’ world.

For autistic people, this may be the first time they have been able to experience such a ‘seamless connection’ to the community.<sup>7</sup> In the context of trauma, therapists, psychologists and literary critics have discussed the way in which traumatic events, because of their unspeakable nature, ‘shatter the sense of connection between individual and community.’ In my own research, I have explored some of the ways in which other writers and I have used poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction as means of re-building these connections. In both contexts, some degree of creative autonomy is vital to the process: the individual needs to be able to put something of her own self into the material, which the world can then receive. This seems like an important point to me, and might go some way towards explaining why behaviour-based ‘interventions’ into autism do not have the same healing effect, and can even harm. The process of integration of the individual into the community has to involve some give-and-take on both sides. This also has a parallel in the work of healing trauma. In their book, *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narratives and Human Rights*, Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly discuss how the inflexible, legal processes adopted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission actually perpetuated the harm they were intended to address, by mistranslating and misrepresenting testimony from many witnesses.<sup>8</sup> The testimony was adapted for official use without truly being heard. Researchers and clinicians who work with autistic people need to take care that the parameters in which they work do not constrain communications and relationships to the point where they become mechanical and hollow.

I have one more point to make with regard to Neurophototherapy and community, and that is to say that we are really talking about communities in the plural. When an individual participates in the practice, she is establishing a connection with the ‘neuronormative world’ but also sharing something with the growing, developing neurodivergent community. When autistic artists and writers develop and share practice as Boué does, we are helping to build a mirror in which this community can begin to recognise itself.

<sup>1</sup> Limburg, Joanne, *The Autistic Alice*, (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Boué, Sonia, *Neuro | Sonia Boué Art*

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, Juliet, ‘Trauma, Recognition, and the Place of Language’, *diacritics* 28, 4 (Winter 1998), pp 121-33.

<sup>4</sup> Lacan, Jacques, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’, *Ecrits*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977) Retrieved from: *The Mirror Stage* (mtu.edu) 18.8.2023

<sup>5</sup> All images and quotes taken from Sonia Boué’s website.

<sup>6</sup> Henke, Suzette, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000)

<sup>7</sup> Herman, Judith Lewis, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, (London, Pandora, 2010), p 55

<sup>8</sup> Jensen, Meg and Jolly, Margaretta (Eds) *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narratives and Human Rights* (Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography), (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014)

## COLOURS: AN UNMASKED ESSAY ON NEUROPHOTOTHERAPY

### Introduction

When Sonia Boué asked me to write a second essay for Neurophototherapy 2, my first impulse was to do what I had been trained to do all the way through my education, and what I had done for Neurophototherapy 1, which was to revisit some of the theory I had relied on in previous academic projects, and find ways to apply it to the new practice which Sonia was developing. I fully accepted the truth universally acknowledged that any new praxis must be in want of a theory – how is anyone to take it seriously otherwise? How are we to know that thinking has taken place, that knowledge has been generated, unless we see it set out in recognised theoretical terms, complete with references? How is anyone to recognise that I, as the author, think and know? What possible credibility could I have otherwise?

Following an online meeting with Sonia, I thought about what she had told me about this second phase of the project, particularly about the way participants had worked in different physical spaces and asynchronously, constituted as a group only through their shared purpose, shared practice and by the consistent presence of Sonia as the coordinator. I thought about time and space, how they work or fail to work in learning environments, in therapeutic environments. I looked up the literature on autistic people in educational and clinical settings, but had to stop reading straight away because of that all-too-familiar feeling that I was myself, as an autistic person, sitting in a cage being talked about by people wearing white coats and carrying clipboards. I'm not a masochist; I put that all aside.

This left me with work by other disabled and neurodivergent scholars, with which I was far more comfortable. I read, for example, Ellen Samuels' 'Six Ways to Look at Crip Time'<sup>1</sup> and a chapter in Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm called 'Designing an autistic space for research: Exploring the impact of context, space, and sociality in autistic writing spaces'.<sup>2</sup> This second piece challenged my working hypothesis, which was that autistic people – whether as artists, learners or scholars – worked best in their own space and time, and found it constrictive and inhibiting to share space and a time slot with others, partly because of variations in speed of processing (slower than the norm,



because of cognitive difficulties; faster, because of monotropic focus) and partly because of the stress of being in shared social space, and the need for masking. I wondered if perhaps neurophototherapy, which is a practice of unmasking to oneself, specifically required conditions of privacy in which to work. What the chapter suggested was that autistic scholars could benefit from sharing space, provided that this was shared autistic space. As the authors wrote, 'We realised the importance of challenging the assumption of the 'lone autistic self.''<sup>3</sup>

This was only one of many intriguing themes that the chapter explored. Another, which chimed in very much with my own intuitions about autistic cognition and writing processes, came out of Hajo Seng's theory of autistic thinking styles. According to Seng, 'autistic people's thinking separates the conceptualisation (language) part from a perceptual part that takes place on a sensory level.'<sup>4</sup> As I say in my essay, 'The Shape of the Problem':

*I engage with language on a non-verbal level. Words for me can have meaning like a colour in a painting or a note in a song: they evoke things in me. I can sense, in a non-verbal way, inside myself, the in-itself-inarticulable shape of what I experience and what it is I mean. When I write a poem or a prose piece, I see it first as an intimation of this kind, something sensed and felt on the inside.'*<sup>5</sup>

Some of the authors of the chapter in Neurodiversity Studies said striking similar things: 'I know that there's something intriguing going on in there, but I don't know quite what. The cloud must disentangle itself first.'<sup>6</sup>

So I put aside my borrowed ideas about time from crip theory, along with other ideas about frames and containers borrowed from Object-Relations theory, and all the words coined by other people that I used to make the clever-girl mask through which I had always written my essays, and I went and picked up some Play-Doh.

### Green – A Child and her Stuff

Miranda Millward, the Collage Mentor for Neurophototherapy 2, had sent me a box packed with the same kinds of materials and tools she had selected and sent to the participants at the outset of Neurophototherapy 2. There was a variety of paper materials; there were book boards; there



were wooden blocks. There was also a small board book called Colours, which I immediately decided I would use as my first substrate. The book appealed to me for several reasons. There was its pleasing compactness, the fact that I could pick it up and hold it in one hand. There was the subject matter and the different-coloured pages – I have always had a strong sensory response to colour, and seeing many different colours together always makes me happy. I dislike noise, and flashing lights, and the sensations of being in a crowd, and the textures of certain foods, but when it comes to colour, I am what would be called a sensory-seeker. So naturally, I went for the book as soon as I saw it.

The book also provided me with some scaffolding, some structure with which to work. As a writer, I often work in dialogue with found materials (in a sense, any intelligible language is a found material). These act, metaphorically, as a substrate and literally, as a medium, giving me a frame to work within and the substance to work with. I often have the sense that there is nothing in my head until a stimulus from outside, or from the environment calls it into being – for example, I rarely have any idea of what I’m going to write until my fingers make contact with the letters on my computer keyboard, as if my thoughts arose through the relationship between myself, the keyboard and the computer screen; or as if they were drummed up ritualistically through the repetitive, rhythmic, percussive action. Throughout this book, Sonia Boué writes of Neurophototherapy as a dialogic practice, a practice of making connections – between the individual and the world, between old and current selves – and the little board book felt like an invitation to dialogue. It also recalled a past self, a pre-masking preschooler who often acted on the impulse to get very, very close to books she loved, as my copy of the Opies’ nursery rhyme collection shows.

When I look at that augmented illustration, I am immediately drawn back to that three-year-old, who wanted only to look at things, and investigate things and for the physical world to accept some part of her back, which as the Object-Relations psychoanalyst Marion Milner says, is the basis of any artistic impulse.<sup>8</sup> This



wasn’t aggression – I loved the book so much I wanted to put my mark on it and join in. I wanted some kind of reciprocal relationship with the books I loved. I loved the Colours book, and I wanted a reciprocal relationship with it.

Back to that three-year-old and her sensory joy. She loved Play-Doh – the smell of it, the gritty-squishy feel of it (different from Plasticine, which came with a certain inexorable rigidity), the bright colours. It was, as a child patient of Milner’s once said of her, ‘lovely stuff’ that could be moulded to one’s will.<sup>9</sup> It brought out a sense of wordless joy, that feeling that always connected me directly to my unselfconscious, pre-masking days, as I wrote in this poem from *The Autistic Alice* <sup>10</sup>:

**Alice’s Antism**

Ground is home to her, it’s where  
her gaze can come to rest,

take stock of what has never changed:  
the rainbows in the gutter,

the points and circles of the pouring rain,  
the pavement’s long squared shoulder.

And every summer the ants turn up,  
shiny black and perfectly themselves,

bringing out the ant-shaped joy  
by which she knows she’s Alice still.

**Yellow – Photography, Masking and Unmasking<sup>11</sup>**

Neurophototherapy is, as the name suggests, a practice conceived with photography in mind. There are two main ways in which a practitioner might use photography, and they can be combined. One involves establishing a connection with a past self, by working with childhood photographs. Looking at images of one’s younger, unmasked self can help with a process of ‘self-recognition’ and can be one method of retrieving the earlier self, which has become hidden under successive





masks. I experienced such a moment of recognition myself, when I went through old photographs and found a particular image.

In this picture I am two, or three at the most, and I am with my mother in Golders Hill Park in North London, near where my grandparents lived. I remember it being one of my happiest places, and I could see from this picture that this

happy relationship began very early. One of the reasons I loved it – and still do – is that there was so much to see. There were many trees, many colourful flower beds, two ponds with ducks and other waterfowl, as well as enclosures with animals inside, some of which you were allowed to feed. Sometimes our grandmother would give us bags of cabbage leaves to feed the deer and goats in the largest enclosure. I am pointing at that enclosure in this picture, drawing my mother's attention to the animals, and obviously wanting her to come over with me for a closer look. As I looked at the excited little girl and her pointing figure, following her gaze away from her mother and towards the animals, it occurred to me that I am still

most comfortable relating to people in this indirect way: this is a thing I like, or that interests me, and I want to share it with you. That Little Girl Pointing represents a large part of what makes me an artist, a writer, and a teacher.

Another way that Neurophototherapy involves photography is as a means of 'unmasking to oneself' through performance art, so as to be able

to express and connect with that lost, playful, unselfconscious self in the present. Sonia Boué often dons costumes or fake noses in her photographs. Inspired by this, and by the picture of the Little Girl Pointing, I asked my son to take a series of photos of me doing what comes naturally.



As an author, I have had quite a few photographs taken in the garden, by professional photographers, to accompany various newspaper articles in which I talk about my personal life and the work I make from it. I hate having these photographs taken. If I have enough notice beforehand, I try to make sure that a hairdresser has cut and coloured my hair, a beauty therapist has waxed my eyebrows and I have some make-up on. I understand

that my role is to be looked at, so I mask. I never look comfortable in these photographs. Often, I am holding my shoulders tensely and wearing the tight smile that begins to appear in photographs in my teens. Tight because I don't like my teeth. I know there is something terribly wrong with my face and that is why people react to me they way they do. I am ashamed of my appearance and I would rather not appear.

This is me in my mid-teens  
Photographs like these, I have come to realise, replicate the experience of forced eye contact. No wonder I don't like them.



### Red – Objects and the Flexible Frame

Alongside collage materials and photographs, both past and present, Neurophototherapy uses objects as a way of linking the artist's childhood self to their present self. Autistic people often form warm, loving connections to objects as well as to people.<sup>12</sup> As Sonia says, working with long-beloved objects 'summons the inner child whose best friends often were objects.' [p.60]



When I turned to the 'red tomato' page of Colours, I came up against a limitation in my artistic method, which was that I had no red Play-Doh (it is available as a Play-Doh colour, but only in the biggest sets). This meant that I would have to introduce an extra element into the images, which until this point had simply involved my interacting with the Play-Doh and taking a photograph of that interaction. After feeling – and acknowledging – my frustration that I could not carry out the consistent and regular plan I had

formed in my head, I realised that I would have to make room for flexibility in the approach to the rules I had made for myself. If I looked closely at the moment when I and my plan had been thwarted, I could identify a cocktail of familiar elements that put me in mind of all the psychoanalytic literature I had read about creativity. The parts of me that represented the residue of internalised adult authority figures were telling me that I had failed, that I was making a mess and not doing things properly and being, as one teacher had described me, 'a perfect pest'. If you want to imagine these figures, you may find this extract from my poem 'Alice and the Red Queen' helpful:

Alice takes her first step late;  
before she can take a second,  
the Red Queen grabs her hand.

Stand up straight! she says,  
and stop that, whatever it is!  
Alice, are you listening?<sup>13</sup>

On the one hand, the child Joanne/Alice in me felt shame at having failed and made a mess; on the other hand, lurking alongside the shame was a sense of defiance, a resentment of the rules that cropped up everywhere, like walls materialising out of nothing, their sole purpose seemingly their embodiment of arbitrary adult power. The adult Joanne, with the freedom of expression and agency which that child had lacked, was able to be a more malleable kind of adult, less like the Red Queen and more like the analyst Milner tried to be in her interaction with her child patient, so I made the decision that rules, rather than being made of unshiftable brick and cement, could be more like walls made of Lego, or some other play material, in that their position was always understood to be moveable.

Having established that the walls around my art project were not Red Queen brick walls but Kind Analyst moveable ones, I went to find an object which would give my next image its necessary redness. I already knew what I was looking for, and I found it in the kitchen, along with others of its kind: a round, red enamelled tray with a friendly, colourful flower pattern. The tray had belonged to my grandparents, and would be brought out on Saturday afternoons covered with Tunnock's teacakes, jam tarts, Kipling's French Fancies and the like, to revive children who had been exhausting themselves

in Golders Hill Park. The tray had been lost after my grandparents died in 1997, but some years later, I had been joyfully reunited with it in my uncle's spare room, and had been allowed to take it home with me. Autistic people will understand what I mean when I say that this tray is to me a warmly-remembered senior family member, who loves me unconditionally. A red tray that is the opposite of a Red Queen, who dispenses not cakes but the thin gruel of approval, and that only on condition.



#### **Purple, Orange, Blue, Pink and Brown – Bodily Encounters**

I have grouped these five pictures together as, along with the first photograph of my hand squishing the green Play-Doh, they show me acting, as unselfconsciously as I could, as a three-year-old version of me might on receiving a brand new consignment of Play-Doh. In the purple photograph, which was the first one I took, I am holding the contents of both purple tubs (one plain, one sparkly) as if they were a bouquet of violets, and taking in that distinctive, vanilla-y smell. In the orange picture, I am replaying the squishing action of the green picture, but this time with my foot, which felt very much like the kind of action a toddler would be told not to do, and then would do anyway. On the blue page of the book (where, unfortunately, the Play-Doh cylinders do look rather green) I am taking in the beautiful varied shades with my eyes and feeling the sense of reassurance, of being wordlessly held, that blue often gives me. For pink, I chose a simple action, and made a ball. I am not very dextrous, and Play-Doh has always frustrated my attempts to make anything more complicated, but a ball I could and can still do. And it was enough.

When I got to 'brown', I contemplated squishing some of all the colours together to make brown – which is the ultimate destiny of any batch of Plasticine or Play-Doh, when played with by a small me – but this only made me feel sad in advance – that end-of-the-stuff/oh-no-I've-killed-it sense of anti-climax, so I decided to picture myself eating the brown image of

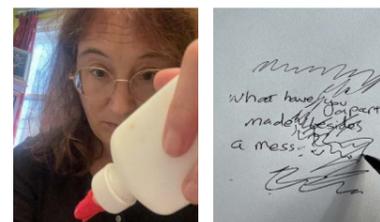
chocolate instead. When I see board books I usually have a very vivid sense-memory of how they feel when I bite them, so I know this was something I did as a small child.

Presenting these photographs is a little challenging for me, because they involve a photographically untouched depiction of my 50-something self, with her frown lines, and in the blue picture, her patch of thin hair, left over from a bout of alopecia in my mid-30s. This picture was distressing to see, as I tend to hyperfocus on certain physical imperfections and this is one of them (I tend to spend Zoom meetings making sure that my hair looks more like it does in the purple picture). For this reason, it felt all the more important to leave it in, to emphasise the point that these are pictures of the artist not appearing, but doing. As John Berger pointed out many years ago, acting vs appearing is a gendered binary, and Neurophototherapy is a practice designed for women and other people of marginalised genders. Some of the forces driving the pressures to mask throughout our lives come from society's rules about how women are primarily for looking at, that our value is tied up in how pretty and conventionally attractive we are. Three-year-old me didn't yet care; perimenopausal me is beginning to see the appeal of caring no longer.

### **White and Black – What have I made besides apart from a mess?**

For the final two pictures in my 'Colours: a Self-Portrait', I relied again on the flexibility that my process allowed, so that I was able to use stuff other than Play-Doh as my something white and something black. For the first picture, I posed with a squeezable bottle of white glue I took from my collage box. Glue is complicated stuff: it is messy, it is unruly, it is often frustrating, annoying or physically irritating, but it is necessary to connect the different parts of the objects that we make, and I would need something sticky to attach my pictures to the board book substrate. I have always had a difficult relationship with glue, because it feels unpleasant on my skin, and because it is not very forgiving of my dyspraxic traits, but I know that it is a necessary tool sometimes, and it represents, perhaps, that amount of discomfort with which one is prepared to come to terms in order to interact with the physical world and put something of oneself into it.

That part of oneself then needs to be received by the world outside of us, whether by the medium, the environment, or the audience. Milner's young patient, who had been experiencing difficulties at his school, found



his relationship to the institution, and his ability to learn within it, much improved after the school gave him and his friends permission to hold a meeting of their photography club on its premises. By gaining this permission, in school as he

had in the consulting room, he had found 'a bit of the external world that was malleable; he had found that it was safe to treat it as a bit of himself, and so had let it serve as a bridge between inner and outer.' <sup>14</sup> As Milner acknowledges in *On Not Being Able to Paint*, her account of her own creative journey, our earliest contributions to the world outside, made in earliest infancy, are made of 'the excited mess, faeces, urine, vomit, saliva, noise, flatus', <sup>15</sup> and, as a psychoanalyst, she understood that a person's future relationship with the world, their sense of their place within it, and their assessment of their potency, depended on how these early gifts were received by the adults around them. The child needs to experience some 'disillusionment' as they realise that the mess is separate from the excitement or pleasure of making it; if all goes well, they will find ways to communicate their sense of aliveness by finding acceptable materials, working them into an acceptable shape, and presenting the results to a world that is willing to receive and accept them. The relevance of this to autistic female personhood and the coercive and aversive forces which underlie masking probably can't be overstated.

On the way, the individual will have to reckon with the separateness of themselves from the world, from their audience (other people) and from the medium, as expressed through its resistance to manipulation, something with which the individual has to negotiate if they want to use the medium successfully. I was reminded again of the need for this kind of work in the final stages of my small art project, as I had to contend with the painstaking and frustrating business of getting my photographs from my phone to my laptop, reformatting and resizing them so that they could fit on the small cardboard pages which were to frame them.

As for the separateness of other people... One of the central principles of Neurophototherapy is that nothing made by the participant has to be shared, that this is, above all, an 'unmasking to oneself' within one's own self-created, independent neuroverse.[p.18] (Milner would perhaps see this

as a benign regression to an earlier state of undifferentiation with the world, a necessary stage in any creative process). Another principle, as described by the participant Helen Robson, is that of 'working with safe things' – 'working with positive associations, and the insights they bring.' [p. 21] Play-Doh, memories of Golders Hill, and the red tray, are all 'safe things' for me.

It is not that one is not allowed to engage with more difficult memories – nothing is not allowed – but that one should be able to 'compartmentalise more difficult memories by being gentle and taking time.' Sonia writes about how one participant '[c]oncerned about stumbling on a difficult memory... decided to be proactive, reclaim the memory and transform it' in a "'little act of defiance'". [p 21] For the final image of Colours, I used a manipulable, liquid medium – black ink – for my own act of defiance, scrawling in the most raw, messy handwriting the words: 'What have you made, besides/apart from a mess?'. These were words that were spoken to six-year-old me, when a playworker saw my 'soap sculpture' during a craft session at a community children's club. I remember how pleased he was with his quip, and how humiliated I felt.

It was one of a group of memories through which I came to associate my attempts to produce art with humiliation and shame. I desperately wanted to be 'good' at art as a child, but it was repeatedly made clear to me that I was 'not good', and the more I tried to compensate for my clumsy 'not-goodness' by intellectualising the process (I knew my academic and verbal skills were rated high and therefore 'good'), the worse it got. I remember another community activity session, in a different prefab building, about six years later, when I overheard the teacher talking about me and laughing: 'She was going on about how she wanted to do something deep and meaningful, and then she winds up painting a cat with no nose – poor kid.' The final memory in this group does not involve mockery, but instead outright rejection and disgust. In Sixth Form, I took photography as an extra-curricular activity. Our homework for the first week was to take a series of images. Trying to be clever as usual, I took a series of very close-up images of my brother, a portrait-in-fragments focussing on different parts of his clothed body. I got: 'What IS this? What am I supposed to DO with this?' in a tone of utter disgust. I didn't go back and never picked my SLR up again.

In scribbling these words down – scribbling them, crossing them out, scribbling around them, photographing and framing them, I experienced the truth of Sonia's assertion that 'Being intentional about what we work with – to repair negative memories – can also be therapeutic and empowering'. [p. 21]

To answer the question, this thing I have made is – apart from a mess – a 'bridge' to my lost, unmasked, small-child self. I have done this with the help of Sonia, my neurodivergent sister, and Marion Milner, my mother-in-theory, whom I often find myself citing while unmasked. Sonia taught me the practice of Neurophototherapy through example as well as through instruction. Milner was, after all, able to provide some theoretical backing for this essay, and a precedent for its introspective method in her text in *On Not Being Able to Paint*. They provided vital ingredients for my own neuroverse, and accompanied me in a shared, creative, autistic space [see Bertilsdotter et al]. This essay comes complete with references – and what is a reference, if not the act of pointing to something interesting you have found, so that someone else can see?

### References

<sup>1</sup> Samuels, Ellen, 'Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37 No. 3 (2017): Summer 2017

<sup>2</sup> 'Designing an autistic space for research: Exploring the impact of context, space, and sociality in autistic writing processes' Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Linda Örulv, Serena Hasselblad, Dennis Hansson, Kirke Nilsson, Hajo Seng in *Hanna Rosqvist, Nick Chown, Anna Stenning (Eds) Neurodiversity Studies, 1st Edition (London: Routledge, 2020), pp 156-171*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p 156

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p 157

<sup>5</sup> Limburg, Joanne, 'The Shape of the Problem', *The Poetry Review*, 107:1, Spring 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Bertilsdotter et al, p161

<sup>7</sup> *I can't stay away from Object Relations and its frames for too long. It may be that this kind of thinking has sunk so deeply into my mind and*

integrated with what it found there that it no longer makes sense to describe it as an aspect of a mask. But that's a whole other essay.

<sup>8</sup> Milner, Marion, 'The role of illusion in symbol-formation' in *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men: Forty-Four Years of Exploring Psychoanalysis*, (London and NY: Tavistock Publications, 1987)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.99

<sup>10</sup> Limburg, Joanne, *The Autistic Alice*, (Tartet: Bloodaxe, 2017), p 51

<sup>11</sup> I feel bound to say that, although I am Jewish, the yellowness of the star in this image has no special significance – I just thought it was the best colour to choose for a star.

<sup>12</sup> See for example *Autism*. 2019 May;23(4):1042-1045. doi: 10.1177/1362361318793408. Epub 2018 Aug 11.

'Object personification in autism: This paper will be very sad if you don't read it' Rebekah C White 1, Anna Remington 2

<sup>13</sup> Limburg, *The Autistic Alice*, p 52

<sup>14</sup> Milner 1987, p. 103

<sup>15</sup> Milner, Marion, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books, 1971), 150

# Prof. Nicola Shaughnessy

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## NEUROPHOTOTHERAPY

The description of Neurophototherapy as 'performance photography' intrigued me. I am an advocate for the value of performance as pedagogy and as a research tool. I am increasingly aware of the role performance has played in my life, having relatively recently experienced an unmasking, a recognition within a practice-based process that I was part of the community I was researching. After I ran a programme of creative workshops with autistic and neurodivergent women, the participants gave me some feedback, suggesting I reconsider my own identity, which they recognised as neurodivergent. The perspective of the researcher was reversed, like that of the photographer suddenly finding themselves in front of the lens as the photographic subject. I was 'discovered' (terminology that is used in preference to diagnosis), but I felt exposed, an empress who had lost her clothes. After years of playing the 'nutty neurotypical' with a PhD led by intense interests, a reputation for writing in too much detail, and as a multi-tasker spinning too many plates and trying to manage too many colour-coded project notebooks, my performed identity was suddenly stripped away as I confronted a new reality. Even looking in the mirror felt different and for some time I avoided my reflection as I no longer knew who I saw. I'm at the time of life where mirrors are changing anyway and the reflection I see doesn't feel like me. So, the invitation to review Neurophototherapy was timely, uncanny and unnerving. Encountering 'playful unmasking for neurodivergent creatives', I was intrigued to know what I might discover and tried to be reassured by the reference to a 'playful' approach as this should give permission to experiment, to try things out, discard, and try again: to 'fail, fail again, fail better'. We learn through play and this has been a principle of my work with autistic children and of the associated training I developed in a project we called 'Imagining Autism'. Our experiential and embodied approach has been discussed in relation to the educational philosophy of Gert Biesta and his concept of subjectification, which involves understanding one's identity as

an ongoing process of making or becoming through 'new, open and unpredictable situations of encounter' (Biesta 2006, Trimmingham 2021 , p.109) . As Melissa Trimmingham has written 'subjectification is a difficult idea: it has to do with someone's subjectivity, their freedom, but it is not an essence or something we possess; it consists rather in 'response-ability' (Biesta 2006: 70), speaking in a voice of one's own that nevertheless comes forth only through its affording others the opportunity to respond in ways that can never be predicted. This seems very appropriate to the encounter I have described and to my experience of working with Neurophototherapy; my performance of neurotypicality was challenged by the neurodivergent group I was working with and a sense of 'response-ability' motivated my approach to Neurophototherapy.

As soon as I saw the cover image and description, I realised someone else was working with me, a familiar voice of 'rationality' that I'd acquired and internalised through my education and socialisation. It reminded me that I wasn't genuinely creative (not good at art) and questioned the viability of my neurodivergent identity. I wasn't like my son who was diagnosed as a toddler because his differences and difficulties stood out from his peers. This is what first drew me into working with autistic children, sensing a need to play differently, to relinquish normative rules as well as the 'pretend play' frameworks that psychologists use in diagnosis. The play-based approaches I've pursued through practice-based research involve following the cues of the child, responding to their sensory preferences and interests through encounters with imaginary environments that are co-produced, encouraging agency through improvisatory structures that afford creativity. There are similar principles in Neurophototherapy with its emphasis on discovery through play, identity in process and new ways of meaning making: 'taking time to peel-off layers of NT social conditioning and false learning.' The mentoring guidance is clear, convincing and encouraging. It assuaged my sense of imposter syndrome as I found synergies with my thinking, touchstones of recognition as I cautiously moved through the contents, following the order on the contents pages, obedient to its ND logic (even though we are given permission to follow our own route through the contents). I would have liked to know about the basic equipment and how it works before getting started but if I'd have read that first it might have prevented me from continuing. There are items in the 'basic' kit that are foreign to me. What, I asked myself, is a bone

folder? A Google search provided the answer. My experience of seeing the examples fuelled my interest in continuing and although my critical passenger told me I couldn't do what Sonia Boué has done in such an extraordinary exhibition of and insight into neurodivergent identity, I felt I could play with the tools to see what might emerge.

I began with a sense of urgency and trepidation to go on this journey, searching for the photos I wanted to include, retrieved from dusty albums, family scrapbooks, boxes in lofts, and prints from my digital archive. I felt like an artist as I assembled the 'basic equipment': a camera (mobile), selfie tripod, scissors and pritt stick.[p.50] I was ready to go apart from the challenge of editing software but I was reassured that I could do it on my phone 'if needed' (which means there is a choice).[p.50] Nothing is mandatory in this creative curriculum. There's a note about self-care that is important. Engaging with memories and photos means working in an amber zone between danger (red to stop) and safety (green to go). I took the risk, knowing that the amber zone is the space of learning.

There was something intriguing in the cover image (now on p.44) of a woman looking in a hand-held mirror, blended with images of her younger self, looking out to a something that isn't me. There's no sense of the reader/maker feeling 'looked at' in this image; there are different author selves (young and old) exploring looking and being looked at but the focus is on the author and we are aware of our perspective in looking at her. This positions us in a curious relation to the author and to the process. I find it strangely reassuring but I'm not sure why; perhaps it is the sideways glance that averts direct eye contact. I know the author/artist but she is objectified in this picture, a familiar person made strange with a quality I can't describe. The elegance of the black dress, the simplicity of the short pixie hair-cut, the bold glasses through which brown eyes do the looking and the hand held mirror that reflects the image back. There is something so self-assured in this triangulation of eyes, mirrors and images. A conviction and confidence in an identity that recognises its previous identities and that is so carefully assembled as a process of becoming. The hair brushing seems mimed, a not-for-real pose, a gesturing to 'look with me' and/or 'at me', a performative act. I stop and pause to consider whether or not I can continue. I am not an artist or a photographer. I use words not pictures. I am not a visual thinker so I am not sure I belong here... But the next page

has second-guessed my thinking. I can just look at the examples. I don't have to understand the method. The hairbrush with images of Sonia's younger self blended with the older self, decorating the handles of both brush and mirror. Mirror mirror on the wall... I dive into this looking glass world.

'Welcome to Neurophototherapy' begins with a positive affirmation of ND identity predicated on difference, moving beyond the pretence and performance of NT to 'live authentically and unapologetically as ND.' I am not ready for this as someone who is existing in an interspace between the old and the new but that's precisely why I am 'doing' this. Moving to Example 1 felt like returning to an old friend, 'working with a fictional character.' Each example has an explanation of why the activities have been chosen as well as the illustration of the author's response. Our 'natural interests and likes will reflect our ND' writes Sonia Boué, delighting in her re-invention of Mrs Pepperpot's eccentricity through blocks and cards and texts. I realise that reconnecting to a favourite fictional character from my childhood was also absolutely in tune with my own ND: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Its author, Lewis Carroll, has been associated with ND identity and in many respects, these stories are about a different way of being in the world. Alice falls down a rabbit hole into an environment where the familiar is made strange through her encounters with people and places. Alice's experience of alienation and isolation at the Mad Hatter's tea party, surrounded by behaviours, sensory challenges, fear and fascination are familiar felt memories. Not least because of my performance of Alice, aged 14, in a production by a local amateur dramatic society. I remember a long queue at the audition, standing in the rain to accompany my sister who wanted to try for a part and suggested I do the same. I was uncertain because of insecurities as I moved from child to adolescent on the cusp of puberty, worrying about peer acceptance, not wanting to do anything that exposed my difference. Yet I had always loved acting. Once in the school hall where the auditions took place, I was given a script and consented, accepting the role in a willing suspension of disbelief when the director phoned my parents the next day. Only one photo survives of the Alice costume but I find it and see myself differently. Autistic Alice is the title of Joanne Limburg's poetry collection, another late diagnosed ND woman, another Alice look alike and another ND artist. Playing Alice was a transitional moment as I entered a looking glass world of self-consciousness

about physical appearance, a stranger in my changing body, suddenly socially shy as schools, uniforms and expectations changed. I became a shrinking violet, retreating into my imaginary world where I dreamed of still being an actress, seeking approval, striving to please. So, in my Neurophototherapy album, I revisit my performance of Alice and the photo is mounted on a card with words, combining Lewis Carroll, Joanne Limburg and my teenage poetry. I remember being asked when I felt most like myself and the memory of playing Alice immediately surfaced. I used to think it was odd to associate feeling real with pretence, being at my most authentic performing a role on stage. In creating this photographic composition of neurodivergent Alice, there's a shift in understanding, a triangulation between the remembered experience of fleeting self-fulfilment, the somewhat painful photograph of the awkward teenager in costume, and the recovery in this reconstruction.

Transforming through collage (Example 2) is an appropriate process as form reflects content through fragmented and reconstructed identity. For Sonia Boué, collage enables her to play with noses and wings, recurrent themes in her performance photography. ND people, especially women, become astute observers of human behaviour, which is sometimes regarded as nosiness but can also produce skilled documentary makers, artists, film directors, actors and detectives. Her wings are a means of escape to the freedom of imagined worlds. She also depicts herself hiding her face behind a typewriter, 'a great performance option for the 'camera shy.' Collage is used to play out fantasies and stay in control. There's an inner clown that can surface in this process as the ND sense of humour comes into play. For me, it's my alter ego as the prankster, famous for elaborate April Fool jokes and the monkey business that is part of a private joke, an alternative persona I've invented: KY Monk. I have a collection of monkeys to feature so my collage turns me into a monkey: a realisation of my playful alter ego: KY Monk, the joker, the disruptor, creating havoc as the trickster, spreading ND humour to make the world lighter with laughter.

A big challenge for me was the 'Street photography' (Example 3) as I didn't feel I could take my ND photography outdoors and on location. I'm not yet wearing an ND identity so it's liberating to be working with a resource that is so confident and celebratory of difference. I'm not a photographer and I was cautioned by self-consciousness about looking

odd, fear of being spotted taking photos without permission and the rational critic being more dominant in the real world. My 'shadow-self' photos are a version of the 'Street photography' as these are taken in 'real world' settings, but I am unrecognisable, a reflection behind the camera. Interestingly, these emerged in vacation locations, as if being in a different place, away from everyday world, gave permission to do this creative photography in a place that was 'outside' my rational work world and inside experienced environments. It started with a happy accident where I captured our long reflections, on a sunny beach in Wales. This reflects a shift in perspective as I have become more visually aware since the ND awakening. I have noticed myself becoming much more conscious of light, waking up with the sunrise, sensitive to the evenings drawing in, seeking to capture sinking sunsets, fleshy moons, scarlet skies. In another coastal location at a conference, I wanted to capture the land/sea scape of water and the harbour view from the window. In the photo that emerges, my shadow blends with the water and boats, impressionistic shades, hues and shapes, resembling the window portrait in Example 3. I too discover that 'playing with reflections feels mirroring and affirming.' In 'Playing with Objects' (Example 4) a vintage doll is featured with a waxy shiny hand doing a thumbs-up. I find it uncanny and slightly disturbing. It reminds me of the dolls I played with as a child, something that went on for much longer than my peer group and which I kept a secret until I finally relinquished them, banished to a box to stop temptation. So many ND people are archivists or hoarders, keeping and storing everything, sometimes organised, sometimes not. For Sonia, objects and memorabilia are connected to the younger child who didn't mask. On reflection, I can't remember not masking but I hunt for objects that might connect me to a younger self. 'Recover and reclaim' is a mantra for Neurophototherapy and, as it happens, my making process coincides with my mother moving out of our family home after 55 years. Some childhood treasures are rediscovered as the clear out ensues and I am reunited with my Wade Whimsy collection of miniature animals. These old friends remind me of the imaginary worlds I inhabited during my childhood. My favourite is the faun with a familiar chip, sitting injured and waiting with a wistful expression and 5 spots on its body that I associate with my freckles. The squirrel, nursing its nut, is next in preciousness, also chipped, followed by the chipmunk. For the photo, this menagerie is reassembled in a miniature suitcase alongside other precious objects from my past. Inside the box is false grass (appropriate to the

plastic perfectionism I was surrounded by) some sand and shells from the beaches I love. I create a timeline, a sensory map of my experiences and stick it inside the box. These are some of my 'moments of being.'

At some point I depart from the structure and the photographs start to emerge spontaneously. An old white Teddy, Peter, offers a soft focus. He is very photogenic and I find a black and white baby photo, in an album lovingly captioned by my father; we reconnect as I juxtapose the photograph of the new teddy (a first birthday present), as big as my baby self, with the threadbare heirloom I imagine leaving behind for other generations. I am a mother now and I photograph it next to the babygro that all my newborns wore straight after birth. It is blue and white striped and I remember the midwife asking if I was hoping for a boy when I dressed my baby daughter. I wanted my children to be free from gender stereotypes and now realise how my feminism intersected with neurodivergence, particularly in terms of marginality, seeking justice and finding a language.

I piece together photos of my younger self in performances as positive memories of feeling authentic: Scrooge's sister in *A Christmas Carol* (aged 9), Wendy in *Peter Pan* (aged 10), Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (aged 18). They are printed and mounted onto books, placed alongside the books I read as a child: Noel Streatfield's child star fantasies (*Ballet Shoes, Gemma and Sisters, White Boots*) and Enid Blyton. I collage past and present by placing the older self on the covers of the books I came to write and bring both together for blank covers of the ones to come. Interactions between past, present and future selves as my self-storying changes my understanding of these identities in flux. At the centre of my 'living library' is a hard bound green thesis, typed on an Amstrad with the title (in gold letters): *The dramatic writing of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath: Theatres of Identity*. Only now do I realise what that research was actually about and why I was drawn to these writers and their word worlds that resonated with my own.

'Being more you' (Example 7) is a fantasy of birds for Sonia Boué as she pursues desires for flight, fascinations with noses/beaks (digging for detail?) and celebrates freedom to move beyond the constraints of typical social structures. I do a lot of thinking about what being more me means and how

to explore this through photography. I play with the different meanings, thinking about my ND values and how to represent these in ways that feel true to me. Two of the things that emerge through this self-questioning are playing music and doing yoga as activities that don't involve words and put me in touch with internal states. 'Attuned' is my title for a series of photographic experiments about this tuning in process, culminating in a merged harp and yoga pose.

'Being more you' also leads into 'Dressing up' (Example 8), playing with costumes to perform new versions of identity and to try on hats, shoes, bags from the vast wardrobe I've accumulated of clothes rarely worn but still preserved. These are old friends I can't bear to lose as I face middle age in the mirror and ponder what to wear and whether my bum looks big in this. The picture of Sonia with her tutu is exquisite, a juxtaposition of young and old through the joyful release of the inner child. My version is 'clothes in crisis', vintage and retro suitcases, assembled on a wooden floor, overflowing with clothes and accessories and a mannequin in the centre wearing my face.

I have a final section of photographs inspired by the bread mask in Neurophototherapy, which explore a shifting relationship with food, a shared theme for so many ND girls and women. There's something liberating and empowering about food and photography being played with as art and celebrated. I am inspired by Bobby Baker's performance storytelling through food and Lady Gaga's meat dress. I want to reinvent some of the stock images of women being gagged or blinded by food but instead, finding the hashtag 'women eating food', I assemble photos of myself eating, drinking and relishing a positive relationship with food. I lay the table to create a picnic of pictures as the end of my Neurophototherapy journey. Or perhaps it's the start...

<sup>1</sup> See Gert J.J. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (London: Routledge) 2013

## THE PRESENTATION OF [AUTISTIC] SELVES IN EVERYDAY LIFE: REFLECTIONS ON NEUROPHOTOTHERAPY 2<sup>1</sup>

**M**y encounter with Neurophototherapy 2 has coincided with extensive research on the complexities of masking and a burgeoning of publications on the topic, including some extremely insightful work by neurodivergent scholars.<sup>2</sup> Much of this research focuses on identifying different forms and categories of masking, as an aspect of autistic and human behaviour (it is acknowledged that masking affects non-autistic people also, particularly marginalised groups seeking to protect themselves from stigma). Much of the research on autistic masking identifies and evidences the negative consequences of masking for mental health.

I felt a jolt of surprise on seeing the term 'Playfully Unmasking' on the cover page of the second version of the Neurophototherapy PDF. I have been thinking about masking in relation to performativity and as something that can be conscious or unconscious. I particularly welcomed the term 'playfully', as in my experience masking can also be socially creative if we have agency in how and why we fashion our personas. The feminist theorist Judith Butler conceptualised gender as a performative act,<sup>3</sup> - a concept that continues to inform my thinking. However, for autistic people a double act is required whereby 'neuronormativity' (as well as gender) becomes integral to the identity performed and the role construction required for social survival.

### Masking and Me

Unmasking has personal significance for me as in many respects it describes an experience that has unfolded since I wrote about Neurophototherapy 1. As this has shaped my relationship to the work, I am beginning with a short personal reflection on masking and me. In November 2022 I unmasked very publicly on BBC Radio 4's *Life Changing* programme.<sup>4</sup> By doing this interview, my story moved from private to public; I was 'out' as autistic. I had told very few people I was doing this and as I'd followed the advice of the psychologist who diagnosed me in choosing who to disclose to and when, I found myself in an increasingly complicated and untenable position of having a neurodivergent identity confirmed (and a strong sense that

something important had shifted) but still having to perform as if nothing had changed. It felt like wearing the same clothes when they don't fit anymore. However, I also have to admit that I wasn't sure I was ready to embrace this new sense of self as I was so enculturated as a neurotypical. What this means, I realise, is that masking, for me was unconscious.

During the process in which my autistic identity was 'discovered', there was a significant moment of exposure which I referred to in the *Life Changing* interview. It involved me being recognised by a group of autistic women I was working with who turned the tables on the knowledge hierarchies and power structures between the researcher and the researched as their knowledge, borne from lived experience, changed our relationship and their expertise became transformative. I suddenly found myself feeling as if I was the researched subject, an experience I have related to the emperor with no clothes. I am told that a defining moment involved me 'dropping the mask' when I encountered the group in a corridor after running a workshop and they complimented me on my appearance. They described me as 'a rabbit caught in the headlights', not knowing how to respond, and although I cannot remember the moment itself, when the incident was described to me I recognised a familiar felt reaction, like suddenly forgetting my lines. This is indicative of the extent to which masking had become habitual. It's a complicated process to unmask and there's no doubt that the creative tools contained in Neurophototherapy enable this to happen iteratively, flexibly and intuitively.

Childhood photos continue to play a significant role in Neurophototherapy and it's uncanny that in the same week that I received Version 2 from Sonia Boué, my mother sent me a photo of myself as a toddler. I'm struck by several features of the photo; firstly, the androgyny with my short hair, gender neutral short dungarees and being pictured at the steering wheel of a toy car. On the reverse of the photo my mother has written 'always our star performer'. I'm not sure why as I can't see anything performative in what is captured in the picture. I am not looking to camera and I don't appear to be focussed on the car; my attention is diverted to something else that can't be seen. I recognise what I am doing as I remember doing it a lot: people watching, a prerequisite for successful masking.

### Theorising Masking in Autism Studies

The term masking is the preferred term by the autistic community to refer to a complex range of behaviours which have been variously defined and categorised. Autistic masking is a relatively new but rapidly developing area of research with a range of publications emerging from evidence-based studies as well as book-length accounts.<sup>5</sup> In its broadest terms it refers to performative strategies whereby an autistic individual adapts their behaviour to appear 'normal' or neurotypical, thereby concealing neurodivergent difference. Examples are wide-ranging but some of the most frequently reported strategies involve suppressing stimming, forcing eye contact when interacting with others and concealing anxiety in social situations. This may be motivated by a range of factors (generally environmental, social, psychological) and needs to be understood in an ecological context. A range of theoretical models have informed research on masking, particularly Ervin Goffman's sociological account, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and social identity theory.<sup>6</sup> There is also a range of terminologies associated with masking, including camouflage, compensation, adaptive morphing, passing and assimilation alongside conceptualisations that differentiate between these terms, particularly the tripartite social camouflage measure, the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CATQ).<sup>7</sup> This distinguishes between masking (concealing autistic features and performing a neurotypical persona); assimilation (blending in with others and trying not to be noticed as different) and compensation, which involves forcing normative social behaviour (e.g. eye contact, shaking hands, etc). As some autistic people find eye contact and/or touch extremely challenging, compensation can be regarded as a form of self-harm, particularly when it involves engaging in behaviour that inflicts sensory distress. Compensation is also used in the literature to describe the alternative strategies developed by some autistic people to 'bypass socio-cognitive challenges'.<sup>8</sup> A series of damaging consequences have been associated with masking behaviours. It is considered to contribute to late diagnosis or misdiagnosis as autism becomes harder to recognise when masking behaviours are being practised (consciously or unconsciously). It can also contribute to mental health difficulties through the effort of performing normative identities, the harmful consequences of engaging in activities that produce social anxiety and/or sensory stress and the impact on identity development, agency and

self-worth/efficacy through the denial of an authentic sense of self and the constant effort of performing externally as other, contrary to the internal affective sense of being in the world neurodivergently. Fear of stigma (the sense of a 'spoiled' identity), as well as vulnerability to bullying, are factors driving masking behaviour and its consequences in terms of internalised disorders, anxiety, depression and high rates of suicide.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, masking is complex and nuanced. In research using the CATQ, for example, assimilation was found to have a more significant impact on well-being than masking and compensation.<sup>10</sup> If we think about masking in terms of social creativity (active) and assimilation as passive, this is understandable. There has been limited discussion of the 'success' of masking as much of the current research focusses on the conscious aspects of masking, considering contexts and intentionality; it is also worth noting that most of the research has been undertaken through self-report. Nevertheless, masking, as evident in Pearson and Rose's overview, is a serious issue, linked to trauma and suicide. It causes people to feel invalidated and its practice, as a form of identity management, needs much more understanding and, arguably, intervention: 'We want autistic people not to have to take the "mask off"' because they never experience the stigma, trauma and lack of safety that causes it to develop in the first place'.<sup>11</sup> More work is needed on the unconscious aspects of masking as well as intersectionality and more interdisciplinary work is called for to deepen and diversify the research.

One of the most important developments in our understanding of masking is the work being done by autistic people themselves through participatory research. There are increasing numbers of autistic academics bringing lived experience to their work and this is leading to different conceptualisations such as Damian Milton's work on the 'double empathy' theory, which suggests that difficulties in social interaction and communication are a consequence of cultural differences between autistic and non-autistic people, so that when autistic people engage with other autistic people, these challenges are not as evident.<sup>12</sup> There has been some research to support this, exploring autistic sociality whereby features such as stimming can be considered part of the vocabularies used to communicate in neurodivergent ways. Another theory developed by autistic

scholars concerns focussed attention, defined as 'monotropism' by the late Dinah Murray.<sup>13</sup> In an explanatory essay, her son, Fergus Murray offers a clear explanation:

*In a nutshell, monotropism is the tendency for our interests to pull us in more strongly than most people. It rests on a model of the mind as an 'interest system': we are all interested in many things, and our interests help direct our attention. Different interests are salient at different times. In a monotropic mind, fewer interests tend to be aroused at any time, and they attract more of our processing resources, making it harder to deal with things outside of our current attention tunnel.<sup>14</sup>*

This is also a theory that is shifting the narrative in autism studies beyond a deficit model to embrace understanding of autism as difference. Autistic scholarship on masking is contributing to what is being recognised as a paradigm shift from 'autism science to neurodiversity in autism science'.<sup>15</sup>

It is recognised that new methods are needed for this new research and that creative practices could play an important role in collaboration with other disciplines. This is because creative practices are increasingly recognised as a valuable research tool for working with marginalised groups to elicit what has previously been unseen or hidden. Interviews are one of the most popular ways of conducting qualitative research but these are dependent on context as the environment in which the discussion takes place, as well as the position and skill of the interviewer, which will determine the content of the discussion. It is not surprising in light of the double empathy theory that autistic people prefer being interviewed by other autistic people and that participatory research is increasingly regarded as critical to the future of autism studies.<sup>16</sup> Creative practices are a popular tool in these contexts as they can help to overcome power imbalances between researchers and the researched. When we engage in creative practices, the focus is on the process of making and on what the art is telling us - it mediates between lived experience and its translation into research. There is more understanding of research being situated and contextualised when creative practices are used alongside other methods; what emerges in a drama workshop, for example, is different to an interview.<sup>17</sup>

### **Being naturally autistic**

I realise I am masking as I write this, trying to locate and be true to an unmasked identity. Writing as an academic is a performance of identity with associated codes of conduct that are cultivated through training and publication. In Neurophototherapy 1, I referred to my performance as Alice in Wonderland and this has continued to feel relevant to my experience of neurodivergent awakening: 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, that's the great puzzle!' These lines seem to fit the photo medley that opens Neurophototherapy, where the artists are introduced. I notice the significance of eyes, significant for their prominence or absence. Chloe Lawson's eyes are central to her collage, looking towards something beyond the picture and positioned in a way that gestures towards a half mask, and enveloping folds with the facial features concealed beneath patterns and paper. Sonja Zelic's eyes are barely evident as an angelic-looking curly-haired doll-like child sits in the grass fully focussed on the flowers she is holding, a state of absorption I recognise as the autistic attentional flow zone. The Maori for autism is Takiwatanga, in your own time and space, and this seems to me what this photo is about - the pleasure of being fully immersed in what is often a sensory activity. The flowers, resembling a lollipop shaped bouquet, are oversized in relation to Sonja's petite face and figure; I imagine the smell of roses, the texture of the petals, and wonder whether it's a tiny insect she is studying so astutely. She is oblivious to the camera and it feels almost intrusive to be joining her in this moment. Lucy Barker's little girl eyes are also looking away from the camera as she cradles her head in her hands, half smiling and clearly thinking her own thoughts. A cloud caption could work nicely here as I wonder what is in her head; whatever it is, it positions her as being differently situated in the room... not engaging with the photographer and camera and with a slightly mischievous facial expression. Naomi Morris's head against a black background occupies an in-between state of consciousness; her eyes are gently closed beneath translucent hexagonal honeycomb shapes, positioned over each eye and her mouth and then surrounding her face in more abstract patterns that form intersecting cubes over her head. A hyper headspace needing to calm. Her child's face has a shrouded serenity, with a neat dark bob, and alabaster skin; it's ghostly but also peaceful as if she is seeking respite in this moment of solitude, absented from the everyday world. This drive to move beyond

the realities of everyday environments is evident in all these introductory photos and throughout the book. It is often expressed or experienced in relation to nature, a theme of autistic creative writing, as identification with or immersion within the natural world can be conceptualised as part of a neurodivergent aesthetic. This is beautifully expressed in Helen Robson's smiling head emerging from and submerging with the earth, linked by the twigs and branches from her head. In this image, the eyes are smiling and there's a look to camera but the subject has the agency in this non naturalistic staging of self. Finally, there is Lauren B's split face with laughing eyes and an open mouth spliced between the two parts of the photo. With one eye in shadow it is the look that draws our attention as this feels like an unmasked moment, a child caught on camera in a moment of play. Turning the page, another eye looks at us but this is the cautionary and powerful gaze of Sonia Boué's analogue collage. The eye, with its well-tended eyebrow and made-up lashes, forms half of the face, a reference to the magazine models of Barbie world's fake neuronormativity; wet tousled curls frame the face to convey a natural reality beneath the eye mask. It is a complex image, combining positive and negative features of masking as both a self-protective strategy and as a compensating performative effort.

So what does it mean to be natural and autistic? This is a question that is fundamental to the creative processes engaged through Neurophototherapy. It conjoins the work represented, a through-line that connects the diverse contributions, producing a series of shared themes (particularly nature, community, safe space and play). Nature is identified as 'a striking commonality' in Boué's commentary: 'Nature featured in our imagery, both as a multi-sensory environment and through an affinity with animals.' This brings into focus something Sonia Boué identifies as 'a psychological rewilding' through working with childhood photographs and memories. I am struck by the pertinence of Boué's perception to my work on autistic autobiography/life writing as this sense of oneness with nature is also a common feature of autistic life writing:

*I've come to feel the concept of restoring our neurological eco-systems- rewilding- can provide a compass for unmasking and feeling more at one with ourselves in the natural world (p.14).*

Understanding what feels natural and revisiting childhood through the lens of neurodivergence is an ontological quest in which identification with nature is often experienced or represented as immersive, whereby the subjects merge with the landscape or animals. I recognise this in autistic writing where engagement with nature is more than being in or with nature; it's wanting to be inside it; the instinct is not to be separate but to be a fundamental part of it. This is particularly evident in Katherine May's memoir, *The Electricity of Every Living Thing* (2018), where the experience of late diagnosis and her shifting understanding of her personal history is narrated alongside a year-long series of walks as a psychological and physical journey.<sup>18</sup> Nature is a prevalent motif as Katherine explores her changing sense of being in the world, articulating an existential need to feel connection to the environment and nature as felt reality: 'when I walk a space opens up and I can finally perceive the fine texture of my own life. It's like dropping through a trapdoor into another world'.<sup>19</sup>

In Naoki Higishada's *The Reason I Jump* (2013), there is a similar orientation: 'when I'm jumping, it's as if my feelings are going upwards to the sky. Really, my urge to be swallowed by the sky is enough to make my heart quiver'.<sup>20</sup> The earliest memories of Anand Prahlad in *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* (2017) are similarly expressed through immersion in nature: 'the blossoms of a redbud outside the trailer window. I was stunned by their bright pink, pulpy stillness. I thought I was one of them. I thought my body hung somehow in sea blue, a cluster of soft petals, suspended and still, floating in space'.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the photos we see representations of merging or submerging with the natural environment. Sonja Zelic's digital collage features a diminutive angelic child photo, set within huge flowers, their faces as large as her body as she sits, like a character from *The Borrowers*, cushioned on the petals of a daisy. Lucy Barker has created an image in which the natural elements are internalised. A suited figure (light purple blazer and dark trousers) walking past a gated garden has a fir cone face with what looks like a thick plaited dried wheat stalk imprinted on white material (looking like a T-shirt that extends to cover the face). It is positioned prominently in a snake shape extending from stomach to heart. There is an ambivalent quality to this image which we find throughout the

photo examples due to the positive and negative features of masking. Social camouflage is often a protective and defensive strategy associated with vulnerability; to unmask involves risk, potential exposure and fear (e.g. rejection, humiliation), particularly if there are concerns about an individual's newly discovered neurodivergent identity being accepted. Analogies with chameleons (the cover of the Pearson and Rose book) and butterflies emerging from chrysalises abound in discussions of masking and metamorphosis, but this is also double-edged. I recently discovered that caterpillars are completely reconstituted through their transformation as their cells rearrange to form a new creature (with a different brain). This seems pertinent to the identity transformation involved in late-diagnosed autism. The acknowledgement of the ND 'butterfly brain' is beautifully depicted in Boué's 'Butterflies' collage, with an invitation to flit through, pausing for absorption or moving on as our attention shifts. It can be a huge relief to realise that the daydreaming or fidgety school child was, in fact, differently brained. 'To a caterpillar, a butterfly is a ghost' writes Katherine May in a commentary on Lorrie Moore's *I Am Homeless if This is Not My Home*, as part of a reflection on the challenges of 'big changes'. These, she notes, 'rarely happen incrementally, but instead feel like a revolution, a complete overturning of the old order, and a violent rising of the new'.<sup>22</sup> I am struck by how strongly this resonates with the photos in Neurophototherapy, particularly the ghostly figure in Lucy Barker's collage. The challenge of such change is articulated by May as how to 'embrace' it rather than 'thwart' it. This is what Neurophototherapy seeks to do through the creation of the neuroverse, a space in which to play with identities in transition. Reference is made to 'Working with safe things' through the selection of photos, yet it is acknowledged that working with memories may well surface negative or traumatic experiences which, however, can be transformed through this form of interventionist action art, replacing or reformatting the photos to create new self-representations. Helen Robson's 'Photo protection equipment' is an assemblage of photos and objects against a background of garlic skins, and Chloe Lawson has similarly created a rich collage of childhood photos, playfully blending racial, gendered and neurodivergent intersectionalities through the perspectives of both the photographer and the photographed; posed images are juxtaposed with pictures of face pulling, performative gesturing and curious looks to camera in a panoply of personas. For me, this practice moves

beyond safe space into the deeper risk-taking territory of serious and brave space.

Objects and animals play significant roles in the neuroverse. They are a means of mediating complex experiences, identities and emotions, featuring prominently in autistic autobiographies and art as a further feature of neurodivergent aesthetics (by which I refer to artistic qualities consistent with cognitive differences). I am reminded of Gregory Blackstock's art and his juxtaposition of related species of animals which, as Ilona Roth has commented, is 'a striking fusion of traditional zoological illustration (think *Voyage of the Beagle*) with Warhol-like pop art'.<sup>23</sup> The use of realism, everyday objects and animals in juxtaposition with abstract or non-naturalistic features is also evident in Neurophototherapy, a perceptual perspective in which making the familiar appear strange creates the beauty of the 'Aha' moment (perceiving differently). Sonja Zelić's use of mirrors in 'There's no better way to fly' is an example. In this picture, the miniature child (appearing enraptured) stands alongside a larger-than-life albatross, looking into a window with an adult and child albatross looking back. The text above the albatross parent and baby reads 'our commitment to you is stronger than ever' which could refer to the mother/child bond or to the relationship between the bigger albatross looking at the two smaller ones behind the mirror/window. Whilst there are some stylistic and aesthetic synergies, it is important to be alert to the dangers of pathologizing and to the concerns of Roth's conclusion: 'while some autistic visual art displays characteristic features consistent with one particular autistic cognitive style, the body of work as a whole defies an overly unified portrayal'.<sup>24</sup> Lucy Barker's 'analogue clipped tape transfer' also features birds in mirroring relations, as a mother and child playing close to the sea are almost eclipsed by the enormity of two oversized gulls, perched protective sentinels with two others hovering in the sky as guardians of the group. Lauren B's 'She has a little cat' is another mirroring analogue collage as a younger child's somewhat pensive face looks towards a more grown-up figure, stroking a kitten with a saucer of milk. Beneath her two kittens are positioned, facing each other in comfortable companionship. The collaged figures are surrounded by a large leafy tree with another cat, almost camouflaged, watching above them, presumably a mother as her tortoiseshell colouring is shared by the kitten. A pasted text set against the watching figure's

back offers a title: 'She has a little cat' against a background of more cut out extracts with hieroglyphics juxtaposed with printed sections from what appears to be a recipe carefully cut to contain partial words and phrases: 'Throw this water... Pressure; Reduce pressure... skin, take off, vegetables or glaze'. In another section on the opposite side of the image are the fragments 'and leave until' with 'same end' underneath. The picture is framed by tiny multicoloured mosaic tiles as a wallpaper effect, with another pattern barely evident behind the collage and its palimpsestic textures. The autistic capacity for pattern recognition is alluded to in this beautifully crafted composition. It evades literal interpretation as a piece that is replete with personal significance. Its effect is through the juxtaposition of images, colours and words, but the cats form a calming centre piece of companionship and care. We are cautioned to suspend judgement of this 'raw and cooked' work, 'made for the purpose of self-expression without formal aesthetic criteria' (p.26). To approach this process feels analogous to rediscovering an inner child, that 'wild child' Boué refers to in this invitation to play without inhibitions, a remaking free from convention, aesthetic formalities and critical judgement. As a reader, commenting on the work, I am positioned in a curious relationship to the material, searching for words that feel true to how I am experiencing the content.

Finding words for complex feelings is challenging (even more so when neurodivergence makes feelings difficult to identify) and my early engagement with feminist theory involved me questioning the extent to which language was adequate to my affective states. I was drawn to writers who played with language, flouting conventions and to the radical theorists who called for new linguistic structures to express subjective experience. My interest in theatre was prompted by its capacity to move beyond words, combining auditory, visual and kinaesthetic media, particularly in contemporary or 'post-dramatic' performance. I discovered neuroscientific theory and embodied cognition as a means of conceptualising the ecologies of performance practices and meaning making for audiences. In Neurophototherapy, similarly, I am aware of a powerful visceral response, a series of gut reactions and 'Aha' moments stimulated by the power of recognition; perhaps a 'double empathy' pleasure (as a corollary of the 'double empathy problem') in which there is the joy of identity affirmation,

a realisation of who you are through seeing aspects yourself mirrored in other autistic people. This is not a simple mirror image, however, as the similarities and synergies will be nuanced with different sensory sensitivities, different intense interests, differently inflected social challenges and potentially different intersectionalities in terms of other forms of neurodivergence. Yet there's still a series of synergies and characteristics which mean autistic people identify each other, and which researchers (and these include autistic scholars) are now investigating to develop an autistic phenomenology.<sup>25</sup> Scientists suggest the 'Aha' moment is associated with a particular area of the brain and dopamine,<sup>26</sup> and this may help to explain the why and how of my felt responses to this collection of photos. But it's also important to draw attention to the recognition aspect; seeing aspects of myself reflected in these images, the joy of understanding them and having that endorsed when I sent my first impressions to Sonia Boué. As she has written, 'we need to integrate sensory feedback and process our emotions - this can be achieved through the images and objects we create. Without accurate ND reflection, how can we place ourselves in the world? As the saying goes, we need to see it, to be it' (p.44).

There are potential risks and challenges associated with this process which are important to acknowledge and a section on 'Things to think about' alludes to this, making reference to support structures, timing (in relation to diagnosis), environment (safe creative space) and material ('working with positive associations and the insights they bring'). This is a method orientated towards discovery rather than recovery of a lost identity. I think of Alice's reflections in the context of Wonderland: 'It's no use going back to yesterday as I was a different person then'.<sup>27</sup> Naomi Morris's evocative series of film stills, 'Into the woods' are positioned on the title page for the 'Things to think about' safeguarding section. These show faces appearing to dissolve and being reconstituted beneath translucent hexagonal shapes. There is a serenity about the central facial image and a sense of being calm and immersed in a process of change; into the woods is not to be feared. Katherine May (*Electricity*) has talked about autistic adaptations to non-autistic culture being analogous to the taming and imprinting of animals, whereby birds, for example, shortly after hatching, develop their sense of species identity by visually imprinting on their parent to learn the behaviours and vocalisations appropriate to their species. If

young birds imprint on humans, however, they will identify with humans for life, a process that cannot be reversed. May refers to herself as 'an imprint who is learning my wildness again',<sup>28</sup> and this also describes the processes we see documented in Neurophototherapy. Identity management through the suppression of what feels natural to autistic people and the cultivation and performance of normative behaviours is a process of developing habits that, once established, are difficult to disentangle from our sense of who we are. There are risks associated with such a process due to the prevalence of trauma in autistic lives, often associated with the lived realities of being neurodivergent in a non-autistic world and having to develop strategies to survive in social, cultural and physical environments that are experienced as hostile and in which trauma is multifaceted. Pearson and Rose have recently produced a taxonomy of autistic trauma:

*to highlight just some of the many ways that autistic people may be (a) at higher risk of trauma, and (b) how many of these experiences have both a direct (through explicitly encouraging masking) and indirect (through fostering internalised stigma and the notion that authenticity is unsafe) impact on the development of masking. Autistic people experience commonly established sources of trauma (e.g. interpersonal victimisation and abuse) frequently, however they also experience forms of trauma that are more closely intertwined with being autistic (e.g. sensory trauma, autism stigma and invalidation).<sup>29</sup>*

The process of revisiting childhood through photography and playing in the revisionary space of the neuroverse is an opportunity for unmasking and rewilding. It's important to emphasise the extent of the humour, the laughing faces, the delight in incongruity and visual anachronism as past and present converge. Lauren B's analogue collage 'Let us Draw' is an exuberant celebration of creative learning in childhood, a smiling younger self standing at an easel in oversized shirt next to an observing older self (back to camera) against a backdrop of making materials – polka dot fabric, buttons, magazine cut outs and the text, 'Let us draw' above what appears to be a scrabble letter tile: 'a'. There is little scope for this in contemporary classrooms, particularly for neurodivergent young people where teaching seems focussed on identifying and addressing deficits whilst promoting

normative behaviour and social skills, rather than locating areas of interest and ability and supporting sensory differences. In 'Let us Draw' there's an invitation to reconnect with a play-based approach to learning and this is precisely what Neurophototherapy offers with Boué's experienced voice as our guide. For the reader/maker, however, there is agency and choice in how to progress and reminders of this throughout the volume. We take control to choose which section to work with, where to work and who to involve. Masking is presented as a strategy, its complexity acknowledged and embraced. It's sometimes 'useful and even necessary' but what is offered through this method is 'playful unmasking', whilst retaining autonomy (p.43).

The tool kit of 'Examples' for Neurophototherapy 2 has been revised and refined in places, but the core materials and methods are now tried and tested. 'Working with a Fictional Character' offers an alternative to working with personal photos but is still an opportunity to reflect on childhood preferences and revisit the imaginative worlds of our childhood. I remember Pippi Longstocking and reflect on how I identified with outsider characters. 'Performance Photography/Collage' had clearly inspired the work of the project participants to use analogue cut and paste methods to blend objects, people and animals, particularly birds. The prevalence of birds in Neurophototherapy is notable, perhaps connected to an urge for freedom as well as to the links to imprinting and species development. In the 'Being more you' section, birds are a focus as Sonia reflects on her early bird drawings and on this connection 'to the early me' through collage, performance photography and photomontage. This has strong links to the work of Lucy Barker and Sonja Zelić. In 'Taking Neurophototherapy for a walk' I notice the playing with reflections (p.58) and how reflections and shadows have been a feature of my own endeavours, inspired by this work. I like the self-reflexive quality where the photographer as maker/author is reflected in the composition. It's a way of integrating process and product and enhances authenticity, a quality that is important for autistic people. 'Working with objects' features a pair of black suede shoes I identify with immediately as a creative persona. Shoes are like people and in encounters with mental health professionals, they become a focus of attention through the avoidance of eye contact and the difficulties of talking about personal experience. I wonder whether this was the inspiration for this photo. The

'Collaging objects' has clearly influenced the work of Helen Robson and her 'Photo protection equipment' assemblage as well as Chloe Lawson, previously discussed. 'Collaging past and present', particularly through combining older and younger faces, produces powerful imagery through a process referred to as 'meeting myself in the middle.' A variation of this is Naomi Morris's performative 'Photo re-enactment' in which she remodels a photo of herself as a child holding on to a bicycle, with a grown up Naomi wearing a pinafore and jumper that echo the clothes in the photo, positioned amidst the clutter of Wellington boots, a space hopper and a child's chair and blankets. The boots are adult size in the older photo but the mirroring of the positioning (and ambivalent facial expression) with the full-sized Naomi with the child's bike, white sock on one foot, ankle boot on the other, creates a comic commentary on change and time. Whilst times have clearly changed, some aspects of Naomi are constant and what is clearly recognisable is the neurodivergent person not sure about the camera and caught in the act of play. I am struck by how these photo compositions engage in dialogue with each other, looking at you, looking at me as a process of neurodivergent discovery and recognition.

In *Autistic Masking*, 'towards a better future', the authors call for an ecological approach to understand 'how factors across multiple levels (e.g. individual, societal) shape masking and the associated outcomes'.<sup>30</sup> Recognising the importance of 'fostering authenticity' they emphasise the need to approach this with 'sensitivity and nuance' and with awareness of intersectionality. They call for interdisciplinary approaches to create new understanding, and for new collaborations of researchers, professionals and educators working together 'to foster autistic flourishing.' Such work needs to be participatory, engaging autistic people and their lived experiences at every level. They cite Georgia Pavlopoulos's life world framework, to be used by professionals as a means of developing 'cultural competency'.<sup>31</sup> This emphasises the importance of valuing subjective experience, promoting agency, recognising and responding to the 'unique' aspects of an individual's identity, listening to autistic people's interpretations of their experiences and facilitating their personal journeys and ambitions. The framework also refers to the importance of safe space.

Neurophototherapy is a creative tool which can be used as part of this process, helping autistic people to make sense of themselves and their experiences through a process that moves beyond masking. This embraces the social, creative and performative possibilities of individuals having agency in how they express their identities and how, when and where to protect and support autistic differences. The method has wider application, moreover, as it provides insight into the complexities and nuances of autistic perception, sense-making and engagement with the world. It has the potential to enhance understanding of the interactions between autism and mental health, positively impacting on clinicians, employers and professionals in health and education. As Pearson and Rose conclude

*It is not solely the responsibility of the autistic person to 'unmask' but an interaction between individuals and systems at multiple levels that can allow for (a) the self- knowledge needed to develop a more authentic sense of self, and (b) a society in which it is safe to express this. It is not solely the responsibility of the autistic person to 'unmask' but an interaction between individuals and systems at multiple levels that can allow for (a) the self- knowledge needed to develop a more authentic sense of self, and (b) a society in which it is safe to express this.<sup>32</sup>*

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