

**Disordering dance:
neuroqueering a choreographic practice**

Aby Watson

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&
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Abstract:

Disordering Dance: Neuroqueering a Choreographic Practice critically interrogates solo choreography and performance through a lens of the neurodiversity paradigm, and a lived experience of neurodivergence, specifically dyspraxia; a neurotype which affects memory, coordination, cognitive processing, and the execution of movements. Yet, through the process of a paradigm shift, the research widens its focus to consider neurodivergence more broadly. Deliberations of choreography itself also become expanded, to explore increasingly interdisciplinary modes of dance alongside alternate social relations and modes of spectatorship within the performance space.

Through neuroqueer autoethnographic practice-research, this doctoral research adopts a methodology of 'disordering'. Through critical autoethnography, an intimate representation of selfhood is formed wherein taken-for-granted neuronormative assumptions within mainstream dance culture – and their consequential impacts – become exposed. A reordering of power relations is desired through dance practice that generates new 'radically inclusive' neurodivergent-centred choreographic methods and aesthetics (Walker, 2021:176). Disordering as a choreographic methodology explores dance outwith the constraints of neuronormative performance, materialising previously unrealised creative potentials (2021:190). With an ethical ambition, *Disordering Dance* works to transform dance cultural environments to create space for neuroqueer embodiments to be 'permitted, accepted, supported, and encouraged' (2021:163).

Disordering Dance utilises a positionality of 'neurodivergent outsider' in Western dance culture. Voiced by a queer neurodivergent choreographer and dancer with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and ADHD (with autistic traits), this research seeks to offer a valuable utterance of neurodivergent authorship to the clinically dominated field of literature, whilst cross pollinating dance scholarship with the burgeoning fields of critical neurodiversity and neuroqueer creative practice.

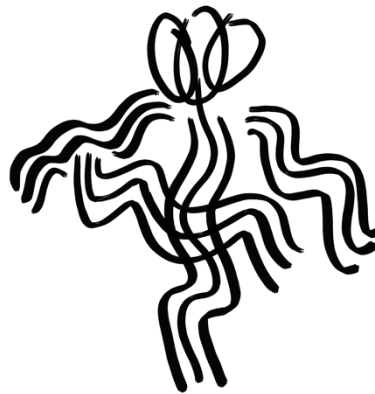


Table of contents:

<i>General acknowledgements</i>	6
<i>Funding acknowledgements</i>	9
<i>Abstract</i>	10
<i>List of contents for the portfolio</i>	17
<i>List of figures</i>	18
1. <i>Introduction / Intervention</i>	19
Transformation in Different Forms.....	20
The Process of a Paradigm Shift.....	22
Shifts in Landscape.....	25
Internal Paradigm Shifts.....	26
2. <i>Methodology: Neuroqueer Autoethnographic Practice Research</i>	28
Neuroqueer Methods.....	30
Neuroqueering the Manuscript.....	31
3. <i>Literature Review</i>	35
What is Dyspraxia?.....	36
Dyspraxia in the Literature.....	37
Normative Standards.....	38
The Dyspraxic Non-Docile Dancing Body.....	40
Dyspraxia, Disability, and Dance.....	42
A Murky In-between.....	43
4. <i>-ish: Choreographing Dyspraxicality</i>	45
Choreographing a Niche.....	46
Choreographing the Unseen In-between.....	47
Dyspraxia, Dualism, Dance.....	48
Choreographing Dyspraxicality.....	50
Objects of Dyspraxicality.....	51
Objects of In-Betweenness – Rising/Falling.....	53
Objects as Non-Docile Actants.....	55
Risk and Investment.....	57
Steady/Wobbly.....	59
Design and Dramaturgy of Dyspraxicality in the Space.....	61
Fixed/Fluid.....	63

Meltdown.....	64
Actual Real Genuine Dysfunction	66
Deviations From the Plan.....	67
Order/Chaos	69
A Shared Dyspraxic Moment.....	71
Cultivating the Slip Up	73
"Go girl, take two"	74
5. <i>The Internal Environment</i>	77
Emotional Dyspraxicality	79
An Inner Dissonance	81
Enter ADHD and Multiplicity.....	81
Brain Shame	83
Tangles and Loops	85
Toxic Perfectionism	86
No More Poison, No More Master's Tools	87
'The Freedom of your Owen Verlison'.....	88
Internalised Neuronormativity	90
Cocooning in COVID	91
Memory (Foundational but Hazy, with Soft Edges)	91
The Feeling of Dancing.....	92
An Index of Embodiment	93
Findings of An Index	95
Neuroqueering a Niche for a Neurodivergent Bodymind	97
6. <i>Unmasking Embodiment</i>	100
Masking	101
Character Armour	102
Unmasking	103
Stimming as Neurodivergent Embodiment.....	104
Stimming as Intuitive Pattern Making.....	107
Rhythm and Repetition and Loops	107
The Space Between Stimming and Dancing	108
Stim Dancing	109
Stim Dancing and Music	111

Stim Dancing as an Embodied Practice of Unmasking	112
'Stimwork': Neurodivergent Artists Utilising Stimming as a Creative Method.....	113
Stimming as Embodied Ornament	115
'Rethinking' Stimming as Embodied Ornament	117
Collectively 'Feeling In' to the Stimming Body	118
Dance as Innate Human Behaviour for Social, Cognitive and Neurobiological Benefit	121
Dance <i>is</i> Stimming, Stimming <i>is</i> Dance	123
Stimdance as Neuroqueer Choreography.....	124
6.5 <i>The Paradigm Shift</i>	127
A Letter from The Opening	128
A Manifesto for Neuroqueer Unmasked Self-Practice	129
7. <i>The Emergence of a Neuroqueer Choreographic Aesthetic</i>	131
Improvisation is Slippery, Fluid and Hard to Capture	131
Choreography as Disabling Arbitrary Architecture	133
Capturing Stimdance	135
Beyond Choreography as an Apparatus of Capture	136
'Disordering' the Dance Performance Space.....	138
Constructing a Neuroqueer Niche	140
Aesthetic Legacies to Support Neuroqueer Choreography.....	140
A. Postmodern Dance	140
B. Performance Art.....	142
C. Somatic Practice	144
D. Art Brut	146
8. <i>Principle Methods of a Neuroqueer Choreographic Niche</i>	152
Assistive Technologies of a Neuroqueer Niche.....	153
1. Relaxed Performance and Process.....	154
What is Relaxed Performance?	154
Expanding Relaxed Provision into New Radical Dance	156
From Relaxed Performance into Relaxed Process.....	159
A. Radical Honesty	159
B. Honouring Needs	161
C. Feeling Good.....	161
D. Collaboration and Collectivity.....	162
2. Improvisation / Stimpromprovisation.....	163
3. Sensory Seeking Scores.....	166
A Collection of Provocations for Neuroqueer Stimpromprovisation	169

4. Human Resources.....	174
5. Mark Making.....	176
An Invitation to Practice.....	179
9. <i>Back and Forth and Forth and Back: Zoning into a Neuroqueer Choreography..</i>	181
A Work in Process.....	181
Being in 'The Zone'.....	183
The Phenomena of Being in The Zone.....	185
Flow and Autism.....	187
Hyperfocus and ADHD.....	189
Different Attentional Styles.....	191
The Audience Experience of 'Zoning In'.....	193
The Performer's Experience of 'Zoning In'.....	196
The Auto-Poietic Feedback Loop.....	197
BFFB as a Neuroqueer Rite of Passage.....	199
Phase 1: Separation / Entering the Zone.....	200
Phase 2: Transition / Going 'Back and Forth and Forth and Back' in The Zone.....	202
A) A Liminoid Event of Neuroqueering.....	202
B) Neuroqueer Anti-structure and Communitas.....	205
Phase 3: Incorporation / Leaving the Zone.....	207
10. <i>Going Back and Forth and Forth and Back: A Neuroqueer Choreography of States of Being in 'The Zone'</i>	210
Shifting States-of-Being.....	210
The Atmosphere of The Zone.....	211
A) Forms.....	212
B) Tonality.....	214
C) Temporality.....	216
The Neuroqueer Sphere: A State of Being in Neurodivergent Joy.....	218
Voice.....	220
Movement.....	222
Object.....	224
The Shadow Zone: A State of Being in Neurodivergent Pain.....	226
The Grotesque Gargiryle.....	227
Gargiryle: Dysregulation, Rumination, Intrusive Thoughts.....	229
Gargiryle: Masking.....	230
Gargiryle: Vulnerable People Pleasing.....	231

The After Dark Zone: A State of Being in Neurodivergent Pleasure	233
The Erotic	235
Erotic Dance	236
Stimming as an Erotic Act	238
Erotic Stimprovisation.....	239
A) As Play and Self-Love	239
B) As Encounter and Becoming	241
C) As Erotic Touch	241
Performing Erotic Touch in The After Dark Zone	244
Erotic Voyeurism	248
Erotic Performance for Neurodivergent Audiences	249
11. Conclusion	252
At the end. In the here and the now.	252
Neuroqueering as a Decolonial Practice.....	256
12. Bibliography	258
13. Appendices	276

Disordering Dance: Neuroqueering a Choreographic Practice Portfolio of Practice

The portfolio comprising the body of performance work produced through this research can be found in a secure Dropbox link here: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/svmnm75wqr863w62txs85/h?rlkey=11nzhpemvl5vy0935xsideuiu&dl=0>. The files are intended to be accessed in the order as detailed below, in correspondence with the written manuscript.

List of contents for the portfolio:

Folder 1) *-ish*

Video documentation: '*-ish* – Performance at Wales Millennium Centre – November 2019'

Duration: 54 minutes, 42 seconds

Folder 2) *An Index of Embodiment*

Graphic document: '*An Index of Embodiment*'

Video documentation: '*Living Room Dancing Sample – November 2020*'

Folder 2) *Back and Forth and Forth and Back*

PDF: '*Back and Forth and Forth and Back – Viewing Notes*'

Folder 2A) *BFFB1 – R&D at The Work Room – December 2021*

Video documentation: '*BFFB1 – Sharing of R&D*'

Duration: 1 hour, 15 minutes, 33 seconds

Folder 2B) *BFFB2 – R&D at LEVEL Centre – August 2022*

Video documentation: '*BFFB2 – Durational Performance Experiment*'

Duration: 2 hours, 17 minutes, 53 seconds

List of figures:

Figure 1. -ish copy image, photo by Jassy Earl.....	52
Figure 2. -ish at Sophiensaele, Berlin (May 2019). Image by Daisy Douglas.....	56
Figure 3. -ish at Sophiensaele, Berlin (May 2019). Deutsche Gebärdensprache Intpretation by Anka Böttcher. Image by Daisy Douglas	61
Figure 4. Table from Pauc (ibid)	83
Figure 5. Work-in-process image of An Index of Embodiment.....	97
Figure 6. Dadderrs by Frauke Requardt and Daniel Oliver. Image by Zoe Manders	149
Figure 7. INCHOATE BUZZ by Fernanda Muñoz Newsome. Image by Anne Tetzlaff	157
Figure 8. Lying alongside some 'sub-power sources' during BFFB2, August 2022. Image by Thom Scullion.	165
Figure 9. Performance score for BFFB2. Image by Aby Watson.	174
Figure 10. Example of graphic notation, drawn during a workshop with Candoco Dance Company (August, 2019)	178
Figure 11. In The Shadow Zone during BFFB1. Image by Tiu Makkonen	211
Figure 12. Audience members in The Zone during BFFB1. Image by Tiu Makkonen.....	212
Figure 13. The hot pink After Dark Zone, during BFFB1. Image by Tui Makkonen.....	214
Figure 14. Performing in The Neuroqueer Sphere with a foil blanket, during BFFB2. Image by Thom Scullion	225
Figure 15. Playing as Gargiryle in The Shadow Zone, during BFFB2. Image by Thom Scullion.....	230
Figure 16. Performing in The After Dark Zone, during BFFB1. Image by Tui Makkonen.	234
Figure 17. Copy image for BFFB that evokes the quality of stimming as erotic touch. Image taken during BFFB1, by Tui Makkonen.	247

Disordering Dance: Neuroqueering a Choreographic Practice

1. Introduction / Intervention

*Memory. I am standing in the middle of a dance floor, barefoot and in loose fitting clothing. I am 17 years old. I face forward to see a thin white woman; her hair slicked back into a tight ponytail. She stands in front of a wall of mirrors, a dozen or so people my age space around me in the reflection. **This is my first ever contemporary dance class, and I am here to learn.** I stand eager to throw myself in. All my life, dancing has been a love of mine, it is how I know myself, and now **I am here to be transformed.** I am ready to become a 'proper' dancer.*

*The class finishes. My throat is sore, lips tremble and eyes water, but I hold it in; quiet. I play it all back in my head to make sense of it. The instruction moved so fast; a wash of bodily information given without time for me to comprehend. **When done incorrectly, small details in sequences create big differences.** The location of one's limbs, facing and direction are set strictly to left and right, two things that I don't have an embodied understanding of. Many steps are organised with numbers that don't land in my body at all. **I'm not in my body, I'm in my head, whirring.** My classmates' reflection dances in unison; a collective body moving in time, space, and shape, seemingly with ease and flow. I catch myself in the image, stumbling and slow, **all sore thumb and odd one out**, so I remove myself. I stand to the side, and as I watch something bubbles inside of me – a churn of humiliation, confusion, shame, envy, and anger that forms a lump in my throat that I don't let out. **I swallow it. I say to myself next time, I will do better.** I will get here early and practice. I can do this; I'll get it.*

I do what I have always done to succeed – I throw myself into it with determination and hard work to find my own way through. Yet, this does not work, and my experience repeats itself. I submit myself to a cycle of showing up and sticking out, as the velocity of the environment continues to clash with the speed of my body and mind. I remain on the outside, still and swallowing myself, alone. Over time, the lump in my throat grows so big that it is impossible to contain and the hurt overflows into public tears. I create my own routine as I remove myself from the studio, compose myself in the bathroom, and return brave (albeit it puffy) faced to try again. No one intervenes, they just let me get on with it.

*I ask myself; **what's wrong with me?** I am trying so hard – why isn't it paying off? Dancing is who I am, so why can't I do this? These questions lead me to intervene myself. I speak to an educational psychologist at my sixth form college, and **she diagnoses me with something called dyspraxia.** From there, things start to make sense, but the dissonance with dancing doesn't change. I continue to find rapture on nightclub dancefloors but find myself drowning on the dancefloor of repertoire class. **How can dancing be both who I am and who I am not simultaneously?***

Transformation in Different Forms

My first encounters with contemporary dance transformed me, but not how I wished. Instead of acquired skill and technique, I departed with psychological pain, knocked self-esteem, a dissonant relationship with dancing, and – for the first time – a formal diagnosis of neurodivergence. My understanding of who I am was shaken. Up to this point, I was able to fly under the radar in educational environments with how I managed myself– but **dance training exposed me.** It made me vulnerable, but in a way, it was also my making. As an artist who wanted

to make physical performance, I now knew that **uniformity was not the path**. I had to do what I had always done, work hard and find my own way of doing.

So, I trained in Contemporary Performance, whereby I learnt to make and perform my own work in the intersection of movement, live art, and postmodern theatre. A few years into professional practice, I recognised that dance remained a central interest, and I sought to reconnect with that identity as an artist. However, the dissonance remained, and questions arose. These are the questions I started my doctoral research with:

- **How can I create dance when I struggle to organise and remember sequences?**
- **How can I be a dancer without traditional training?**
- **How might a dance practice hold my dyspraxia with support and acceptance?**
- **What would it take for dancing to feel like mine again?**

Through this journey, I have transformed. Over eight and a half years, this long-term research has been parallel to, and inextricably intertwined with, the development of both my choreographic practice and my personhood. Researching from my lived experience has required me to address old wounds, whilst the practice has demanded I make things anew to create an alternative environment from that which has hurt me. This has been healing, as **the lived knowledge from experiences past becomes reinterpreted as new knowledge towards change.**

The process of this research embodies an '**untangling**'; a coming to terms with who I am at my core, 'under all those layers of shame, stigma and confusion' (Frank and Solden, 2019:3). It has afforded me with **training**; a critical and

practical engagement with dance to develop and attain skills previously unobtainable to me. Crucially, this research remains as a **becoming**; 'a transition towards an embodiment of the desired change which will demonstrate a transformative movement' (Natanasabapathy and Maathuis-Smith, 2018:370). As well as the autonomous transformation for my practice and person, a desire for change within the field of dance also drives this research. It hopes to influence a **transformative movement for the betterment of neurodivergent experience within the dance sector**, towards the creation of choreographic practices and aesthetics that radically include, support, and care for the broad spectrum of neurodivergence and all its embodiments.

The Process of a Paradigm Shift

'Disordering Dance' was not always the name of this research. It initially began life as 'Choreographing Clumsy' and sought to practically interrogate **the 'problem' of choreographing dyspraxia**, whose etymological root derives from the Greek '**dys**' – meaning '**bad, ill; hard, difficult; abnormal, imperfect**' and '**praxis**' – meaning '**a doing, action, performance**' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2023:A;B). How might choreographing dyspraxia be explored from an affirmative angle? However, the focus regarding how to choreograph embodiments of 'bad action' took a significant shift during the research process, in response to **personal, critical, societal, and cultural expansions** that have played out over the eight years.

When I began the PhD, I **had not even heard of the word 'neurodiversity'**. Mostly recognised as coined by autistic sociologist Judy Singer in 1998¹, the term pertains

¹ Judy Singer's seminal coinage of 'neurodiversity' has recently been challenged online. In the face of her public transphobic comments online and her criticisms calling the contemporary neurodiversity movement 'cultish', members of the autistic community who surrounded her at the

to the natural diversity of all human brains and minds. Singer argues the value of such human difference akin to the concept of biodiversity; the more diverse the ecosystem, the more sustainable and robust it is (1998). Since, neurodiversity has expanded into a social justice movement that aims 'to end what proponents see as **the default pathologization of neurodivergence** (i.e., divergence from normal mental functioning) and to instead promote **the acceptance and accommodation of human neurodiversity**' (Chapman, 2021:1360). A societal shift drives the movement, seeking a turn from the historically dominant '**Pathology Paradigm**' towards an inclusive '**Neurodiversity Paradigm**'. Seminal neurodiversity theorist Dr Nick Walker (she/her) proposes the fundamental principles of the Neurodiversity Paradigm to be:

- 1) Neurodiversity is a natural, healthy, and valuable form of human diversity.
- 2) There is no 'normal' or 'right' style of human mind, any more than there is one 'normal' or 'right' ethnicity, gender, or culture.
- 3) The social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g. diversity of race, culture, gender or sexual orientation). These dynamics of social power relations – the dynamics of social inequity, privilege, and oppression – as well as the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential within a group or society (2021:19-20).

Walker urgently calls for a profound paradigm shift, expressing that the long-term wellbeing and empowerment of neurodivergent people depend upon it. She states

time of the term's inception claim it was not purely her idea. Dekker (2023) maintains she took the sole authorship of ideas that emerged collectively from the autistic community in the 1990s, from the Autism Network International (and an individual called Jim Sinclair in particular – an intersex genderqueer person).

that shifting the lens of which society understands neurodivergence requires **radical change**; redefining terms, recalibrating language, rethinking approaches, and rephrasing our questions (2021:17). Walker argues for a **new non-pathological language** of neurodiversity and presents new concepts and words to act as tools that resist the 'Something-Wrong-With-You' narrative (2021:22).

'**Neurotypical**' and '**neurodivergent**' emerge as terms regarding those whose neurological make-up does, and does not, align with society's categorisations of 'normality' respectively, enabling modes of discussing neurological diversity beyond the dominant pathology paradigm. From this standpoint, whereby neurotypicals are the majority, neurodivergent people can be recognised as '**neurominorities**' – different groups with differences of mind, instead of an identification determined by their 'disorder' or 'condition'. This reframes neurodivergent people as '**neurocognitively marginalised**' (Legault et. al, 2021) – a position that acknowledges the oppressive social power dynamics at play. Another word to emerge that addresses the impact of societal systems on neurominorities – and is a central concept for the argument of this thesis – is '**neuronormativity**', meaning the pervasive concept of neurotypicality as the preferred, expected, assumed, and 'normal' way of being. **A neuronormative view upholds a social hierarchy based on neurological functioning that privileges neurotypicality as the social norm**, and thus societally stigmatises, oppresses, and even dehumanises those whose natural ways of being diverge from the constructs of 'normal' cognition.

For Walker, a language of neurodiversity is an important tool to resist neuronormativity; words influence how society treats neurodivergence and

shapes how we understand ourselves². Words are central to aid the paradigm shift, which Walker states must happen both internally, within our own consciousness, and externally, through propagation in the cultures we live in (2021:16). Over the course of my research, I have witnessed such processes of shifting in both my internal consciousness and through the words and culture of external perspectives. Throughout this thesis, I coin new terms and concepts to assist with a paradigm shift in neuronormative western dance culture. These terms are highlighted **like this**.

Shifts in Landscape

The literature, initially dominated by clinical experts in psychology, psychiatry, and education regarding specific diagnoses, has seen **a boom in neurodivergent-led authorship** and has expanded with the emergence of **critical neurodiversity studies**. Neurodivergent perspectives are increasingly present across other forms of output too. Culturally, we now see a wave of **out-and-proud neurodivergent artists**³ increasingly creating cross-disciplinary work that manifests the creativity of thinking differently. The societal discourse is changing, with greater **representation of and dialogue** around neurodiversity in popular media, whilst the increasing prevalence of social media platforms continue to **connect and empower neurodivergent communities** to embolden their collective voice. Furthermore, shifts have also unfolded in the performance sector, with discourse

²Walker states this includes the messages we internalise within ourselves as the use of self-pathological language, e.g. 'I suffer with autism' or 'I have a co-ordination disorder', internalises the pathology paradigm and one's oppression, disempowering oneself (2021:26).

³The work of artists/companies such as Touretteshero, Nwando Ebizie, Kai Syng Tan, Xan Dye, Sam Metz, Daniel Oliver, and Freestylers are notable examples, alongside neurodivergent creative collectives such as Neuk Collective and Scottish Neurodiverse Performance Network.

and provisions regarding the inclusion, equity and access of both neurodivergent artists and audiences on the increase⁴.

Additionally, rates of identified neurodivergence are becoming more prevalent across society. Those seeking and attaining diagnoses of autism in the UK has rose exponentially, as research shows referrals for autism assessments rose by 226% between 2017 and 2022⁵ (Topping, 2023). The landscape of neurodiversity within society, culture, knowledge, and creative practice has transformed since the inception of my research, which has evolved alongside the waves of such change.

Internal Paradigm Shifts

The understanding of my own neurodivergence has also shifted. I knew I was dyslexic and dyspraxic, but during the research I also was diagnosed with ADHD. Consequently, I received medication through a psychiatrist who told me I also have 'autistic traits'. As a result, the understanding of **my neurodivergence became much more fluid⁶ and porous**; less clear and important were the boundaries between objective categorisations of specific 'conditions'. **I became empowered** through connecting with neurodivergent community, critical thought, and creative authorship. This effected both the direction of my research and the relationship to my neurodivergence, as **my perspective distanced itself from**

⁴Projects such as Birds of Paradise's 'House Lights Up' report into relaxed performance in Scotland, National Theatre of Scotland's 'Limitless' exploring autism and performance, and the instigation of Neurodivergent Talent Group, an agency specifically for neurodivergent talent, are notable examples.

⁵This increase is seen with rates of ADHD diagnosis in the UK. At time of writing, there is currently a global shortage of ADHD medication due to a significantly increased need (Ping, 2023).

⁶The understanding of my sexuality and gender identity also became expanded over this period. I recognised my queerness as an omnisexual person attracted to different multiple genders, and began to explore my sensuality outside of normative, patriarchal constraints. I started using she/they pronouns. I also began to practice polyamory, engaging in multiple simultaneous relationships through care, respect, mutual agreements, and transparent communication.

pathological determinations, diagnostic criteria, and behavioural characteristics, and widened beyond concerns of the individual.

A paradigm shift took place for me. My investigation evolved beyond dyspraxia and the site of my practice to address **the collective barriers caused by neuronormativity in dance culture** – for both artist and audience. I stopped considering neurodivergent embodiment as the ‘problem’ to a choreographic practice and thought more radically to **question the cultural norms in dance that suppress, stigmatise, and exclude neurodivergence.** With this shift, ‘it wasn’t that questions had new answers – the questions themselves where different’ (Walker, 2021:17). The problem became not how to choreograph dyspraxia, but how might a choreographic practice **disorder** neuronormativity in mainstream dance culture? How might an aesthetic of dance be ordered to accept and accommodate neurodivergent embodiments?

2. **Methodology: Neuroqueer Autoethnographic Practice Research**

Disordering Dance originated as autoethnographic practice research, utilising my lived experience and creative practice as sites of knowledge. Yet, another central methodological frame gradually guided the research – that of **neuroqueering**. Coined by Walker, **neuroqueer** builds on the conceptualisation of queerness to ‘encompass the **queering of neurocognitive norms**’ (2021:160). Firstly, it emerges as **a verb; as a multiplicity of practices** of ‘intentional non-compliance with the demands of normative performance’ (2021:175) that seek to **subvert, disrupt, and liberate from both neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously**⁷ (2021:160). Neuroqueer may secondarily serve as a social identity for those who have ‘been shaped by their engagement with neuroqueering’ (2021:161). Through the ‘creatively subversive and transformative action’ of my practice research, **my identity emerges as a neuroqueer choreographer** (2021:174).

My neuroqueer critical stance is of ‘disordering’. Not as a position that affirms a pathological standpoint, but akin to Dr Daniel Oliver’s ‘neurotransgressive’ ‘dys-practice’ (Arika, 2024) – an inherently dyspraxic mode of practice that violates social boundaries and norms. For Oliver, the ‘awkwardness’ of dyspraxia is his methodology; a generative, defiant approach that locates value in that which socially unsettles. Such a methodology evokes form that expresses Kotso’s concept of ‘**cultural awkwardness**’, a situation wherein ‘there seems to be **a set of norms** in force, but it **feels somehow impossible to follow them**’ (Kotsko, 2010:6 in Oliver, 2019:30). **My experience is arguably an embodiment of ‘cultural awkwardness’**

⁷For both heteronormativity and neuronormativity are interconnected systems of oppression. Such dominant systems demand social performances of ‘normality’, be it neurotypical or cis-hetero, and thus punish, stigmatise, and exclude ‘non-normative’ embodiments. The intertwining of hetero and neuro normativities is also evident in the history of pathologizing queerness. Homosexuality was a pathological diagnosis until it was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1978 (Drescher, 2015).

in **neuronormative dance**. This forms an outsider positionality. Both in my embodiment, due to my exclusion from traditional routes of training, and my identity, as I disassociated with attributes normatively constituted as 'dancer'.

Disordering Dance utilises a positionality of '**neurodivergent outsider**' in dance culture. Through critical autoethnography, taken-for-granted neuronormative assumptions within mainstream dance culture become exposed. A reordering of power relations is desired through practice that generates new 'radically inclusive' neurodivergent-centred choreographic methods and aesthetics (Walker, 2021:176). **Disordering as a choreographic methodology explores dance outwith the constraints of neuronormative performance**, materialising previously unrealised creative potentials (2021:190). With an ethical ambition, **Disordering Dance** works to transform dance cultural environments to create space for neuroqueer embodiments to be 'permitted, accepted, supported, and encouraged' (2021:163).

In foregrounding a **neuroqueer voice**, an utterance normatively unheard emerges that critically intersects the fields of dance and neurodiversity. The written narrative forms a **neuroqueer polymorphic voice of multiplicity, fluidity, and becoming**. It centres the complexity of the process over the need for a unified or cohesive product, and resists flattening the subjectivity of experience into objective coherence. This is reflected through the portfolio. Projects include public presentations that, even in their 'finished' form, were constantly reshaping through ongoing development, resulting in multiple versions of the same work. 'Unfinished' works-in-progress also feature and are articulated in the manuscript with future visions and potentialities that are yet to become. All reflects **the unfixed and ongoing site of this research**, which continues its evolution even following the finality of submission.

Through autoethnography, a story is told of **untangling oneself from neuronormative conditioning**. Practice research journeys towards a **mode of liberated dance** to reclaim 'one's capacity to give more full expression to one's uniquely weird potentials and inclinations' (2021:162). A **neuroqueer stance destabilises 'fixed' logics** and binary determinations. Themes of mental health, embodiment, and identity emerge, blurring dualistic concepts of body/mind, thinking/sensing, and subject/object. Whereas the impact of external environments on one's internal consciousness illustrates **the porosity of neurodivergent identity, embodiment, and lived experience**. Through a neuroqueer lens, **an intimate representation of a neurodivergent bodymind emerges** – as an embodied psyche, a body that thinks and perceives (2021:54), undergoes **a process of choreographing itself that results in transformation**.

Neuroqueer Methods

Practice research was principally undertaken through various projects of **solo performance**⁸, as evidenced in the portfolio. **Creative processes were vessels to develop choreographic methods and generate aesthetic ideas** exploring specific research subjects, whilst providing motivating milestones across the research. Some projects resulted in public performance and touring, opening practical experience within the field that enabled connection with audiences and their responses. **Fieldwork** was also undertaken through **experiencing various dance practices and environments**⁹ external to the context of my own work, and through travel to immerse myself in **events of burgeoning neurodivergent culture**. I actively engaged with various neurodivergent creative networks,

⁸Alongside small teams of collaborators

⁹These include contemporary dance classes and intensives – in and outside of contexts of disability dance – alongside contact improvisation jams, and then later, regular classes in burlesque, pole dancing, and erotic floorwork.

fostering connection with vast practices and knowledges of the neurodivergent artistic community. Furthermore, I collaborated on other neurodivergent-led projects throughout the research – despite not featuring in the portfolio, such exchange made undoubtable impacts on my thinking and practice.

All engagements of practice impacted on my lived experience, thus **generating autoethnographic material**. Experiential knowledges occurring through practice were captured in various forms for later reflection and/or analysis. **Personal reflection** was undertaken both alone and with others through conversation, freewriting, talking to myself, mind-mapping, and mark making. **Documentation** during – or shortly after – the immediate moment was the preferred approach, ensuring accurate capture whilst also enacting a mode for processing the here and now. Methods of voice, video, and photography documented my reflection, as well as offering means to capture creative practice – which emerged as an access strategy for my choreographic process. Such documentation facilitates playback, enabling opportunity to both witness and recall material to then respond to or revisit. It was essential that all self-practice and reflection was **documented honestly, inclusive of vulnerability, instability, and uncertainty**. Public performances were also documented, enabling the ephemeral moment of performance to be later analysed. **Self-reflexivity enabled a feedback loop between process and performance**, as both avenues of practice mutually impacted each other to inform the future direction of projects, methods, and lines of enquiry.

Neuroqueering the Manuscript

Disordering Dance seeks to **centre a neurodivergent readership**. Bennett writes of **neurodivergent reading as 'feeling... It is exploring in co-composition... a**

becoming, transensory, transmodal, nonsensuous, activity; an event— **it is the field of relation felt'** (2022:56-57). This manuscript seeks to honour the nature of **non-neuronormative reading as an explorative, relational exchange of co-composition and feeling**. Additional to its emotive autoethnographic voice of self-sensing and becoming, **the manuscript adopts an alternative format** through strategies that consider **non-neuronormative modes of reading, processing, and learning**, and seeks to embed them in its style, structure, and layout. My neuroqueer method must bring attention to neuronormativity of academia, the taken-for-granted conventions that demand neuronormative conformity, and the power relations that often result in neurodivergent exclusion from equitable engagement with knowledge. *Disordering Dance* desires a more democratic, accessible, and **neurodivergent-centred knowledge exchange**¹⁰.

Linear and longform presentations of written information may be overwhelming, inaccessible, or just out right boring for neurodivergent readers whose focus, attention, cognitive processing and/or reading capacity may impact on their engagement with academic material. Therefore, this **thesis is presented through 'chunking'** – breaking down the overall argument and through-line into **smaller, more manageable sections** to encourage comprehension and offer more natural opportunities for breaks in reading (Patrick, 2015:114). **Each 'chunk' has a title**, synopsising its content, to make them easy to distinguish and navigate. This hopes to enable **a process of co-composition** with the reader, offering them with **more autonomy to choose their own non-linear journey** through the thesis, led by their

¹⁰No form, however alternative, would be fundamentally accessible to the diversity of all minds and learning needs. Due to *Disordering Dance's* hyperfocus on dyspraxia, particular strategies pertaining to dyspraxic learning and lived experience have been considered and enacted. In an ideal world, this thesis would be presented with different options for engagement, including formats in Easy-Read and audiobook. However, due to limitations with time, resources, and capacity, providing multiple forms are not possible at this stage. I do have plans to revise this thesis to widen its reach to those who may experience barriers (or disinterest) accessing this current format.

own curious areas of interest – carving a **pick-and-mix route** determined by their own agency.

A neurodivergent readership will inherently cross a myriad of learning styles. Normatively, academia solely privileges comprehension through the written word and neglects alternative modes of communication to effectively express complex ideas and concepts. *Disordering Dance* recognises **the need for an increased visual language**, and purposefully adopts visual compositional strategies for whom the written word may be a barrier. Typeface options like **bold**, *italic*, and **highlight** are utilised to **visualise the written word, creating clear visual hierarchies and distinctions in address**. **Key points are emboldened** throughout the manuscript, **creating an easy-read throughline** of its argument; a general overview to its central flow. Furthermore, this manuscript is presented in a **dyslexic friendly font called Inconstant Regular**¹¹.

Where the written word often requires a linear reading, visual strategies can create **non-linear potentialities** in communicating ideas. *Disordering Dance* utilises **'figures'** to offer photographic documentation and graphics **to visually supplement the written word** with a different access point. Furthermore, visualising the thesis seeks to create **a more engaging, enjoyable, and accessible reading experience overall** for a variety of learning and processing needs.

¹¹Inconstant Regular is a font created by graphic designer Daniel Brokstad, for Dyslexia Scotland's project 'There's Nothing Comic About Dyslexia'. It is currently free to download for personal and commercial use – it is not to be resold.

The thesis attempts to stylistically embody traits of my neurodivergent voice¹². I understand that **efficiency does not always equate clarity** – short and sweet is not always loud and clear. **Some things benefit from repetition**. As I do not wish to compromise the authenticity of my voice, I requested and attained permission to extend my word count. **Taking up space outside of such limitations is an act of neuroqueering**.

Sections of this thesis feature in **images of handwritten text**, as I ‘take the longwidj and sine it with [my] owen hand’ (Phillips, in Disability Arts Online, 2020). These offer a positioning statement for most chapters, voicing personal context to frame the following content. Footnotes become the vessel for **tangents**, as information normatively deemed non-essential but important enough to elbow into the dialogue regardless, forming a subjective voice of excitable additions, meandering wanderings, and personal reflections.

¹²As this thesis project is an embodiment of my special interest – the intersection between neurodiversity and performance – I think it appropriate to note how this whole thing is neurodivergent communication. This PhD offers me an avenue to pursue my special interest as a ‘legitimate venture’. As well as giving me reason to hyperfocus on my interests and geek out with those similar in my field, it offers permission for me to talk about it all the time in a socially accepted way. What else is a PhD manuscript if not an instance of monologuing academically!

3. Literature Review

Over its trajectory, *Disordering Dance* surpasses a pathological perspective of neurodivergence and its initial sole concern of choreographing dyspraxia. However, we revisit the roots of the research through the literature review, inclusive of pathologising language and concepts. The voice and concerns of the early research included here honour the starting point of investigation. Furthermore, incorporating such material offers balance by acknowledging the pathology paradigm of neurodiversity, which remains dominant in the body of literature and contemporary society. Furthermore, a specific address to dyspraxia remains of relevance as it raises particularly interesting – and continually unaddressed – concerns within the context of neuronormative dance and choreography, as will become clear.

What is Dyspraxia?

Dyspraxia is difficult to define objectively. Historically, it has been referred to as developmental dyspraxia, minimal brain dysfunction, and clumsy child syndrome amongst others (Penketh, 2011:49-50). The terminology in the current context is not certain either, as the literature interchanges with the term Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD). Dyspraxia is not acquired, it is developmental, without an identified cause. However, research suggests symptoms occur because of an 'immature function' of the neural connections in the right hemisphere of the brain (Portwood, 2000:18). The 'impairments' of dyspraxia are subjective, and definitions reported in the literature range various perspectives and disciplines. The notion of **an impairment, or 'physical clumsiness', with action** is central to many definitions. Penketh states that:

dyspraxia is a term used to define '**difficulties**' with the development of **physical co-ordination** related to sensory processing... [It] not only affects the coordination and **execution of movements** but also the **planning of movements** prior to carrying them out and is independent of an individual's level of intelligence (2011:48).

Dyspraxia is a diagnosis that encompasses physical, cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics¹³. Educational psychologist David Grant (2010) considers dyspraxia through an analogy of an iceberg. He states its tip, visible above the water, signifies **the physical aspects** that may be seen through embodiments of **awkward movement, poor balance, and poor manipulative skills** (Penketh, 2011:51). Physical proficiency is arguably not the nature of the dyspraxic, as they may be prone to tripping over, bumping into objects, and spilling liquids (Grant,

¹³ Dyspraxia's emotional and social characteristics are discussed in chapter 5

2010:51). Underneath the visible surface lies the **hidden cognitive profile** – the main body of the dyspraxia iceberg. Difficulties regarding **executive planning, organisation, language, and perception** comprise this invisible cognitive component (Hendrickx, 2010:87), which can affect dyspraxic daily life through **forgetfulness, disorganisation, and difficulties with absorbing information quickly and navigating new places** (Grant, 2010:62). Grant states observable **physical characteristics of dyspraxia may progressively diminish**, as coordination skills develop and as they learn to be cautious, suggesting that **the visible facets of dyspraxia can fade** but cognitive hidden differences remain unchanged (ibid).

Dyspraxia in the Literature

The literature predominantly communicates a pathological perspective, with **clinical studies primarily centred on early childhood with a bias towards the study of boys**¹⁴. Such research adheres to a **medical model of disability**, wherein difference is recognised as a **deficit** that inherently presents a **problem for one's capacity to function within society**. For Penketh, the dyspraxia literature can be spilt into two areas: help manuals for parents and professionals and scientific clinical research (2011:47). There are anomalies to this divide, as a few publications articulate 'insider perspectives' to assist a broader perspective on dyspraxia (ibid). However, **dyspraxic voices are infrequent** in a literature saturated by a non-dyspraxic clinical authorship. Academic perspectives offering **alternative viewpoints on dyspraxia are significantly lacking**, particularly

¹⁴ I am referring to Penketh's identification of gender bias regarding definitions of dyspraxia within the literature (2011:54–56). She references multiple studies whose statistics proclaim a larger percentage of dyspraxic individuals to be male, albeit with a variation in the figures. Penketh suggests this may be because boys' behaviour might draw more attention from teachers. The author also comments on the predominant use of male pronouns in the literature and discusses a disproportionate balance of genders within specific studies.

regarding those that foreground dyspraxic lived experience. A perspective of dyspraxia through a **social model of disability is missing in the literature**. This viewpoint recognises **impairment as distinct from disability**, which is a result of social constructions that exclude people with impairments. Disability is not the concern of the individual; it is **the result of societal structures that act as barriers to one's equitable functioning within society**. Such barriers can be physical obstructions to access but can also be limitations through social dynamics such as discrimination, ignorance, and normalisation.

Literature that addresses dyspraxia specifically within the field of dance is slim, and **research that centres the positionality of the dyspraxic dancer is non-existent**. *Disordering Dance* seeks to address this gap, contributing new knowledge to aid fields of both dyspraxia literature and dance scholarship. As a condition categorised by its 'inability to plan, organise and coordinate movement' (Polatajko et. al, 1995 cited in Gibbs et. al, 2007), **dyspraxia raises unique and highly relevant concerns for the context of dance**. Difficulties with bodily organisation, coordination, and control of movement present challenge to the expectations of physical proficiency and cognitive sequencing ability in traditional choreographic environments of dance. **This research excavates this issue through practical investigation and autoethnographic experience that adopts a social model perspective** to address barriers that may be exclusive for dyspraxic dancers.

Normative Standards

Penketh (2011) investigates **dyspraxia from a social model perspective in an educational context** of observational drawing. She discusses how **specific exclusive values**, approaches and norms surrounding the practice and pedagogy

of drawing – such as the criteria to master and execute specific technical skills – **disadvantage and exclude dyspraxic students.**

art education can be constructed on **elitist principles** resulting in the meaningful participation of the few. If the subject is defined for pupils as based on **the ability to master specific technical abilities**, pupils might well decide that it has **no real relevance for them** (2011:43)

The enforcement of elitist criteria may result in the **dyspraxic dismissing themselves from involvement**, inhibiting future participation. In discussing disabling structures in art education, Penketh refers to **Foucault's** Discipline and Punish (1995) in which he contends that individuals are persistently surveilled and controlled through subtle and unseen means, which steer towards normalisation and acceptance of said systems. Penketh situates **education as a system of disciplinary power**, which through a process of individualisation, attempts to distinguish individuals against a certain '**pupil ideal**': 'a set of characteristics that embody a learner that is ready, willing, and able to learn. who is largely **compliant to hegemonic learning systems and practices**' (2011:36). Penketh articulates Foucault's terminology of the **docile body** to identify this ideal learner as **obedient to discipline** (2011:35) and cites Rabinow (1984) to describe it as one which 'may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (2011:35). For Penketh, constructing a set of **normative standards thus creates an identification of the abnormal**; if a student is **not presenting as a docile body they are identified as other** and are consequently marginalised by the disciplinary regime (2011:36).

Penketh's discourse **rings true for my experience**. I entered technical training with a will towards docility, compliance, and an expectation to become transformed and improved. However, within a dance environment of fixed practice and exclusive aesthetic standards, **I was rendered non-docile, unintentionally**

disobedient to the regimen. Thus, forming an outsider positionality, 'other' and 'abnormal', that resulted in personal withdrawal from participation. I argue this as an experience of marginalisation, through exclusion from, and a removed sense of belonging in, contemporary dance practice and culture. From here, I will situate this marginalised positionality of a dyspraxic dancer as the **'dysdancer'**¹⁵, distanced (or **dysdanced**) from identification with, and embodiment of, normative western dance culture and aesthetics. In such individualistic traditional dance environments, I observe a distinct lack of collective concern, care, and responsibility for holding neurodivergent bodyminds equitably and safely. Therein, an unspoken, subtle disciplinary power speaks: **'if you can't keep up, that's your problem – get better or get out'**.

The Dyspraxic Non-Docile Dancing Body

Green considers such Foucauldian discourse in the site of dance education. She argues **technical dance training as a disciplinary regime** wherein students are **'docile bodies** created to **produce efficiency**, not only of movement, but also, a normalisation and standardization of behaviour' (2002:111). Student dancers' bodies are **subject to systems of codification** and are therefore manipulated, shaped, and trained to obey, respond, and become skilful to produce **mastery** and achieve **perfection and control** (ibid). This produces a mass of **elite bodies**, where the normative physical standard demands the immaculate performance of set codified movement vocabularies. These exclusive ideals are representative of the normative standards in mainstream dance culture, and therefore shapes what bodies and ways of moving are visible in the dance field.

¹⁵ As a term that I have coined, the 'dysdancer' may also encompass other neurodivergent dancers with Specific Learning Differences, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, or dysgraphia, whose neurodivergence may also meet barriers to access in sites of neuronormative dance.

In a culture where a **'lack of control of the body is not tolerated'** (2002:115), the **dyspraxic will inherently be at odds**. As neurodiversity advocate Dr Thomas Armstrong states, 'human competence is defined by the values of the culture to which you belong' (2010:12), thus arguably, a **dyspraxic dancer presents as 'low competence' in mainstream dance culture**. Physically, their **'clumsy' embodiment** of poor balance, awkward locomotion, and difficulty integrating both sides of their body (Colley 2006:17) **contradicts an aesthetic of masterful, perfect performance**. Furthermore, exclusion from dance training prevents embodied attainment of dance codifications – even if a dysdancer can 'move well', they likely will not do so with a culturally standardised and 'correct' movement language.

As aforementioned, time and increased caution can diminish the physical traits of dyspraxia, giving rise for one's potential docility to dance regimen¹⁶. Yet, **the cognitive profile of the dyspraxic remains unchanged and in conflict with the 'pupil ideal'** of dance education. Neurocognitive differences that affect perception, learning, memory, and thought (Colley, 2006: 19) may include 'weakness in visual processing speed, short-term visual memory, implicit memory processing, and short-term auditory memory (working memory)' (Grant, 2010:52). Such skills are important to pick up and reperform instructed movement. Furthermore, **developing habitual movement can be difficult** for the dyspraxic as they 'may have to re-learn how to carry out specific tasks before they can come habitual' (Penketh, 2011:52). They likely will require additional time and repetition for choreographic vocabularies to become habitual in movement

¹⁶However, if one's physical characteristics developed so that their dyspraxic traits were less visible, thus increasing their ability to 'pass' for normal within the dance training environment, I would contend that they would still need to significantly adapt themselves to fit the environment. This may require extra time, energy, work, and effort from the dysdancer compared to their peers. Such imbalances in labour would likely be stressful and tiring, forming an inequitable experience between learners, and putting the dyspraxic dancer at a disadvantage and at risk of emotional harm.

memory. Therefore, **the dysdancer is likely to fall behind** in a such a fast-paced physical learning environment and **may require additional time and attention** to develop a skilful ease with performing choreographic material.

Dyspraxia, Disability, and Dance

In Western culture, **the consummate dancer** has historically been white, female, **delicate**, tall, thin, **able-bodied**, long limbed, and **graceful** (Cooper Albright, 1997:57). Although arguably still dominant, this aesthetic legacy is increasingly shifting within the contemporary context. The emergence of **disability dance culture is significant**, as articulated in Cooper Albright's influential 'Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance', wherein she considers how visibly **disabled dancing bodies violate the audiences' objectifying, narrow and voyeuristic gaze**. For the past 25 years or so, disabled dancers have increasingly circulated in the field of contemporary dance. Candoco Dance Company maintain their prominence as a leading company of disabled and non-disabled dancers, whilst the practices of independent artists such as Claire Cunningham, Alice Sheppard, and the late David Toole (1964-2020) make further seminal impact. All of whom are based in the UK, illustrating its national reputation as a hub for disabled creative culture. Cooper Albright argues that **disabled dancers violate certain cultural values and revise what movements are classified as dance and what bodies can be understood as dancers** (1997:58). Therefore, such movements may support the development of dyspraxic practices circulating in dance culture.

Yet arguably, such representations of **disability in dance culture are often rooted in the visibility of said difference**. For example, one could argue that – despite being a cultural leader in the field – **the representation of difference in Candoco**

Dance Company follows a singular narrative of disability that is focused on physical and visible impairment. Cooper Albright suggests their founder Adam Benjamin focused on an aesthetic of virtuosity, urging technique from his dancers, whilst encouraging their own subjective style (1997:77). Post Benjamin's leadership, Candoco's aesthetic arguably still bears his legacy through the 'high level technical ability' of their dancers, whom must have 'an ability to remember or repeat material' (Dance City, 2023). Arguably, such a company dynamic maintains a traditional corps de ballet model, wherein dancers of 'a generalised technically proficient body' form a tight, unified group in unison (Marsh and Whatley, 2018:7). Disability is thus represented within a uniform regimen, wherein alternative aesthetics and innovative choreographies realise the potential of disabled dancers, but normative virtuosic classical values remain. As a company edging the mainstream, Candoco's aesthetic ideals arguably maintain an exclusive practice to dyspraxic dancers.

A Murky In-between

Although inherently connected, neurodiversity is not synonymous with disability. Dyspraxia is not commonly regarded as a disability but rather a 'disorder', a 'condition', or a 'specific learning difference/disability'. Yet, through the social model, we can recognise a dyspraxic person will likely have disabled lived experience through meeting barriers in the neuronormative world. Whether a dyspraxic person identifies as disabled or not is a subjective, individual choice¹⁷.

The notion of dyspraxic disabled identity arises interesting considerations. Due to the invisibility of both their difference and disabled lived experience, dyspraxic

¹⁷ I identify as a disabled dancer, but not as a disabled person overall. People are more or less disabled by different contexts; the context of normative mainstream dance is disabling to me in a way that I don't experience across my whole life.

people may generally experience **'passing' privilege** wherein they are generally perceived as non-disabled, regardless of how they identify. Therefore, they may experience less prejudice, stigma, and exclusion overall than disabled people with physical, visible impairments. However simultaneously, **their difference may not be recognised at all**, which consequentially may lead to **a lack of understanding, personal support, and action to address barriers** they may face – which may disable them further. All of which may impact negatively on the dyspraxic person, creating burdens for them to individually bear.

As Marsh and Whatley state, 'if the disability is **unseen**, then the dancer may find herself **treated no differently**' (2018:4). Therefore, **dyspraxic dancers may generally 'pass' for non-disabled** and be perceived as such in dance environments. Whilst simultaneously, the nature of **their non-docile body in movement likely makes visible their otherness** to classical ideals of 'dancer'. The dysdancer may be **perceived as non-disabled**, whilst simultaneously **experiencing disability in a standardised and inaccessible dance environment**.

Arguably, the dysdancer presents as **neither disabled nor able bodied 'enough'**, producing an unclear embodiment for an audience's objectifying gaze. Without clear signification of difference to the norm, dyspraxic dancing bodies arguably won't disrupt or confront the normative expectations of dance viewership like visibly disabled dancers do. Their embodiment may be objectified through a lens of normative standards, wherein traditional and exclusive cultural values of what dance can be, and who can be a dancer, are maintained. Therefore, **the dyspraxic dancer is at risk of looking – put simply – 'just a bit shit' through a normative gaze**. Their positionality is **murky and interstitial**, rendering them outside of a clear belonging to either disability or mainstream dance cultures. Consequentially, questions occur: **where might the dyspraxic dancer find their place? What dance practice or culture would be inclusive?**

4. -ish: Choreographing Dyspraxicality

This chapter discusses the first piece of practice in the practice portfolio. The voice shifts from a first person address to a third, distancing - for the most part - from an 'I' positionality of embodied experience. Through performance analysis, a mode of 'outer body' address is favoured that is removed from my personal subjectivity. This honours my state of being during the project - disembodied, over analytical, and disconnected from myself. For reasons that will become clear, I found it personally challenging to reflect and write up this project. The disassociation of self here became a means of creating safety and instigating boundaries as a form of self-care. Furthermore, the distanced stance of address signifies the temporal space and personal disconnection between then and now. I am no longer the person I was all those years ago; I no longer recognise her as myself.

Choreographing a Niche

A choreographer is an auteur of dance. Their distinct approach and aesthetic embody their ideas through physical form, in time and space. When excluded from neuronormative tradition, the dysdancer may turn to their own choreographic practice to carve their place in dance. Choreographing oneself can nurture means to support one's nature and needs, whilst transgressing neuronormative standards. The autonomy of working on – and with – oneself gifts powers to determine both how one works and what one 'says' through creative output; agency is bestowed, their 'voice' empowered.

In 'Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Powers of Your Differently Wired Brain', Dr Thomas Armstrong states that neurodivergent 'success in life ... depends on modifying your surrounding environment to fit the needs of your unique brain' (2010:16). He refers to the notion of 'niche construction', a term coined by biologist Richard Lewontin to define the process by which an organism alters its own environment (or that of another species) to help increase its chances of survival (2010:17). A spider constructs its niche by weaving a web, a beaver thrives in its environment by building a dam. Armstrong extrapolates this to suggest the key for success for neurodivergent individuals is to tailor their environment to the needs of their own mind. Instead of adapting to the demands of a set, rigid and 'normal' environment, strategies of modification such as career and lifestyle choices, assistive technologies, and human resources can support an environment wherein the neurodivergent can thrive (2010:19-20).

Through constructing a choreographic niche, the dysdancer may forge practice outwith external barriers, tailored to their strengths and supportive of their challenges. This forms a central investigation of Disorder Dance's practice

portfolio. Two central pillars of investigation uphold this enquiry – the aesthetic dance product (the 'what') and the choreographic dance process (the 'how')¹⁸.

Choreographing their niche empowers the dysdancer to autonomously transgress dominant neuronormative aesthetic tradition. **Solo practice defies a need for uniformity**, surpasses the corps de ballet model and its consequential exclusive standards that thus creates the abnormal, the other. **A distinct choreographic aesthetic can develop outside of canonistic legacies**; in one's own movement language, ordered to meet one's unique needs. Through niche construction, **the dysdancer need not bend themselves to survive in a hostile environment**. Instead, modifications developed through their niche can bend the rigid, dominant, and taken-for-granted neuronormative methods and aesthetics of dance. Such bending is expansive, **creating inclusive space where exclusion has been experienced before**. Considerations regarding what dance can be, how it can be done, and who can be considered a dancer become extended, aiding both the dysdancer and wider dance culture. Furthermore, through niche practice and performance, **the dysdancer can form representations of their positionality and subjective experience**. Circulating such representation through means of culture has significant value, as a lack of awareness about dyspraxia persists in society (Grant, 2017:52) and the dance sector. Through their practice, social impact may be made to support a greater awareness of dyspraxia and instigate dialogue about it in the field of dance.

Choreographing the Unseen In-between

¹⁸ At this early stage of research, the former is my primary intention. By focusing on generating output, preliminary modes of process will naturally occur that can inform conscious, directed explorations later regarding niche methods.

The first project of the portfolio explores the **'unseen in-between' positionality of the dysdancer**. Such dance work seeks to make their invisible difference perceivable through creative means of embodiment and aims to be an empowering enactment of their positionality. This is not merely a means of disclosure but is terrain for choreographic investigation. Through grappling with **themes of in-betweenness and invisibility**, a dance performance is sought that is **representative of dyspraxic lived experience**, not just the 'characteristics' or 'symptoms' of one's 'condition'. The dysdancer positionality becomes the subject in an objective work of dance performance. The title of this project is **'-ish'**, an informal adverb meaning **'somewhat; in a way; not exactly'** (Dictionary.com, 2023). Suggestive of interstitial experience; vague and unclear, not clearly one thing or the other – the title reflects the work's enquiry to **explore the murky territory that dyspraxia inhabits between the simple dichotomy of able/disabled**.

Dyspraxia, Dualism, Dance

The **dualistic binaries** of Western thought are the legacy of the Cartesian split – wherein **body and mind are distinctly separate**. The body is merely ignorant material, whereas the mind is the 'seat of intelligence' that governs, and thus 'others', the body. The ideologies of Western mainstream culture are based on this initial dualistic paradigm, which consequently began an onslaught of oppositional binaries, e.g. knowledge/experience, nature/culture, subject/object (Cooper Albright, 1997:6-7). The **binary distinctions of non-disabled/disabled** consequentially occurs. Arguably, disability is most categorised objectively by one's physical body, as disabled people 'have historically been tied to the material conditions of their bodies, structuring an identity that has repeatedly been constructed as oppressively and basely physical' (ibid). Yet through the Social

Model, disability is recognised as a social consequence. **Not all disability is visible, physical and of the body;** it is of subjective, not objective, categorisation.

Interesting considerations thus occur regarding neurodivergence. Neurodiversity and disability are interrelated¹⁹ but not directly synonymous. Arguably, **disability is commonly perceived as visible and physical, whilst neurodivergence is most considered as invisible and cognitive;** brain differences with thinking, learning, processing, and feeling, hidden in our heads. Signifiers of non-normative neurocognitive functioning may be externally perceivable through one's behaviour and expression, but the site of one's divergence remains unseen, unknown, and at risk of being misinterpreted. Debatably, **neurodivergence disorders the traditional logics of Cartesian dualism.** When one's divergence from the norm stems from one's mind, the philosophical belief of it as the governing site of order becomes destabilised. Consequently, **one's consciousness becomes 'othered', the messy and incoherent matter, not the body.** As invisible neurodivergence that becomes visible through physical coordination, dyspraxia in particular exposes the falsehood of Cartesian dualism. As a process(ing) of the mind that effects the ability of the body, the inherently entwined relationship between body and mind is uncovered.

It is understandable why dyspraxia creates complications in environments of mainstream western dance. Arguably therein, **the dysdancer embodies the mind-body problem.** In a culture bearing a legacy of the corps de ballet model, uniformity is demanded and enforced through set choreography that creates a collective body of dancers. **Embodying choreography didactically requires both processing speed and working memory** – the ability to parse and remember

¹⁹ The umbrella of neurodiversity is incredibly broad. Not all neurodivergent people identify as disabled, but some do. Neurodivergent conditions can also co-exist with physical disabilities, particularly in those with complex needs.

information in the short term, so it can be worked with – both of which are ‘weaknesses’ for the dyspraxic. Therefore, they may present the bodily ability to fulfil the sequence, but their cognitive processing will likely meet a barrier with normative expectations of ‘picking up’ choreography – thus rendering them out of uniform order, excluded from the collective. A choreographic sequence is a mental item determined to be fulfilled by the body – attainment of the information in one’s consciousness is necessary for intentional physical enactment. **There is disruption between the dysdancer’s conscious intention and physical actuality.** In a neuronormative environment of fixed expectation, this conflict between their abilities – to dance with their body and attain or organise dance in their mind – likely disables them from dancing at all. The dysdancer’s position illuminates how **dancing choreography is a mutual doing of mind and body**, wherein embodiment and cognition are entwined.

Choreographing Dyspraxicality

Visible/Hidden

Order/Chaos

Steady/Wobbly

Rising/Falling

Mind/Body

-ish is constructed through a collection of **performance vignettes**, a series of episodic performance. Each vignette explores **a different oppositional binary** that connects to a dyspraxic positionality. Through each episode, a choreography unfolds that **interrogates the potentialities in-between two oppositional concepts**. The dichotomies become vessels to embody the continuum between two ends, to occupy the fluidity of the betwixt and between.

Dyspraxia itself is a fluid continuum of experience, unique and different to each person who associates with the diagnosis. *-ish* is not concerned with the notion of dyspraxia as a condition, but rather **the condition of being dyspraxic** – a phenomenon I coin as **'dyspraxicality'**. This word adopts the word forming element 'ity', which means the 'condition or quality of being' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2024). Therefore, dyspraxic + ity (with an 'al' in there to make it easily soundable) becomes 'dyspraxicality', meaning **the quality of being dyspraxic** – or the dyspraxic reality. This shifts the focus from impairment and signifies the experiential knowledge of being dyspraxic. Such a viewpoint extends beyond pathological perspectives that maintain dyspraxia as a 'disorder' – a deficit, impairment, or abnormal 'condition' that one 'has', rather than as an aspect of who one naturally 'is'. Being one dyspraxic person, I cannot singularly represent all dyspraxicalities. In *-ish*, I express my own dyspraxicality through my own choreographic language in my own performance.

Yet, **dyspraxicality remains unclear to the objectifying gaze of audience**. Yes, I can utilise choreographic auteurship to explore it as the subject of performance, but a paradox persists. If **embodiments of dyspraxicality present unclear terrain** for viewership, **how does one represent it choreographically** through dance – a form that mostly communicates through the body? In tandem with the dysdancer's embodiment, *-ish* adopts **dramaturgical and choreographic strategies to produce dyspraxicality** through performance.

Objects of Dyspraxicality



Figure 1. -ish copy image, photo by Jassy Earl

The use of object is a principal strategy to choreograph dyspraxicality in *-ish* and is central to the work's aesthetic. **Foil helium balloons and a spacehopper** form central players. Chosen for their symbolic signification, their materiality objectifies **kinesthetic qualities of dyspraxicality** external to, and alongside, the subjectivity of the performer.

Through choreographic interactions, **human subject and human-made objects come into contact**. Dialogue occurs through the mutual action of such bodies, as **task, game, action, or co-created image are enacted** and create a to-and-fro dynamic. As a 'solo' in collaboration with material players, the performer is offered intuitive 'ways in' to movement whereby a physical relationship instigates

choreographic material. **Choreography emerges through playful entanglement**, instead of the need to recall of prior planned sequences of movement; **it occurs through an immediate 'doing' with processes of responding, reacting, sensing, playing**. Manipulating objects generates choreography that in turn manipulates the performer's embodiment and action. **This frees and liberates the dysdancer** from dominant choreographic modes of fixed sequence and canonistic language to be perfectly recalled by the solo performer.

Objects of In-Betweenness – Rising/Falling

Balloons are composed in various arrangements throughout *-ish*. They possess the **balletic quality of *ballon***, meaning 'the quality of **lightness of spring**, with **suspension of shape** and form in the air of 'jumped steps', and with **softness in landing'** (Greskovic, 2005:504). Helium balloons effortlessly embody such a virtuous classical quality, defying gravity to become airborne and move with 'smooth and unstrained coordination [that] float(s) and hover(s), no matter how far off the ground' (ibid). In *-ish*, **the dysdancer's performance is arguably oppositional**. They present not the 'perfect dancing body ... unhampered by sweat, pain, or the evidence of any physical negotiation with gravity' (Cooper Albright, 1996:56). We see their **effortful and untechnical movement**, as they **crash** into the ground, growing **tired** and **out of breath**. In the arena of dance and direct relationship with an object of *ballon*, **the performer is presented as 'other'**.

Further dramaturgical meaning is composed through the balloons' placement in space and time, their distinct corporeality, and relationship to the performer. **A gold circular foil balloon takes a solo** within *-ish*. Held between the performer's hands, obscuring their face, it looks perfect – round, full and shining. Yet, when propelled into the air, **its directionality is not as expected**. It does not rise but

hangs and slowly falls – taking its time to come to ground, catching waves of air. It does not perform the normative expectation of helium balloons to rise on a primarily vertical axis and upward directionality. Yet, through its process of falling and floating, **multiple directions become available that traverse rising/falling, vertical/horizontal, left/right**. Seeing this object as we know it moving in ways that we don't **stirs uncanny, unseen potentials** through movement.

On the surface of seeing, it is the archetypal balloon. Yet, **its inside make-up is unseen** – a careful mix of helium and room air that gives it weight. This evokes the invisibility of dyspraxicality; **the unseen that creates difference** which may be surprising or conflicting with surface level expectations. In between clear distinctions, **the solo balloon literally hangs in the balance**. The performer uses their hands to manipulate wafts of air – an unseeable force – that gently directs its pathway, creating unseen changes in its environment that effects its state of being. **A dialogue of cause and effect is enacted between bodies without physical touch**, signifying the invisible – but impactful – effect of one's external environment on one's state of being.

After the rising/falling vignette closes, the solo balloon continues its journey. Untethered, it moves boundless to explore all spatial potentials between floor and ceiling. Here, **difference becomes not a 'problem' or deficit, but freedom**. Unbound by normative ways of being and forces of control, its unique qualities are respected, as its gentle, soft movement reveals beauty through the unexpected. By its own agency, **it takes its time and takes up space**. Often floating gently into the audience, finding cosy corners to take stillness, sometimes catching a wave of air – or being directed by audience members – to enter the domain of the performance again. It exists in the ongoing performance as it pleases, teasing at upstaging the current action of the performer. **The solo balloon performs its own freedom through its own path**.

The final vignette of *-ish* further represents **the beauty in the unexpected**. More gold balloons gather at edges of performance space, taped down in bunches that are released and let loose. Like the solo balloon, all are filled with different quantities of helium/room air, attached to ribbons of different lengths, and taped down in different places. Their release transforms their collective uniformity to **unveil a landscape of divergent individual balloons**. All with different speeds of release, directionalities of travel, qualities of weight, hoverings of height. A constellation of non-normative balloon ways of being, forming a forest of divergent embodiments. **The multitudes of possibility within a shared identity becomes signified; all are distinct with their own unique pathways, agencies, and conditions of being.**

Objects as Non-Docile Actants

Arguably, **dyspraxicality is only 'visible' through moments of 'dysfunction'** – observable in situations that create an 'otherness' or 'abnormality' in opposition to the ideal or expected. **Object collaborators in *-ish* were chosen for their 'dysfunctional' and 'disobedient' qualities.** Mainly bodies of air, balloons and space hopper are both **susceptible to impact** from the environment; they **respond in unpredictable ways** when affected by forces of gravity, weight, and impact. With 'minds of their own', they often 'misbehave' and are **non-docile; difficult to manage**²⁰.

²⁰This was true outside the performance. The labour and time required to prepare, organise, and transport the objects was extensive – which was the cause of much stress for me in rehearsals and on tour. I was particularly anxious about the bunch of balloons – if they became untethered, they would float upwards and out of reach. This happened a few times, getting them back always took time, energy and often assistance. As the balloons were so central to the work, the stakes felt high - without them I arguably had no performance. As the one with extensive working knowledge of them, they were my responsibility. This management impacted on me. It was stressful and distracting. I often didn't get a full pre-show warm up as I needed to get them in order. I went into



Figure 2. -ish at Sophiensaele, Berlin (May 2019). Image by Daisy Douglas

They incur challenge for the performer. During Visible/Hidden, white circular foil helium balloons gather in a bunch secured under their chin, forming an enveloping headpiece. Quite the absurdist image; their head becomes invisible, surrounded by a bouncy flurry that connotes overwhelming thoughts. As they perform a controlled, precise, and set choreography, **the balloons bounce frenetic and repeatedly against their face**. The sound and sensation of which is obscuring, limiting the performer's hearing, sight, and proprioception, increasing the need for carefulness attentiveness. Yet, the body's lower half continues with full attempt 'as normal', evoking a dissonance between body/mind that indicates a strength of

every show stressed, tense, and unsure if everything was in the right place – not feeling fully confident that it would go as planned. Plus, I'm dyspraxic – organisation is not my strong suit. Managing objects of an unmanageable nature took a significant negative effect on my state of being. It felt like the performance could fall apart before it began. There were so many things that could go wrong – and I was holding it all.

will, desire to succeed, and need to persist through the chaos. Such intimate enmeshment between balloons and body creates a limiting performance environment that embodies a process of meeting barriers. Objects in *-ish* aren't solely symbolic of dyspraxicality – they impact and change the performer through interaction. The objects possess agency, power, and the potential to transform and effect the unfolding materiality of performance.

They become *actants*, Latour's notion of 'a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman ... which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events' (Bennett, 2010:viii). In *-ish*, objects have their own agency and power. If they burst, break, become lost then there is no performance. Along with the performer, they are mutually responsible; without either party, it all falls apart. Such dysfunctional objects incur risk, as their efficacy may conflict with that of the performer²¹. Yet, their power does not overpower and subjugate her – after all, it is she who puts them in motion and consents to chase them in a dysfunctional environment of her making. In *-ish*, the power dynamic is reciprocal – a playful tumbling between parties, a to-and-fro between chaos and control.

Risk and Investment

In *-ish*, performer-body and object-body collide to enact dynamics of disobedience. Here, risk and conflict become alive and real; not merely expressive, representative, or symbolic, but are actions of dyspraxicality through risk and investment. Etchells writes:

²¹ Risk was also present for the venue and other collaborators. Through the Order/Chaos activity, the spacehopper often accidentally hit fresnels, putting the lighting equipment and design at risk. Physical damage never occurred, but once or twice, the hopper's contact with them did close the lamp's 'barn doors' which affected the lighting design for the rest of the performance.

Investment is the connection between performer and their text or task... **Something is happening – real and therefore risked** – something seems to slip across from the private world to the public one... to be at risk in it, [is] to be **exposed** by it... **not representing something but going through something**. They lay their bodies on the line... and **we are transformed** – not audience to a spectacle but witnesses to an event (1999:48)

Through investments of risk in *-ish*, **private dyspraxicality enters the public domain**, as the performer 'goes through it' in the here and now. As evidenced in Order/Chaos, whereby the spacehopper is forcefully bounced and thrown around the space, as the performer runs after and launches their body onto it. It responds unpredictably, threatening to escape her, launch into the audience or outside the performance space. Her investment to catch, contain, and control it requires high effort and is exhausting. **Limitations exposed, she becomes changed** – face red, inhaler at mouth, out of breath, visibly tired, gulping water, purple bruise on shoulder.

Through investment in physical risk, **the likelihood for unexpected mishap increases**. A precarious physical relationship between players creates a situation of momentary chaos, as the performer desperately fights to be 'on top' yet remaining at its will. The **audience become exposed to an atmosphere** that captures an essence of dyspraxicality beyond the representational. Through a physical process of performance, a spectacle emerges that tussles in-between states of Order/Chaos in the here and now. Clearly not a performance that fulfils the traditional 'consuming gaze' of aesthetic dance, such uneasy, uncertain, and **risky viewing transforms 'the act of watching ... into the act of witnessing'** wherein an experience of whole-bodily perception emerges for the audience

(Cooper Albright, 1996:xxii). Through witnessing, an experience of dyspraxicality becomes shared and increasingly mutual between audience/performer.

Steady/Wobbly

Not all object/performer relations are dysfunctional, producing chaotic results. The **potential for positive and balanced outcomes through investment** is evident with the spacehopper. During the process, project producer Daisy and I were on a residency together. At the end of one day, they were trying to talk to me, but I was finding it hard to focus and listen to them. Tired, I began to be distracted by all the interesting, vintage-looking objects decorating the studio. My eyes met the face of an orange 1970s era **spacehopper** – **I impulsively grabbed it and began to bounce** on it. Then, very clearly and almost instantaneously, my capacity to focus and engage in dialogue noticeably shifted. **Bouncing up and down, I was more present**, and we were both quite amazed at how effective it was. This discovery felt so significant that the spacehopper became introduced into the process.

A **dyspraxic need for movement** is noted by Kurtz, cited in Patrick, who states: 'some dyspraxics seem to **crave motion** [because of] being **'undersensitive'** to **vestibular input**, and may **seek out extra movement** experiences [to] **'fuel'** their **central nervous system** with meaningful information' (2015:49). I have always sought out movement; this rings true for me. **Bouncing brings me equilibrium**²²; I

²²As a child, I skipped to primary school every day. As an adult, I still love skipping. For me, it is more efficient and fun than walking. It covers a lot of ground and feels good – in body and mind. I am a 'bouncy' person with lots of energy, a mostly sunny outlook and when I walk, I bob up and down. At secondary school, I was insecure about my bounce – hyperaware of how my ponytail would swish almost violently as I walked. I consciously tried a more horizontal stride, seeking to hide and reduce my bounciness. As a teenager, I didn't like how it made me stand out. As an adult, it frustrates me how skipping is not considered an accepted mode of travelling on foot – it associated with childishness. Skipping whilst holding hands with people I love is the only time I

find it in other repetitive movements like skipping, swaying, swinging, and rocking. In *Steady/Wobbly*, the simplicity of repetitive bouncing is given time and space. Normative choreographic values for novelty, a dynamic rate of change, and fast paced vitality of movement are resisted. Instead, **simple action forms a pedestrian choreography of balance and equilibrium**. In silence, the performer bounces the perimeter, an up/down verticality, punctuated by the sound rubber hitting floor. **There is calm and control, safety in rhythm and repetition.**

On finding centre stage, **the bouncing shifts to presentational**. Gaze outward, the performer's hands move away from the safety of handles. A gestural choreography unfolds atop the bouncing and a show of alternative virtuosity emerges. In control and with balance, the performer bounces hands-free, demonstrating their clearly practiced skill. Through repetition, **a shift slowly spirals from a state of safety into one of risk** as a gesture that propels the body up and out generates momentum. The size of movement and bounce increase simultaneously, forming a risky crescendo. The equilibrium inevitably tips, the hopper slips out beneath the performer and throws them off with a bump. She lands, absorbs the shock; the hopper shooting off elsewhere. In stillness, she watches it rock back and forth, expending its remaining kinetic energy until it reaches a stop. The pair find themselves on the floor, steady and equal again.

feel safe enough to do it publicly. I wish I could do it solo. As a petite woman, I fear skipping may infantilise me and draw unwanted attention.

I inherited my walk from my dad, who had a distinct bounce that could distinguish him at a distance. Some suggest such a 'bouncing gait' is caused by 'toe-walking' (Bailey, 2011) or a 'premature heel rise' due to 'impaired ankle rocker/dorsiflexion from weak anterior compartments and short/tight posterior compartments' (The Gait Guys, 2013). I have also learned that 'idiopathic toe-walking' is more prevalent in children with 'neurodevelopmental disorders' such as ADHD and autism (Soto Insuga et. al, 2018). Also, research suggests that a bouncy gait improves your mood; it is a literal spring in your step. How we walk 'influences our mental state ... we can change our state by changing our gait' (Nicholson, 2014). A relationship emerges between one's neurology, inner consciousness, and gait – how you physically move through the external world. Perhaps there is a link between my bouncy gait and my neurodivergence – both of which I suspect I have inherited from my dad.

Through the trajectory of this encounter, the audience witness a process that traverses the Steady/Wobbly continuum, occupying the in-between.

For the performer, the hopper is capable of inciting both balance and chaos. This demonstrates that no 'thing' is inherently dysfunctional. Rather it is the environment created, the specific task at hand and the forces upon it, that determine whether the impact is of balance or instability. This process mirrors dyspraxic experience, as it is the external environment, and the specificity of the task therein, that determines states of either equilibrium or imbalance.

Design and Dramaturgy of Dyspraxicality in the Space



Figure 3. -ish at Sophiensaele, Berlin (May 2019). Deutsche Gebärdenprache Interpretation by Anka Böttcher. Image by Daisy Douglas

The **space further materialises dyspraxicality** in *-ish*. Large crosses, arrows, and lines of electrical tape mark the floor, indicating directions to follow and spots to hit. Black tape on white floor aesthetically nods to binary thinking, whilst its genuinely functional use offers a strategy to orient the performer in space²³. This exaggerates the normative theatre practice of taped 'mark-ups' – placed subtly on stage to locate the required placement of set pieces, objects, or performers – and makes visible both the performer's process of spatial navigation and their need for support with it.

Dramaturgical rules of the space situate dyspraxicality in the world of performance. Thick black tape forms a box that rectangularly frames a central performance area, creating a corridor that runs external to it. This becomes a **border between two different zones: the 'onstage' and the 'offstage'**. Without the use wings or the backstage area, arguably all is onstage, exposed to the audience. However, **dramaturgical rules create distinctly separate 'worlds'** that the performer oscillates between. Upon **entering the box**, she is **onstage**, and a state of performance is immediately triggered produced by sign systems of lighting and music. This in **the focused world of the performance**, the arena for the vignettes. Through **careful, considered, choreographed** performative action, the performer meets the gaze of the audience; here, **she is knowingly seen**.

Upon leaving, she enters the offstage. Although visible, she relaxes, does not meet the audience's gaze. This is a **functional space**, a site for rest, returning breath, and regulating oneself. In this corridor, she has all the things she needs – the floor forms a bit of a props table. During offstage time, the title of the upcoming vignette projects onto the back wall. **The performer mentally gathers**

²³ This was particularly useful when on tour and performing with minimal or no rehearsal time in the performance space.

herself. She checks what's next, ensures all her materials are in order, ready to enter back in. Yet, she doesn't rush; she takes her time.

The offstage invites a moment of '**crip time**' for the performer. A concept from Crip theory, it means **a reorientation of time** that acknowledges, and is flexible to, the **different temporal experience of disability**. For Alison Kafer, crip time...

...requires **reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time**, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies. [Crip time is] **a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling**. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds (2013:27)

The offstage pauses the normative temporality to support the performer, giving time to process and ground as a strategy to avoid overwhelm. Her needs aren't hidden but are woven into *-is/s*'s dramaturgy.

Fixed/Fluid

The **choreographic structure** of the vignettes is relative, **ranging between forms of fixed sequence and fluid improvisation**. Visible/Hidden is firmly set and choreographed to music, the same sequence each time. Whereas, Order/Chaos has a highly regimented throughline and structure, following a timeframe where movements of various action are set to the second of Charles Mingus' *Moanin'*. Yet, a solo is loosely sequenced within it, not purposefully fixed but shaped through the familiarity of repeated improvisation – its pathway is in the body. Whereas Mind/Body is score based, its movement emerges in the moment, is open to

change, but is grounded by a pre-determined choreographic arch and intent. **How fixed or fluid the choreography is relative to each vignette**, and the process required to perform it.

Overall, *-ish's* throughline is **linear and fixed**. The **vignettes unfold in a set order**, meaning the offstage breaks are pre-determined too. However, the 'rules' of work enable the performer with ability to trigger offstage moments if needed, in case of emergency or crisis. This was implemented as a strategy to hold any moments of unexpected dysfunction. This plan proved incredibly important and useful, as will soon become clear.

-ish intended to embody a **truly dyspraxic performance of 'real effort (and momentary chaos) ... an unapologetic exploration of inbetween-ness that flourishes with and thrives on dys-function'** (Watson, 2023). Celebratory and unashamed, it intended to **construct a performance environment for dyspraxicality to prosper in**. However, in processing the experience, I realised this aim was not successful. *-ish* **did not carve a niche** to fit the unique needs or my brain, nor did it modify the environment of dance to support my strengths. In truth, **I spent a lot of it struggling**, experiencing turmoil in both process and performance.

Meltdown

Memory.** I'm on the bathroom floor of my dressing room; knees hugged into my chest, back against the tiled wall. I've just premiered *-ish* at The Southbank Centre's Unlimited festival and now I'm **having a meltdown**. My friend and the show's BSL interpreter Amy Cheskin is here, offering soothing touch alongside words of support and encouragement. The feelings won't hold in. **Deep howl-like

cries move into quivering voice, into a patter of sobs, into staring silently. A cycle that repeats, starting up almost as soon as I settle. I cry talk loudly, spilling my feelings about the performance, whilst Amy listens generously and with compassion.

"I've been working on this for so long. I can't believe I fucked this up. Everything went wrong. It was shit. Oh god... I can't believe Caroline Bowditch and Claire Cunningham saw that. And dancers from Candoco. I can't believe they saw that. All that hard work and that's fucking it. It was so shit. It was so fucking shit"

*My head is in my hands, I run my fingers through my hair. I cover my wet face with my palms, pushing into my eyes, adding pressure until everything is kaleidoscopic. I gently rock back and forth. There's a lot to process, but after a while, I start to calm a little. The intensity of feeling stops bubbling over; it quietens, turns inwards and **shame simmers**. The audience have all left the auditorium. I picture them gathered with drinks, these people who I look up to, as they talk about my performance, all awkward and sympathetic. I play the show back in my head, with a judgemental veneer. I lost control. It went wrong. It all felt wrong, I feel wrong. In this moment, there is no achievement and there is no joy. I do not celebrate myself or my work. There is just **resonating failure**, and it sits heavily.*

*More people have entered the room now. Collaborators and venue staff see me in this state, becoming **witnesses to the aftermath of my meltdown**. The personal moves in to the professional fast; I'm uncomfortable with the spillover. I'm now conscious of how upset I am, how intense my reaction is. I stand up, seeking to seem steady, and look in the mirror. Face red, eyes bloodshot, puffy, and swollen; there's no hiding it. I see myself how others are seeing me, and an additional*

level of shame begins to bubble. These people don't know me, and I project their perceptions... I'm overreacting, unprofessional, hysterical, childish, out of control. Something inside me begins to believe it too, and I scold myself for how this has all unfolded. Why does everything turn into a drama? Why do I have to be so intense? Why can't I just contain myself? Quiet now, I move inside of myself and stay there. I remain in my dressing room and avoid speaking to anyone. We leave when only the cleaning staff are left in the building.

Actual Real Genuine Dysfunction

The run up to the Southbank Centre performance felt like a **whirlwind of chaos**. Things had not been going to plan. In an **ultimately dyspraxic fashion, I strained a ligament in my ankle** four weeks beforehand. Behind schedule and unable to rehearse, I played catch up with preparation and tried to rush the rest required – **I would not be fully healed before the performance**. Strapped up and medicated for the pain, I would need to perform with even more control and care to prevent further injury. In circumstances far from ideal, **I did not feel secure or safe**. Yet, I felt strongly that **it was not an option to cancel the premiere**.

More chaos ensued on route to London, the day before the show. We nearly missed our connection, and I smashed the screen of my laptop in the rush. I had been finalising the visuals on the train, which were now unfinished and near inaccessible behind a shattered display. That evening was **stressful**. I borrowed a laptop, downloaded Photoshop, miraculously transferred the files without ability to fully see the display, and worked late into the night, alone and stressed. **I did not sleep well**. On show day, I woke **highly anxious, tense, and tired; an unsteady foundation** for a long day of meetings, rehearsal, get in and premiere.

As the culmination of the project and all my hard work lay ahead of me, **I felt the pressure.**

I'd been playing with dysfunctionality as a state in performance. Yet in real life, **when things don't go to plan, I feel like I am losing control.** With a new, sudden problem or situation comes new information to process, and if I don't have the capacity or time to process the change, it becomes **overwhelming and all consuming.** Unease saturates my thoughts, my **hyperactive mind** rushes to all the worst conclusions and begins to plan strategies to prevent them or to deal with them as they might occur. Thoughts go into overdrive, then they drive me and **I'm not in my body, I'm in my head, whirring.**

In such situations, my capacity to sit confidently, easily and in control of my emotions, behaviour and thinking decreases. **The fear of potential failure both freezes me and fires me** – a white-hot burning up that pushes me to expend more of myself, **in panic and in pursuit of control.** Instead of steering the situation securely from within, it washes over me, and I am submitted to it; frenetic. Compelled by fears and thoughts, **I become unable to care for myself. I push myself hard,** beyond limits and towards goals – success is the most important thing. Cancelling the premiere would never really be an option.

Deviations From the Plan

Before the performance, I do everything within my control to ensure success – **I am as ready as I can be.** However, other factors could determine how things unfold. This becomes evident when **a small mistake** instigates a chain of events that **lead to state of disorder** in the performance.

It all starts with a **late cue** of the audio described introduction. This outlines the performance, the space, and me to visually impaired and/or blind audience members. Due to play before their entry and through headphones, I would receive clearance once all audience members are in the space. Then, I planned to mingle with the audience, striking up conversations with the aim of finding someone for a moment of participation in the show. I'd clearly detail exactly what I am asking of them, and we'd both leave the conversation confident of the plan for that moment. Then the performance would begin. That was **the plan**.

However, clearance doesn't come. **A mistake outside of my control sets everything back** – the introduction has been triggered late. For 10 minutes, I sit with Amy welcoming everyone; confused in waiting. The audience become restless and so do I, but I smile, nod, and laugh – *'look, I'm charming and I'm in control'*. **Under the surface, anxiety bubbles**. Finally, clearance from the tech box! The show can begin but going back into the audience to 'scout' a participant is now out of the question. **I deviate from the plan**, think on my feet, and address the audience all at once – briefly stating what help I seek and what it entails. Before I finish, **a woman shoots her hand up** with enthusiasm – I immediately point to her, confirm the choice, and **feel a wash of relief**.

The relief is short lasting. **I now remember this woman**; we met a few days before at a panel discussion where I spoke about my work. **She is dyspraxic too** and had come specifically to hear me talk. We connected afterwards; she was supportive and enthusiastic about my work, and she shared about her own dance practice. During our conversation, I sensed that her dyspraxicality differed from mine; she may meet more barriers than I do; I have more passing privilege. I also noticed and admired her confidence. She hollaed out to me during my presentation, joyfully declaring her dyspraxicness. **She was fearless and proud, I really respected that**.

We move her seat; bring her closer to the stage for easier access. I brief her on the moment of participation and go through it step by step. She smiles and listens. I make it clear that it might be difficult to do it as a dyspraxic person and ask whether she thinks she can do it. **She happily, confidently says that she will "do her best"**. This doesn't reassure my anxiety but gives me **a sinking feeling**.

I am dyspraxic, *-ish* is about dyspraxicality, yet somehow, **I have not considered that the audience participant might be dyspraxic**. In the context of a disability arts festival, **I have expected and prepared for a disabled audience**, but I completely overlooked the possibility of a dyspraxic person as the participant. I think I had overlooked them even being in the theatre at all. By considering the access requirements of only those with physical or visible impairment, **I further render those with hidden differences invisible** – an experience that the show seeks to critically explore. **I have failed to consider any dyspraxicality outside of my own** as the performer.

There is a lot riding on the moment of participation. It requires the spacehopper to be inflated with a pump, and then immediately following, I use it to perform large physical actions. I continue to use it heavily throughout the performance. Without it fully inflated, I cannot perform the show. The moment may be short, but unbeknownst to them the responsibility of the participant is huge – arguably, **the whole performance is in their hands**. This all dawns on me as I move into position. **Chaos inside**, I turn to Amy and say quietly, **"I have no idea what is going to happen"**. I start the show.

Order/Chaos

The **requirement of the audience participant is tightly regimented**. The task is strictly choreographed to music: there is exactly 33 seconds for them to get from their seat and join me 'offstage' centre. Then, a quick reminder of the plan before I jump backwards onstage, dance a solo behind them and leave them to it, as they sit on the floor and inflate the hopper in front of me. **The timing is tight** with no margin for mistake, accident, or deviation from the plan. I've tested it in rehearsal without fail many times.

With this moment, **I intend to put them in a dyspraxic position** – feeling slight panic and tension following a functional instruction – as I flow fluid behind them, generating a sense of otherness, a restriction through the task at hand. However, **I need not put this audience participant in a dyspraxic position. She has own dyspraxicality**, real and lived, not representational and dramaturgical. The task demands physical and cognitive efficiency to follow and deliver the instruction. Verbal, sequential information needs to be processed, acquired, and recalled, whilst control and strength through fine and gross motor skills are physically required. **Demanding such a rigid task** within a short, fixed timeframe will likely **be inaccessible, stressful, and highly pressured for a dyspraxic person** – especially whilst lit on stage, in front of an audience.

Yet when it comes down to it, the audience participant shows no signs of pressure or stress. When in our respective positions, **we perform our duties**. I dance with trepidation – small and careful – whilst she sits with the hopper on the floor. I'm not absorbed in my performance, **I'm hyperaware of how she is doing**. I see that she has stopped inflating the hopper, but it isn't full and bouncy – it is still mainly a sag of lifeless latex. She watches me dance, begins to move it towards me ahead of cue. I gesture 'not yet', but she rolls the hopper to me regardless. Now on stage without a task, she begins to get up from her seated position, clearly ready to leave the stage. Breaking from my solo, I position the spacehopper back into her domain

of the offstage area and encourage her to keep going. As I move it, I notice that **the spacehopper and pump seem to be broken in some way**. She hasn't used the pin-like stopper to close it but has jammed in the tip of the hose connected to the pump. Air continues to escape from the hopper, slowly undoing all efforts of inflation. **I act immediately**, raise my hand high, step into the offstage area and yell **"stop the music!"**. We look at each other and, on the spot, **I intuitively suggest a new plan**.

A Shared Dyspraxic Moment

ABY: Let's do this together. OK, so we need to pop – can you put your finger there? Just there. There we go. And let's do this.

(Aby looks at how the spacehopper and pump are entangled)

ABY: Oh, what's happened here?

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: It's OK, I'm having a dyspraxic moment!

ABY: We're both dyspraxic, so!

(AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT and ABY laugh)

ABY: This is just our dyspraxic time. What has happened here, sweetheart? It's OK, we can figure it out. Was there another white bit? Could you look for the other white bit?

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: Oh, I dunno

ABY: Let's have a wee look

(Amy Cheskin walks over, immediately finds the white bit)

AMY: There!

ABY & AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: Aha!

ABY: Put your finger in there. Great. So, we'll just be a wee moment and then we can get this show on the road. See, I've not put this together this

way before, so this is a learning curve for the both of us. Alright, so you pop that in there...

(The pump decompresses air and makes a comical exhale of air, like a fart)

ABY: Ooh, alright!

(The audience laughs. The 'offstage' lights come up)

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: Yeah!

ABY: Alright, alright!

(Aby begins to pump the spacehopper in silence, it whistles as it inhales air through the bellows)

ABY: Would you prefer me to do the pumping, or you to do the pumping?

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: Welcome to the life of a dyspraxic

ABY: You've got to have an A plan, a B plan, a C plan, and a D plan

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: Yep

ABY: An everything plan... So, I'll blow it up and do you think you can pop the stopper in for me? Not yet, not yet. Hold that for me for a sec? Thanks darling.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: It's the hole.

ABY: It's just one of those things though, isn't it? I've been working with this thing for a long time, and it still doesn't do what I want it to do. So, I can imagine on the first bash...

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: Yeah!

ABY: Oh, that's perfect. I'll hold that there and you put the thing in... Oh yes, we got it.

ABY & AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: Yeaaaaah!

(ABY and AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT celebrate together, sharing a high-5 over the hopper. The audience clap and cheer)

ABY: I'm gunna do the next bit, OK?

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: Go girl, take two.

Cultivating the Slip Up

This experience was painful, stressful, and uncomfortable – but **I am grateful for it**. Now, I recognise this encounter as the beautiful, **genuine moment of dyspraxicality**, as reflected in Zátka-Haas' review:

It made for **a beautiful moment** that opened up some pretty interesting questions... Yes, it **affected the flow** of the piece, but could this **slip up instead be a celebration of the very chaos** that this double bill²⁴ is about? Our **efforts might not always go as planned**, but that is okay. It's not something we should get angry at. Instead, **we should explore and cultivate it** (Zátka-Haas, 2018)

The audience participant's dyspraxicality in that moment felt like a gift. Her unintentional non-docility ruptured the rigidity of the task, overstepping my surface level dramaturgical intentions to illuminate meanings of greater depth. **The 'slip up' exposed the exclusive expectations and presence of disabling barriers I had imposed by assuming neurotypicality of my audience**. In solely focusing on my own dyspraxicality, I had failed to consider it outside of myself. This was self-centred. Consequently, I perpetrated that which I sought to critique through *-ish*, as by only considering the needs of those with physical and visible disabilities, I had further rendered dyspraxicality as invisible, uncomfortably in-between distinctions of disability/non-disability. I chose to put myself at risk in the work, but it was not ethical or responsible to put my audience in such a position. There was **a distinct lack of careful consideration for how neurodivergence was held** in the performance space. Furthermore, **the encounter brought my lack of self-care to a head**. It burst the build-up of stress, pressure, and overwork that I had forced on myself and became normalised. The

²⁴I had the pleasure of sharing the evening's billing with the fabulous crip queer choreographer and dancer Dan Daw and his piece 'On One Condition'

severity of my reaction illustrates how **I was still not safe in the environment of my own work**. This needed to change, I needed a take two.

"Go girl, take two"

Instead of creating a niche to thrive in, **I maintained a set, rigid and mostly 'normal' environment** for dance. I held **fixed normative expectations and bent myself to their shape**, rather than taking an approach of true deviation. To manage feelings of uncertainty and instability, **I implemented rigid strategies to determine secure outcomes and feel safe**. I sought control of the environment, instead of 'being at one' with it through the command of my strengths. The rigidity of my approach did not support freedom in my work as, in both process and performance, **the strategies I instigated for safety were limiting and did me harm in the end**. Although non-normative, *-ish's* aesthetic values maintain the need for physical and cognitive control, clarity, linearity, and precision. Despite intentions of *crip time*²⁵, **little time and space was held for slip-ups, messiness, or any other deviations from the expected plan**. In the process, **I overexerted myself and suppressed my needs** to maintain a social performance of control, prioritising productivity over wellbeing. Rigid strategies and expectations enacted **a lack of flexibility and fluidity**. When an illusion of safety is found in the firmness of a plan or the meeting of a set aim, deviations from it can feel unsafe and terrifying, even if necessary and more supportive for one's wellbeing.

²⁵I intended for *crip time* to enact a mode of self-care in *-ish*. Yet in the work, it was segregated and fixed solely to offstage 'breaks' to regulate oneself, presenting a temporary pause of the norm for a moment of relief – not as an embedded overall philosophy. *Crip time* was evidently not practiced in the process either. Rushing to heal an injury and performing before I was ready is oppositional. I ignored my needs, forcing myself to fit the needs of the project timeline at detriment to my physical and emotional wellbeing.

Throughout *-ish*, I held everything tightly and with fear. Whereas the audience participant demonstrated self-acceptance, personal flexibility, and courage in the face of mishap. At first, this confused me, but on reflection it taught me a lot. In our shared 'dyspraxic moment', how she held herself was a central pillar of stability. Had she been emotionally unstable, the risk of resulting harm would be significantly increased for both of us. Her spirit held us both and allowed us to continue, finding a solution through support, acceptance, collaboration, which triggered an instantaneous response of care from me. Ultimately, our dyspraxic encounter exposed how it is the fixed expectation, the rigid and imposed structure, that needs to break, bend, and become flexible to meet the needs of those involved.

As useful a gift it was, I did not wish to repeat such experience – **change was crucial**. In the short term, the moment of participation developed to be fulfilled by a briefed, consenting, and confident audience plant. Dramaturgically, it became a moment of assistance and support – indicative of the power of human resources²⁶. Yet, long-term substantial change is clearly required in my practice. I must further explore the construction of niche environments that support neurodivergent modes of making, performing, and experiencing dance performance.

Instead of seeking safety through rigid plans and fixed expectations, I wish to cultivate stability through practice that supports looseness, flexibility, and responsivity in the present moment. I seek to deviate more radically from

²⁶I use this term in relation to Armstrong, and his discourse on assistive technologies in the construction of a niche. He states human resources as such an assistive technology, stating 'another dimension involved in good niche construction involves putting together a rich network of human resources that serve to validate, enable or in other ways support the gifts of the neurodiverse' (2010:20). I discuss human resources in niche construction in more detail in a later chapter.

neuronormative aesthetics and strategies to carefully embrace the neurodivergent modes of being of myself and others. In response, questions occur: To what extent can my practice separate from neuronormative values? What would that look like in process and performance? How might I choreograph care to hold neurodivergence safely, for performer and audience? If *-ish* set to destabilise dichotomic thinking through dance, how can I go further to embrace fluidity and multiplicity?

5. The Internal Environment

My initial attempt to construct a choreographic niche may have failed, but I hold compassion and understanding with why. I did not have the tools to truly understand, recognise and meet my needs, nor the methods to create an aesthetic for dance that truly deviates from neuronormative expectation. In -ish, the external environment of my own practice did not support me. Instead, it produced emotional instability within me - a chaotic internal experience of thoughts and feelings, wherein fear drove my behaviour, actions and decisions. Before I attempt to carve another niche, a closer look at my internal environment is required. Yes, the events that surrounded the premiere were highly stressful, understandably a strong trigger for emotional volatility - but challenges in my internal consciousness have been present long before that. This chapter turns inwards to question: why was I so afraid? What was I so afraid of? Why were my emotions so unsafe? How might the external environment of my practice offer support, care and balance for my inner environment?

Memory.

*I am in the studio early in the creative process. I'm with neurodivergent choreographer Frauke Requardt – I am a fan of hers, I think she's great. She's here in a mentorship capacity, an outside eye to help develop the work. It is early in our shared time, and we are looking for a **starting place to choreograph from**. She asks me to put on some music and improvise, something that comes easy to me and that I love to do. **I put on some go-to dancing music and try to move, but all I can do is think**. As I feel her eyes on me, I think about what she is thinking, what she might think about my dancing, and what she may expect of me. **I analyse, my thoughts race**; a flurry that clouds my capacity to move. **I feel tense, unable to be relaxed, playful, and embodied in dance. I'm not in my body, I'm in my head, whirring**. No dancing comes – but that breeds more anxiety, I can't just stand here! So, I just walk. In time to the beat, hyperaware and inside of myself, I just pace for her. Frozen by thought, walking back and forth, **I overthink so hard that there is no space for the flow of dancing**.*

Memory.

*I am in the studio with my PhD supervisors. I have just shared some material that I have been working on. **I'm feeling vulnerable**, I'm not at all confident with what I have performed. As we begin to discuss the sharing, **I start to cry**. Through tears and in a shaky voice, I say **"I just want it to be good"**. Dr Bissell questions, **"but what do you mean by good?"**. Pause. I don't know, I can't answer. I feel that **my performance is not enough**; this sharing feels subpar. Deep down, **I'm fearful that I just look like a 'shit' dancer**. I desperately want to please my audience. I want my work to be well liked – I want to be well liked – but evidently, I don't even feel that way. **I am not liking my work or myself**. I notice a conflict between the **'unashamed' and 'celebratory' aspirations of -ish and how working on it makes me feel**.*

Emotional Dyspraxicality

Up to now, the discussion of dyspraxicality has centred on the physical and cognitive aspects – but **qualities of being dyspraxic also encompass emotional and behavioural characteristics**. Alison Patrick discusses the emotional consequences of the dyspraxic mind. She suggests they may be partly neurological or genetic, therefore potentially being an inherent aspect of dyspraxic neurological wiring (2015:136). Although, she proposes such emotional dyspraxicality may also be of psychological consequence, developed through one's experience of being dyspraxic in a neurotypical world. She refers to Skinner and Piek (2001) who demonstrate **the mental impact of dyspraxia to include lower self-worth, greater anxiety, and weaker social support** than non-dyspraxic peers (cited in *ibid*). Patrick identifies certain emotional difficulties that dyspraxic people may experience, including:

- **Obsessive thoughts**

She writes that **obsessive thoughts could develop as a coping strategy** for the dyspraxic to try and gain control of their life, and to deal with the difficulties and anxieties that dyspraxia can bring (2015:129). Obsessive thinking may involve **distorted thinking** – thoughts about past events that are repeated obsessively (2015:130), **becoming twisted out of shape**.

- **Anxious thoughts**

Patrick states it is 'almost inevitable' that the dyspraxic will be an anxious individual, as **the unpredictability of a dyspraxic life can be 'an endless, emotional rollercoaster ride... that creates real anxiety'** (2015:142). Research from Pratt and Hill (2010) evidence this, finding that dyspraxic children develop 'high anxiety and emotional issues' (cited in *ibid*).

- o **Repetitive thoughts**

She refers to co-founder of the Scottish Dyspraxicon, Roy Moller, who notes the nature of **the dyspraxic mind to 'riff' on people's remarks**, deeply examining the implications of people's comments, honing in and **scrutinising everything** (2015:131).

- o **Low self-esteem**

Patrick notes an **'acute self-awareness'** and **self-consciousness** that can develop from a clumsy nature, which is likely to lead to **low levels of self-esteem** (2015:138). She acknowledges the effect of low self-esteem with how one views themselves and interprets the interactions and perceptions of others around them. She cites three main causes of low self-esteem in dyspraxics to be: **a lack of physical proficiency, learning difficulties and other people's reactions** (ibid).

- o **Overreaction**

According to Patrick, this may manifest in dyspraxic behaviour through being **easily upset, hypersensitive, negative, over-dramatic and argumentative** (ibid). Their reactions are likely to be **uncontrolled and instantaneous** – even to minor incidents – and reactions are given **without engaging in rational thought first**.

- o **Emotional volatility**

Patrick claims the frustration of dyspraxia can lead to **rages and emotional extremes**, especially when feeling tired. The dyspraxic may also be **irritable** when experiencing stress, anxiety, or frustration (2015:137). She further **states rage may occur in response to a 'world that cannot be controlled'** (ibid).

An Inner Dissonance

I identify with these emotional challenges and thought patterns. They were at play during and following *-ish*. When the project finished, intense thoughts and feelings persisted – making it hard to objectively reflect on the experience safely. However, through the gifts of time and the comfort of my own home, the **COVID pandemic offered opportunity for introspection**. Sitting with my thoughts and feelings, **I began to process my experience**. An awareness grew that observed **an internal psychological conflict**, which may explain the intensity of my emotions throughout the project.

I noticed a dissonance between my intentions and my actuality. The work desired to be an ‘unashamed’ dyspraxic performance, but my actual feelings were rooted in beliefs that I was not ‘good enough’, this performance was not ‘good enough’, and a fear that everyone would find out. I was fearful of failure, of being exposed as not worthy or capable to do my job. **A discord between my ‘proud’ dyspraxic identity and a feeling of incompetence was painful, unsettling, and persistently present in the process. This dissonance – and the fear underlying it – drove me emotionally.**

Enter ADHD and Multiplicity

As well as making sense of this internal conflict, the introspection of lockdown led me to other revelations. **I received an ADHD diagnosis**. The entrance of ADHD into the research **destabilised its singular focus on dyspraxia**, instigating an expansion to consider neurodivergence more broadly. Honouring the complexity of my neurodivergence felt important. **I am dyslexic, dyspraxic and have ADHD** – yet I am not an accumulation of labels, my thinking segregated through diagnosis. **My mind houses traits of those identities, entwined in co-existence**

and fluxation. With my ADHD diagnosis came new experiences, identifications, and life-shifts. For the first time, I was initiated into the processes of psychiatry and medication. Prescribed chemical stimulants naturally altered my brain chemistry, and my feelings, thoughts, and behaviour consequently. I began to recognise the fluidity of my neurodivergent identity, experience, and consciousness. It all increasingly felt emergent, with **one's mind always open with the capacity for change.**

The experience of co-existing neurodivergent conditions is incredibly likely. Pauc's (2005) study into the **comorbidity**²⁷ of dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADD, ADHD, OCD and Tourette's Syndrome in children discovers staggering statistics, evidencing **how frequent co-existing conditions are.** The percentiles of comorbidity regarding dyspraxia as a secondary diagnosis never dips lower than 81%, meaning **if one has a pre-existing diagnosis** of any condition covered in the study, **there is at least an 81% chance of co-existing dyspraxia** according to the data (2005:192). For those with a primary diagnosis of dyspraxia – like me – then there is a 38% likelihood of comorbid ADHD. Evidently, **the significance of overlapping neurodivergent conditions is high** – especially regarding dyspraxia. The experience of co-existing neurodivergent conditions is much more likely than the singular. For the majority, their **neurodivergence is multiplicitous.**

²⁷ Comorbidity is a pathological word that means co-existing – therefore 'comorbid condition' is a condition that co-exists with their initial diagnosis

Table 3 Matrix detailing comorbidities.

Condition	Comorbidity (%)					
	ADD	OCD	Tourette's	ADHD	Dyslexia	Dyspraxia
ADD	—	20	18	32	46	89
OCD	70	—	10	25	45	95
Tourette's	81	13	—	38	25	81
ADHD	64	14	17	—	31	89
Dyslexia	62	17	8	21	—	85
Dyspraxia	70	21	14	36	50	—

Figure 4. Table from Pauc (ibid)

For my research, it no longer felt appropriate to compartmentalise aspects of my neurodivergence to aid a singular narrative. My work must account for – and subsequently honour – multiplicities of mind and intersecting qualities of being. Expanding the focus shifted the investigative frame of my study. 'Choreographing Clumsy' began to crumble as 'Disordering Dance' more confidently entered, with renewed agency to explore neurodivergence and choreography more broadly.

Brain Shame

Embracing ADHD gifts my research with extended literature, as there is a greater level of discourse regarding the emotional aspects of ADHD than dyspraxia²⁸. In 'A Radical Guide for Women with ADHD', Drs Frank and Solden offer an in-depth, nuanced, and native perspective centred on the mind of the ADHD woman, from their expertise as psychologists who are also ADHD women. They address **the complicated psychological entanglement and internalised shame caused by the societal stigma of neurodivergence**, and a life lived experiencing said stigma as an ADHD woman. Solden calls this experience '**Brain Shame**', stating it as **how**

²⁸ This is indicative of the literature generally. ADHD is significantly more researched and understood in comparison to dyspraxia

neurodivergent women feel when 'compared to the idealization of neurotypicality' (Solden, 2019). They write:

Just as women feel deep wounds when they feel they don't live up to the standard of culturally approved bodies, so, too, do **women with ADHD feel hurt when they can't conform to expectations about how to be "good enough"** in other ways that highlight their brain-based challenges. These neurodiverse women, just like those with body shame or a member of another minority group, **often internalize culturally transmitted gold standards** of what is "good" and then **toxically compare themselves to a false goal and illusory image** (ibid)

I identify with brain shame, retrospectively seeing **its strong presence** in the process of *-ish*. This is how I felt when I said that "I just want it to be good", whilst crying profusely in the studio. By 'good', I obviously meant the gold standards of neuronormative dance. I understood in my logic that **an empowering alternative was needed**, but the **culturally transmitted neuronormative dance aesthetic was all I knew**. I had no other tools of practice or frames of reference to build upon, **so I continued to idealise it and expect it of myself**. The internalisation of the gold standards of tradition was so strong that I unconsciously maintained it through my practice, **despite conflicting with my needs, conscious aims, and research enquiry**. Despite lifelong experience of feeling 'othered' and being excluded from mainstream dance culture, I still desperately sought validation through a performance of neuronormative conformation – whilst simultaneously seeking an alternative path.

There therein lies the dissonance. **Such dissonance was destructive and disabling**. In front of Frauke, it made me freeze – a toxic comparison to a projection of neuronormative expectation immobilised my flow, eradicated my

presence, and halted the development of the work's progress. In the studio receiving feedback from my supervisors, shame triggered an emotional vulnerability that limited my ability to engage in feedback and think constructively about my work. **This dissonance illustrates the little – to no – separation I held between the quality or value of my work and myself** as a person.

Tangles and Loops

A risky entanglement between one's sense of self and one's work is exposed. When choreographing oneself to explore one's personal subjectivity, **a lack of boundaries is dangerous**. Through *-ish*, my self-worth and the worth of the work became enmeshed. This emotionally raised the stakes – when the performance felt unstable, I personally became unstable. **The external environment of my work and the internal environment of myself became bound, leaving me unsafe in both**. I had gotten myself into what Sari and Solden regard as **'a tangle'** (2020:25) – a triangular entangling between one's core sense of self, feelings about neurodivergence, and relationship to the world (more specifically here, context of professional dance performance) (ibid). **I was caught up in 'loops'**, repetitive modes of thinking that do the tangling. A **'Loop of Isolation and Hiding'** leads ADHD women to **hide and isolate themselves as a 'false sense of protection'** (2020:47) – when hiding in my dressing room until after hours, I was caught up in this loop. A **'Loop of Shame'** converts **'something external into an internal, painful core belief** about who you are' (2020:25) – this loop told me that because **'it went wrong, I am wrong'** when my performance didn't go to plan. Sari and Solden state that **this shameful loop may make the ADHD woman overwhelmed, avoidant, or perfectionistic**, with the latter behaviour posing a risk of burn out, due to **a strong inner-critic that pushes a 'must-try-harder' mindset** – forcing her to **expend more of herself** (2020:26).

Toxic Perfectionism

According to Solden, ADHD women experiencing Brain Shame often **'seek to be fixed'** as their self-worth depends on it (2019). She writes of the strategies the ADHD woman may implement to 'fix' herself, as she **'doubles down** on her planners and tips, **tools and strategies, hides away, digs more deeply... her authentic self becoming increasingly buried'** (ibid). A **'must-try-harder'** mindset has allowed me to succeed in life so far. **Strategies of overworking, overthinking and perfectionism developed to 'fix' my 'limitations' and achieve neuronormative standards.** As Stober, Harris and Moon (2007) articulate, **perfectionism has a direct relationship with shame.** They find that 'perfectionists often measure their self-worth in terms of **unachievable goals** of accomplishment and productivity, and have their lives ruled by a **self-imposed tyranny of the should'**. They continue with more detail regarding the unhealthy – or **'neurotic'** – perfectionist, listing perfectionistic concerns in this category as **'concerns over mistakes, doubt about actions, fear of disapproval by others, and discrepancy between expectations and results'** (2007:132)

Throughout *-ish*, I **measured the worth of both the work and myself by** how I perceived they 'should' be – **what I deemed professional and 'proper'**. In performance, strategies set to achieve aesthetic ideals of control, precision, and linearity, whilst in the process I pursued productivity and accomplishment over my wellbeing. Despite seeking to **'thrive on dysfunction'**, I hyperfixated on potential mistakes, feared disapproval from my audience, and doubted both my work and self. With *-ish*, I overextended myself so far that my exertion was destructive, and my authentic self became increasingly absent. **When seeking authenticity and safety, tools of fixing and hiding are no longer useful to me.**

No More Poison, No More Master's Tools

When discussing the compromises she must make to fit the non-ADHD world, neurodivergent artist academic Dr Kai Syng Tan states that **a 'community's 'gold standard' or unbreakable truth becomes another's poison'** (Tan, 2018). The gold standard of **neuronormative dance is poison to me**. Aspiring for its 'unbreakable truth' breaks me and rots my mental health, as I feel inadequate, retreat inside of myself, become disconnected from my body. Perceived expectations of the neuronormative gold standard stunt my nature of being in movement – I become frozen in fear. **Away from equilibrium through movement, causing emotional chaos and psychological pain.**

Starting *-ish*, I did not have the tools to genuinely carve a choreographic niche for myself. Leaving the project, I may still not have the tools, but **experiential knowledge greatly supports the journey forward**. At least now, I know what not to do. My understanding of the need for **more radical means** is strengthened. Future niche construction must not build tools to merely 'cope' within, or adapt oneself to meet, neuronormative expectation. **Tools must aid a radical shift with the frame of reference. A paradigm shift**, a new 'lens through which one views reality' (Walker, 2021:17) must be applied to carve a whole new environment for dance performance.

Arguing for a shift to the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Walker refers to the self-described 'black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet' Audre Lorde (Poetry Foundation, 2024), who writes:

Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone ... and how to make common cause with those who others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we all can flourish. **It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.** They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change (Lorde, 2017:19)

Walker contends **neurodivergent liberation depends on throwing away the tools of the pathology paradigm**, as 'to work within a system, to play by its rules, inevitably reinforces that system, whether or not that's what you intend' (2021:20). Neurodivergent survival within dominant neuronormative culture of dance²⁹ requires more than thoughtful intention or academic rationale. It needs radical practice to truly recognise difference beyond mere tolerance, wherein it can be seen 'as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic' (Lorde, 2017:18). **Possibilities outside of the norm are abundant and full of creative potential, a true neurodivergent choreographic niche must ignite innovative and imaginative alternatives to model and enact the fruits of an alternative approach.**

'The Freedom of your Owen Verlison'

²⁹ It is important to note, the context to which Lorde speaks is vastly different than the context to which I take them on. As a white woman writing about dance in 2024, my discussion of 'survival' is significantly different than hers, penned as a black lesbian in 1977 USA. The stakes to which I identify with her words are much, much lower – my life is not literally threatened by the tools of neuronormative dance culture. Sadly, for many queer people of colour today, the urgency and significance of Lorde's words remain of upmost relevance.

Such a philosophy is expressed in **dyslexic artist Benedict Phillip's *Agender of the Agresiv Dislecksick***, a powerful statement that fervently speaks back to non-dyslexic modes of literacy:

Why lern to do a thing that is not your destiny? ... Realaty is wot man understandz, trooth being wot he berleevz ... For wuns you eksept the translater as naseserty, you denigh yourself the freedom of your owen verlishon ... Take the langwidj and sine it with your owen hand ... Do this in your owen name and if it helps, do it for all thows fuckwits hoo let their creativerty di in their folss litrasee (Phillips, in Disability Arts Online, 2020)

For Phillips, **assimilation is a falsehood that kills one's creative agency**. Translating your nature to achieve norms – that are not destined for you – denies your freedom. Using his own distinctly dyslexic lexicon as a tool for creative 'dislecksick' address, Phillips urges the dyslexic reader to **make their own distinct mark outside of neuronormative convention**. After all, 'words are tools' that aid to 'discuss, recognise, challenge, and deconstruct – and eventually dismantle' the dominance of neuronormativity (Walker, 2021:25). I am curious as to how **dance itself may act as a tool, as a non-verbal language of distinct creative agency, to destabilise neuronormative tradition and empower neurodivergence**.

In declaring reality as what one understands, truth being what one believes, Phillips situates understanding and belief as central to how we make sense of our outer environment. I extend this thought to consider the self and the internal environment. **How much does one's understanding and beliefs of oneself create one's external reality and truth?** Greatly, I would argue, as **the sense that we have of ourselves in the internal environment – our understandings, beliefs, narratives, thoughts – impacts directly on our state of being in the external world**. This is true of my experience with *-ish*.

Internalised Neuronormativity

A neurodivergent choreographic niche must be carved with the freedom of one's volition, not the neurotypical master's tools. Yet, before their presence is abolished through the external means of one's practice, they must first be eradicated in oneself. A process of unlearning and unravelling brain shame is required. I need to detangle and unloop internalised neuronormativity within my inner environment and open my mindset from limitation towards possibilities yet unknown.

For Walker, internalised neuronormativity is internalised oppression (2021:26), a phenomenon wherein minority groups unconsciously accept and believe the prejudices and biases forced upon them, thus self-maintaining and reinforcing said systems of oppression. She refers to Lorde's contemporary, feminist journalist Sally Kempton, in stating that 'it's hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head'³⁰ (ibid). **Before the master's tools are dismantled in the external**

³⁰ This makes me think of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, an institutional building wherein the architecture facilitates an inbuilt system of control. A rotunda with an all-seeing inspection house at the centre, the panopticon leads inmates to self-regulate and self-surveil themselves to the disciplinary regime, as they are unaware of when exactly they are being watched. Foucault further theorised this further as a mechanism that 'automatizes and disindividualizes power', wherein the architectural apparatus enforces upon inmates a 'power situation of which they are themselves the bearers' (2008:6). More concisely, those in its structure internalise the mechanisms of discipline in themselves.

I recognise this process through my experience in neuronormative dance environments. I have never been actively ridiculed, disciplined or punished for deviating from the norm. I have experienced a lack of care and consideration, yes, but the shame has been internalised and pervasive, arising in response to my otherness to the standard. When observed by the neuronormative gaze, I discipline and punish myself. This manifests in behaviours of negative self-talk, internally located frustration, pissing (using humour as a 'coping strategy') and, ultimately, self-withdrawal. I perpetuate and maintain the powers of neuronormative expectation with how I have treated myself.

environment of my practice, I need to eradicate their presence in my head and how they consequently drive my thinking, feeling and behaviour.

Cocooning in COVID

How does one even begin to dismantle the neuronormative tools of the neurotypical master? What would support such processes of internal and external transformation – of self and of practice? What even are my strengths that I seek to centre through the construction of a niche?

During COVID, inside a bubble removed from the neuronormative world, **I delved into the internal environment of myself**. Not as a retreat of avoidance, seeking false safety, but as a period of introspection; **a process of self-discovery and growth**. My home became a cocoon. Inside, alongside my new ADHD diagnosis and medication, I entered back into therapy, reflected on *-ish*, and took a lead on other neurodivergent-centred projects. Through positive personal and professional challenges, I grew in confidence, stability, and self-connection. From this place, **I sought to reconnect with dancing** and what it means for me outside of neuronormative value systems. Reflecting on my relationship and identity with dance, I questioned... **What leads me to persist with a practice that is so connected to pain?** What continues to motivate me to carve my place in dance? Why is dancing important to me? If not the gold standard, then **what aesthetic values uphold my choreographic practice?** As a dancer, what are my strengths?

Memory (Foundational but Hazy, with Soft Edges)

I don't know exactly how old I am, but I'm a child – perhaps seven or eight? I don't know what time it is, but it is past my bedtime. I've woken in what feels like the

*middle of the night, tired and groggy, I am confused and seeking comfort. I stumble down the stairs – likely in a baggy nightgown, rubbing my eyes – through the kitchen, to find my mum in the living room. She’s alone in there. The furniture is pushed back slightly towards the walls, creating a small clearing of carpet in the centre of the room. **There is music playing.** I can’t recall exactly what, but it is **undoubtedly disco music.** Earth, Wind and Fire? Chic? Sister Sledge? Whatever it is grooves on the record player. My mum faces away from me, towards the mirror above the fireplace, and **she is dancing happily to herself.** In some way, I come to her attention. Caught in the act, **she doesn’t shoo me off to bed but welcomes me in. Together, we cut some gentle shapes in rhythm and joy on our living room dance floor.** Perhaps holding hands, eyes in contact, exchanging smiles through our soft, sweet mother daughter boogie. I don’t know when or how our dance closes, but I feel confident that **I sleep soundly afterwards. I know I feel happy and safe.** This night-time disco dance encounter reoccurs, and **dancing together forms a central part of our relationship.** As a young woman, my mum loved to go out dancing at discos in the 1970s. **She still loves dancing – and disco music – and she passed on those loves to me.***

The Feeling of Dancing

In my COVID cocoon, **I reconnected with dancing.** Removed from the neuronormative gaze and any pressure to ‘produce’ an aesthetic product, being confined to my home facilitated a process that supported my freedom in dance. With no distinction between spaces of work/play and zero physical stimulation to be found elsewhere, **dancing grounded my life.** As a balance to periods of stillness, impulse and inner stirrings of movement could easily and immediately take form, following the call whatever music played in the background. **Dancing emerged to counter anxiety or express happiness,** and as a mode of shared

presence with my partner. **It materialised as a physical state of play, expression, and connection** – to myself and others.

In the flow of living room dancing, I held no expectations. **The focus shifted inwards to my experience of the present moment.** I wasn't in my head – thinking, organising, or analysing – I was in my body, moving with what felt good and what I needed. **I did not feel fear and I resisted judgement.** My relationship with dancing loosened, giving way to feelings of **pleasure, joy, release, and fun.** In those feelings, I found deep value outside of neuronormative conventions of 'professional' practice. **Dancing offers me balance and equilibrium – it is a mode of process(ing) – a means to connect with one's internal environment.** The importance of **dance as a 'doing', not as a 'thing',** became clear. As an act that produces a state of being – not an aesthetic object. Dancing from home, I felt increasingly like myself. **I was 'feeling myself'** – in **greater self-connection** with my internal environment, alongside an **increased confidence** in, and **restored identity** with, dance. In joyful flow and equilibrium, **I remembered why dancing matters** to me.

An Index of Embodiment

Yet, I still observed a removed sense of my own movement language and sought to understand it more consciously. **What is the vocabulary of my dance in flow? What aesthetic interest or strength might be therein?** I wished to observe and capture the qualities of my living room dancing to aid future practice. Yet, it was important to **honour it as a process and resist the urge to form a product of performance.** I set out to **consciously witness and gather qualities of embodiment occurring from state of flow** in dance, with the intention to build some form of practical bridge between the safety of home and return to a

'professional' studio environment. I also sought to **connect with authentic neurodivergent corporeality** more broadly and **observe any other distinctiveness with my body and movement**, outside of the moment of dance.

This exploration forms the second piece of practice in the portfolio, titled *An Index of Embodiment*. Culminating with a graphic resource, this project utilised my ongoing practice of graphic notation that acts as a tool to assist with the capture, process and recall of movements and sequences. Yet, in this project such illustration becomes the output, to visually gather, group and communicate qualities of my embodiment, external to the presence of my own body in movement. The index follows three distinct categories of interest: a) **dancing movements** (style occurring from joyful flow), b) **non-dancing movements** (non 'performative' but distinct movements), and c) **the static body** (physical characteristics of neurodivergent corporeality).

The research took **a relaxed methodology**; a crucial measure to avoid pressure, perfectionism, and stress. The project ran gently, parallel to my life indoors, the method consciously casual. Whenever I found myself in moment of dance, or other modes of being 'in my body', I would incite a gentle awareness to the experience. **Not with a pressure to 'find', but a curiosity with what could emerge.** If a movement, or other aspect of embodiment, of interest came into conscious awareness then I would document it crudely, scribbling down either with a name or initial drawing. It would then be added to the collection, a messy cacophony of post-it notes. Once I felt satisfied with the spread of my assembly, I began a phase of refinement wherein I reviewed each 'item' in the index, made amendments of clarification where necessary, and digitally processed all illustrations. Finally, **I gathered all notations into one digital image**, forming *An Index of Embodiment*. In organising, refining, and collating all 'items' into one cohesive index, **a gentle process of analysis 'made sense'** of what was gathered.

Findings of An Index

In organising the index, I found that the **categories of interest became blurred** – crossovers were frequent. I found that **qualities of non-dancing movement often stylistically occur in with my dancing flow**, e.g. 'swinging arms' and 'touch and pressure'. Furthermore, I discovered how much my static corporeality informs my moving body, e.g. my 'collapsed arches' may give reason for my 'heel spin (with coupe support)', to creatively offset the difficulty of balancing on the balls of my feet. Increasingly, the categories emerged as arbitrary and redundant, revealing the interconnection between all modes of embodiment. More simply, **all are inherently interconnected – they index the same body**. Categorising one's corporeality in such a way reduces complexity, disconnects the holistic nature of the body, and fails to appropriately represent the fluidity of one's embodiment.

I observed how **sensorial qualities** of movement reoccur in the index, through items that instigate a **particular sense of feeling**. Spinning, hair whipping on face, rocking, touch, and pressure are all sensorially stimulating movements. Not shapes in motion to meet an external gaze but **movements that create, or respond to, inner feeling**. Movements that allow the body to further sense itself.

An interesting **language of movement** arose. When dancing to music, **a flow of persistent, constant movement in tempo provided a baseline** – a quality of always moving through and with time. **Rhythm and repetition** grounded the body, as footwork, gestures of hand/arm, and directions of the head synchronise to the beat. Although not all pathways of movement occupied the same groove. **The 'top' and 'bottom' of the body would often operate in different rhythms**, embodying complementary variations of tempo. Although repetitive, the current of movement

would rarely stagnate. **Movements would 'loop'** but not would not necessarily 'get stuck' in repetition. **The loop in motion would evolve**, spiralling in revolutions into new emergences of movement; **the flow of rhythm and repetition enacting a persistent process of transition**. Through intuitive responses to music, **playful patterns emerge** through the body without conscious composure.

When considering this 'language', my interest decreased regarding the dance's 'vocabulary' – the specific 'moves' captured in the index. Instead, curiosity developed about its syntax – **how does the dance arrange itself, what are the emerging patterns or qualities?** My interest centred more so with the experience that brings out this bodily language, **the state of being created through dancing**. Consequently, an index that captures objective significations of one's embodiment becomes reductive. **One's embodiment is never 'fixed'** or objectively quantifiable – **it is always emergent, multiplicitous, in-flux, and in response** to changing inner and outer environments. **Embodiment isn't a language, it's a state of being that makes utterances**. The index fails to honour that.

However, its value persists through its recognition as a subjective collection, marking a particular time. Almost as **a portrait of one's embodiment**, a creative record of how I saw myself then and felt particularly 'in my body'. More indexes could be created in future – the differences, evolutions, or enduring qualities would make interesting comparison. I still intended to work with the index in a studio context, as a basis for choreographic exploration. A 'fixed' choreographic vocabulary may no longer be of interest, but other discoveries aid future explorations of practice. The discovery of **dancing as a flow of intuitive bodily patterns, unfolding with rhythm and repetition**, feels important. **How might this state be approached choreographically?** How might the interconnectivity between neurodivergent embodiments of 'dance' and 'not-dance' be explored? **How might dance be approached as a mode to further sense oneself?**

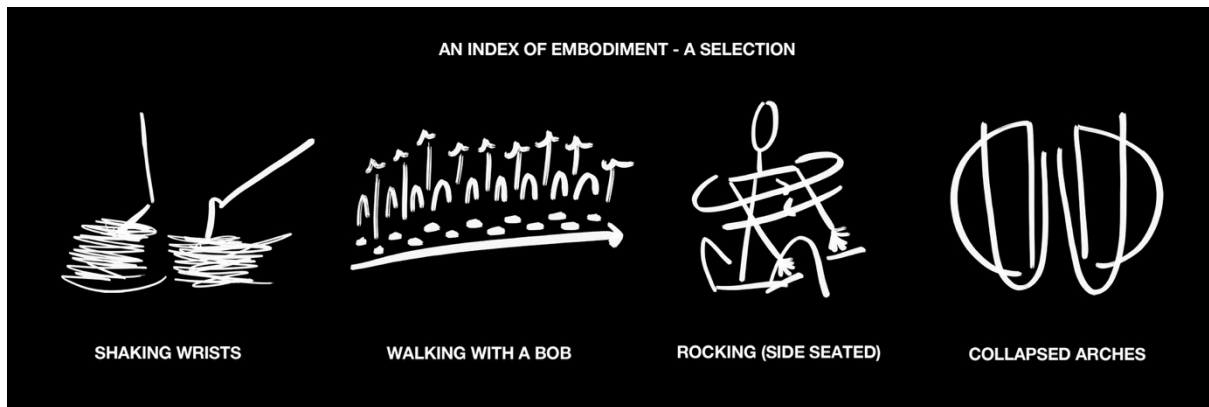


Figure 5. Work-in-process image of An Index of Embodiment

Neuroqueering a Niche for a Neurodivergent Bodymind

Through a process of introspection, **the importance of one's internal environment in forming one's external reality becomes clear to me** – as does the impact of one's external environment to determine one's internal reality. **Inner and outer environments are entwined, mutually shaping one's experience.** As the inherent entanglement between internal and external becomes clear, so does **the reciprocal entwinement between body and mind.** Embodiment and cognition reveal their mutual interconnectivity. The concept of a '**bodymind**' now enters the dialogue:

Mind is inextricably entwined with brain, and brain with body; thus, mind is inextricably entwined with body in a single complex system and in a continuous dance of mutual shaping. We're not minds riding around in vehicles of flesh and bone; we're **bodyminds, bodies that think and perceive** (Walker, 2021:54)

A neurodivergent choreographic niche must honour the dancer as a bodymind. It must support their internal self – thinking, feeling, wellbeing – as well

composing their external presence in the moment of performance. Such an environment for dance both supports and presents such an 'embodied mind' in time and space (ibid). Perhaps, **dance can become a tool of liberation for the neurodivergent bodymind** in and of itself. Not a tool carrying aesthetic legacies of neurotypical masters, and made with mere 'coping strategies' of hiding, perfectionism, and overexertion to produce an illusion of the neuronormative gold standard. More radical means are required; **neuronormative choreographic aesthetics and methods must be subverted, defied, discarded, and surpassed.** It is here I realise that my task to form a neurodivergent choreographic niche is one of **neuroqueering, as a practice...**

...intended to **undo and subvert one's cultural conditioning** and one's ingrained habits of neuronormative and heteronormative performance, with **the aim of reclaiming one's capacity to give more full expression** to one's uniquely weird potentials (Walker, 2021:162)

A truly neurodivergent choreographic niche queers the conventions of neuronormative practice. **How might a dance practice of neuroqueering assist to undo, unloop, and untangle internalised neuronormativity, support further authentic neurodivergent embodiment, and open choreographic potentials that diverge from the norm into exciting possibilities?** I'm interested in the potential of a neuroqueer niche to enable **dance as a means of process(ing)**; a doing wherein one's inner and outer environments meet through motion in the here and now. May a niche be constructed to not just accentuate the aesthetic strengths of the neurodivergent bodymind, but serve **to empower and strengthen them in the moment of dance itself?** I'm curious how the safety and freedom found dancing at home could transfer into professional practice; how might dance ground me in my body – not my head – in performance.? As I move on from *-ish*, **I seek choreography that garners my self-acceptance, stability, and flow to become**

empowered and present in the moment of dance. I no longer wish to be in brain shame, my true self absent in my practice.

6. Unmasking Embodiment

From my COVID cocoon, I witnessed a swell in societal discourse on neurodiversity. Social media platforms and other forms of internet-based communication³¹ aided a significant increase in dialogue and connectivity between neurodivergent communities. From this, two new terms entered my life with transformative effect: masking and stimming. Although new to me in language, such concepts were not new to me in experience - I had been stimming and masking long before. Yet, their introduction to my research would fundamentally transform my relationship to dance and the construction of my neurodivergent choreographic niche going forward. This chapter theoretically dives into these terms and gathers an argument to propose a radically neurodivergent choreographic approach, alternative to neuronormative tradition.

³¹ Back in the 1990s, the early internet enabled autistic people to communicate, connect and form community through accessible text-based means for the first time (Dekker, 2020). The use of social media platforms became increasingly prevalent through the pandemic, providing similar

Masking

Masking is the 'process of intentionally, or unintentionally, **hiding aspects of yourself to avoid harm**' (Miller et. al, 2021:330). It is the performance of neurotypicality, a social strategy of **camouflage** to fit in and **avoid stigma**, wherein one suppresses and conceals aspects of their authentic neurodivergent self. The 'mask' may manifest externally through strategies of **mimicry** and **mirroring; practiced and copied to 'pass' as 'normal'** to observers (Miller et. al 2021:330). Masking is a term most used by the autistic community but is also used by those of different neurominorities. Away from the neuronormative gaze, **I realised I have been unconsciously masking all my life**³². I grew aware of the extent to which I perform in everyday life; how I externally shape myself by motivation to meet the expectations of others. **I realised I didn't have a strong sense of my authentic self.**

Research shows **how harmful masking is for neurodivergent wellbeing and identity**. Miller, Rees, and Pearson report masking as complex and pervasive to **'a person's entire identity, life, and sense of selfhood... [it is] beyond what is "seen" ... It can deeply affect a person's identity and lead to confusion about who they "really" are'** (2021:333). As a 'protective mechanism from outside sources of harm', **masking can create an internal identity loss wherein one's internal self can become fractured** (ibid). Furthermore, Miller et. al report masking as a 'resource drain' that takes a **'huge emotional and physical toll'** on one's health and

increased means for neurodivergent communities to connect and share globally. TikTok aided the increase of discussion around neurodivergence, particularly regarding ADHD as it 'propelled [it] into popular awareness' with many people 'credit[ing] these platforms with helping them realize they had the diagnosis' (Abdelnour et. al, 2022). The rates of diagnosis for ADHD and autism soared, leading to increased discussion and awareness in mainstream contexts.

³²I have been performing on stage since the age of 4. I have always been good at 'pretending'. There's an interesting question regarding the impact of my stage experience on my young developing self. Did I develop as a good performer because I learnt to perform socially? Or am I a good social performer because of my stage experience?

wellbeing (ibid). **Masking is an external performance of neuronormativity** that risks significant negative internal states of being for neurodivergent bodyminds. **It removes one from their neurodivergent truth** and wears them down.

Character Armour

Walker articulates **masking's impact on neurodivergent embodiment** and the extent to which masking is held in the bodymind. She refers to Wilhelm Reich's concept of '**character armour**', to express masking as the 'bodily component of repression': a **deep, muscular tension** that results from when the suppression of embodiments becomes a chronic, unconscious, and deep-rooted habit (2021:187). Therefore, **masking is more than a situational, social, and behavioural performance** in the moment, it fundamentally changes neurodivergent embodiment long-term. It stifles the connection to one's inner landscape and corporeal truth, as it impedes spontaneous natural bodily self-expression and disconnects one from accessing the 'feelings, yearnings, organismic impulses, and psychological capacities associated with those movements and self-expressions' (ibid). **Masking severs a fundamental self-knowingness connected to interoception** – the sense of the internal state of the body – **detaching an ability to notice, recognise, and respond to the physical and/or emotional senses**. This is reflected in research that illustrates autistic people have a reduced interoceptive sense (Schauder et. al, 2015).

Looking back at *-ish* with greater distance, **I see a performance of character armour**. Instead of freeing flows of embodiment, I observe a rigid and tentative body. Often with straight outstretched limbs, there's a strict carefulness and tightness in constant attempt of physical control, a purposeful and overly attentive placement of the body. I move in space on an axis of straight lines, with only an

up/down, left/right directionality. Aesthetically, **I now observe an embodiment of restraint and limitation.** Entanglements with objects incite choreographic actions, but there is actually very limited freedom of movement or moments of dancing. Objects put me into motion, but movement doesn't stir and flow from within.

In *-ish*, **I do not allow myself the messiness, chaos, and fluid agency that I generously encourage in my object collaborators.** They can wander where they please, be in a frenetic whirlwind, or act deviously and throw me onto my rear. Yet, I do not allow any of this freedom to materialise from my own movement. **I am hyper-controlled, hyper-aware, and self-contained, camouflaging and compensating for my natural embodiment.** I do not let my whole, true, and joyous self to be seen. Instead, I now see *-ish* as almost medically clean, clinical, and detached from the complexity and truth of myself in dancing. **I do not see myself in it.** I do not see the pleasure and joy that has always connected me to dance. **I now see a subconscious performance of my own self-consciousness,** as I hold myself with stress in attempt to conceal the self-perceived 'limitations' of my neurodivergent bodymind. I am done with choreographing to hide and suppress myself. **The character armour must go - I must now 'unmask' my dance practice.**

Unmasking

A language and practice of '**unmasking**' is developing in the neurodivergent community and discourse. As masking is the suppression of non-neuronormative embodiments, **unmasking** is the reclamation of those embodiments (Walker, 2021:186). It is a **practice of refusing to conform and perform to dominant neuronormative standards,** which autistic queer scholar Dr Devon Price sees as a 'revolutionary act of disability justice... [and] a radical act of self-love' (Price, 2022:11). In their pivotal book, '**Unmasking Autism**', Price observes unmasking as

an essential measure for the healthy wellbeing and quality of life of neurodivergents, and as a necessary route to self-acceptance outside of neuronormative expectations. Unmasking is no longer camouflaging ('hiding') or compensating ('overcoming') neurodivergent traits, but a journey to accept and be as we truly are. It takes inner-work and an accompanying side quest of developing self-trust and compassion for neurodivergent bodyminds to 'feel safe enough to get reacquainted with who we really are' (ibid). For Price, unmasking can present new possibilities for being that exist outside of the pressures of neuronormative performance, form deeper understandings of self and has transformative potential as '**when you stop judging yourself according to the neurotypical gaze, everything... is free to change**' (Price, 2022:12).

Walker posits unmasking as a vital form of neuroqueering; a process of regaining one's capacity for 'spontaneous neuroqueer movement' (2021:187). Unmasking embodiment is a twofold process – it is of both liberation and recovery; a means to both release from entrenched tense character armour and reconnect with previously suppressed movements and ways of being. For Walker, such bodily unmasking can regain and nurture what masking disconnects from – one's true embodied expression and interoceptive 'attunement to the inner stirrings, inclinations, and impulses from which such movements emerge' (ibid). Walker states cultivating such an attunement has transformative and liberational impact for both the inner and outer worlds of neurodivergent bodyminds, gifting greater self-expression and the ability to reshape oneself.

Stimming as Neurodivergent Embodiment

'Stimming' is a term developed by the autistic community to reclaim what the clinical discourse understands as 'self-stimulatory behaviour' or 'stereotypy' – a

core diagnostic criteria of autism, meaning autonomous repetitive behaviours that self-stimulate. 'Motor stereotypies' such as body-rocking, head-nodding, flapping the hands at the wrist, and jumping up and down are common examples reported in the literature. Stimming is also reported for other neurodivergent conditions which involve differences in sensory processing, like ADHD.

Under the pathological gaze, stimming is regarded as purposeless 'dysfunctional compulsive or automatic behaviour' (Walker, 2021:105) that 'shut[s] out external stimuli and interfere[s] with focus' (Kapp et al. 2019:1782). This perspective **sees stimming as an undesirable reduction of engagement with the neuronormative world** and 'normal' behaviour. Research into treatments and methods to 'control, (i.e. eliminate, modify or reduce)' self-stimulatory behaviour of autistics remains common within clinical studies (ibid), reflecting the pathology paradigm's wider objective to 'fix' the neurodivergent, neuronormalising them through the institution of medicine. This viewpoint is reflected in neuronormative cultural practices around stimming, i.e. the practice of 'quiet hands' which teaches suppression of stimming of the hands (e.g. hand flapping) as 'good behaviour'.

The discourse on stimming is expanding to include neurodivergent voices of scholars and members of the community, and so is the societal understanding of what constitutes stimming. Although commonly identified in the literature as predominantly repetitive movements or sounds, stimming can occur across all facets of sensory engagement and stimulation – varieties of stimming can include:

- **Proprioceptive or kinaesthetic** (e.g. rocking, pacing, flapping hands, seeking physical pressure or impact)
- **Tactile** (e.g. touching objects and surfaces with appealing textures, stroking one's skin)
- **Vestibular** (e.g. spinning or swinging)

- **Visual** (e.g. gazing at running water or rising smoke)
- **Auditory** (e.g. listening to running water or loud music)
- **Olfactory** or **gustatory** (e.g. sniffing or tasting things)
- **Verbal** (e.g. repetition of particular words or phrases)
- Any **combination** of the above (i.e. drumming, which combines kinaesthetic, tactile and the auditory)

(Walker, 2021:105)

Academic research informed by autistic lived experience is emerging, offering a perspective more in alignment with neurodiversity paradigm. 'People should be allowed to do what they like: Autistic adults' views and experiences of stimming' (Kapp et al., 2019) is of note, and reviews stimming literature and parallels with lived experience of autistic participants. Kapp et. al refer to theoretical perspectives, such as Delacato (1974), to suggest a sensori-motor basis for stimming, as 'excessive, insufficient and inefficient sensory processing causes all autistic behaviours ... producing stimming as a controllable response' (2019:1782).

Sensori-motor, relating to the '**functioning in both sensory and motor aspects of bodily activity**' (Merriam Webster, 2024), is most referred to regarding the initial stage of psychologist Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. At the sensori-motor stage, Piaget theorises that a child begins to discover the difference between themselves and their environment through sensory engagement. Walker recognises stimming as a parallel process; a sensori-motor response as an act of sensory meaning making. Instead of a stage of development to move through, Walker contends that for autistics and others with sensory processing differences, stimming is 'an ongoing lifelong activity' which is an act of 'parsing ... the confusion of the sensory field into coherence' (2021:106).

Stimming as Intuitive Pattern Making

This view correlates with artist Simon Yuill's perspective, whose critical and personal publication 'Stimwork' (2021) gives voice to the embodied lived experience of the stimming autistic body. He articulates stimming beyond an understanding of mere specific located actions, but instead as a **'form of thinking-in-the-world'; a physical mode of sense-making** and an autistic **mode of being in dialogue with the environment** through 'a form of homeostatic relation' (ibid).

Yuill writes of the repetitive quality of **stimming as a process of 'intuitive pattern making'** that helps make sense of the present experience and environment. For him, stimming is an integration between an outer and inner landscape **which has transformative qualities**, as this pattern making 'creates small changes in our environments which in turn feed change within ourselves' (ibid). Yuill paints a picture of **the fluid, in-flux nature of stimming** – as opposed to the 'fixed, compulsive' perspective in the pathological literature. He states the stimming acts themselves can change regarding situation, context and throughout one's lifetime, but **stimming can also act as an embodied vehicle of change**, a means for learning, growth, and maturity. In this regard, stimming is a sensorimotor response that is **not developmental but intuitive**: it is the 'voice... language... enunciation and conversation with the world' (ibid) for autistic bodies, **a fluid physical process making sense of in-flux environments**.

Rhythm and Repetition and Loops

Repetition and rhythm have been found to be important factors for stimming and its effect on how one *feels*. Accounts from autistic participants detail **the soothing nature of stimming as a 'self-regulating mechanism**, which acted to create a

calming feedback loop' (Kapp et al., 2019:1785). By attending to a singular sensory point of focus repetitively over a duration, excessive input could be reduced for a self-regulating effect (ibid). This feedback loop illustrates **stimming as a response one's 'inner rhythm'**, as self-stimulating movement which an autistic participant voiced to calm the body 'in time with the pendulum... [as] it sort of metronomes everything in your body to sort of go at that speed... [it] helps quell everything because you're at the same rhythm with everything' (2019:1786). **Stimming aids to bring embodiment into balance by regulating and soothing in response to triggers**, be they external – overwhelming environments, sensory overload – or internal – noisy thoughts, uncontrollable emotion (ibid).

Through my research, rhythm and repetition have revealed themselves as important factors to achieve bodymind equilibrium. They've been observed through the spacehopper in *-ish* and as a foundational quality emerging through the living room dancing of *An Index of Embodiment*. Physical patterns of rhythm and repetition self-regulate me and bring bodymind clarity. Might this be true for my mum's living room dancing? Was she also seeking equilibrium and balance? Do these instances of dancing fulfil a stimming purpose? If so, **where is the line between stimming and dancing?**

The Space Between Stimming and Dancing

Dr Peter Lovatt is a neurodivergent dance psychologist. As a dyslexic, he taught himself to read through his skill and training as a dancer. He also exudes ADHD energy, as he states at school, he 'fidgeted a lot; the teacher told me countless times to sit still and listen. I got bored sitting still and didn't learn very much' (2018:39). He discusses **dance as intrinsic to human behaviour**, quantified by three categories of innateness: **inclination** (natural tendency to display

behaviour), **automaticity** (behaving in such a way without need for instruction) and **universality** (people regardless of geography or culture display similar behaviour) (2018:24). This belief which is bolstered by academic research that evidences **dance by humans stretching time and place**, with a strong indication of dance **not just aesthetic artform but a part of human nature**.

Lovatt defines **dance as an 'automatic physical response to other people's movement or to a heard or felt rhythm'** (2018:26). He doesn't specify what is regarded as 'felt' rhythms, but we can extrapolate to consider the 'inner rhythms' as felt and enacted by neurodivergent people through acts of stimming, as articulated in Kapp et al (2019). Instead of responding to sensory audible stimulus of hearing a beat or tempo when dancing to music, the automatic physical response for stimming neurodivergents occurs automatically in relation to other sensory means, be it from internal or external causation. In this regard, **stimming could be argued as a form of dancing in and of itself**, relatable as an innate act of human nature. This raises further interesting considerations on the distance between stimming and dancing.

Stim Dancing

Primarily through online platforms, neurodivergent produced discourse is developing regarding practices of '**stim dancing**' – sessions of dancing to music which fulfil a stimming purpose to both express and regulate oneself. Such activity focuses on **the sensory experience of dancing and the resulting positive response** for the neurodivergent bodymind. Riah Person, an autistic dancer and aspiring movement therapist, shares her lived experience and research through her blog and social media presence. In a YouTube video, titled 'A World Without Dance is Me Being Unwell', she speaks:

Stimming is... one of the ways we regulate, express but it can also be beyond ... movement has never stopped being a significant method for me to make sense of the world and express my place in it... I took a partner class which is very not me – **I’m a very solo dancer** or like **social dancer**, because **I have unfortunately experienced some non-preferred things** in the past ... I would be in the classroom for maybe like five minutes and then I would leave and **I’d be like having a breakdown in the bathroom** (The ConneKt, 2022)

Person’s relationship with dancing resonates heavily with me. She expresses dancing as fundamental act for her positive wellbeing; to understand and be in the world. Yet unfortunately, previous experiences in neuronormative dance environments – such as a partner class – have been upsetting, exclusive and disabling. Person’s experience mirrors mine in this regard: **dance as both a fundamental enabler and disabling barrier depending on the context**, with a turn to a **‘solo’ practice** to be able to dance on one’s own terms.

Content creators are **collectively voicing a positive ownership of their neurodivergent embodiment through stim dancing** discourse, sharing videos of and reflections on their own stim dance practices. Holistic Autistic (2020) contends **dancing as ‘vestibular stimming’** which offers physical freedom, bodily autonomy, and an opportunity to connect with aspects of their neurodivergent embodiment previously understood as a negative; ‘spatial awareness is something I have a love/hate relationship [with]... when I’m dancing, I don’t have to be worried... about having control of how my body is moving. I can just freely move, exactly how I want to’. Aut-Ish (2020) further supports **stim dancing as an act of embodied neurodivergent freedom** as ‘stim dancing doesn’t have any rules, and it doesn’t matter if you look like an idiot or not... you just show your natural, full on,

comfortable self'. This illustrates **the boundless subjective nature of stim dancing** that inherently functions outside of the standards of the external judgemental neuronormative gaze. **Stim dancing is a practice of unmasking**: it allows neurodivergent bodyminds to reconnect with their internal selves and express their subjectivity external to neuronormative standards with comfort, safety – and most importantly – enjoyment.

Stim Dancing and Music

Agony Autie (2019) details **the importance of music** for their stim dance practice, which integrates everyday stim movements into 'their songs' – deeply loved musical tracks they listen to repetitively (which could be seen as 'auditory' stimming behaviour). This resonates with my own relationship to music³⁵, particularly the behaviour of obsessively, repetitively listening to the same tracks and albums on loop – favouring the depth of long-term musical loves over the dynamic novelty of newness and change. **Music moves me inside and out**. If my living room dancing is stim dancing, then music is the vessel that carries it – a co-existing player in dialogue. **When in the flow of the music, there is an absence of thoughts, decisions, of a need to control** – just a trust in the body, an awareness in the present moment through the BPM.

Lovatt discusses the **innate, natural response humans have with seeking out rhythmic patterns** and moving to them. He refers to the brain response of **sensori-motor coupling** – the coupling of sensory experiences with motor activity – 'whereby **a sound triggers the parts of the brain responsible for movement,**

³⁵ Music and dance have always been closely tethered in joy for me. I am also a DJ, using the moniker of Niki Rush. I love playing my music obsessions to a club full of dancing bodyminds. Behind the booth is the best seat in the house – I get all the dancing space I want and control of the music to dance to. I get so much satisfaction from looping and mixing, merging music to take dancefloor dwellers on a journey.

either giving us an urge to move or actually making us move' (2020:43). He refers to disco and the 'trance-like state' brought on by mesmeric 4/4 beat of Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love'. Within the groove, he states 'there is layer upon layer of changing colour that empties your brain of all thoughts... as though the music is a puppeteer and all my movements are involuntary' (2020:41). Here he articulates the potential for **dancing to music to generate a shift in consciousness**, suggesting a transcendental relationship between the external sensory stimulus of music and the internal sensory landscape of the dance, thus producing shift in mood.

Stim Dancing as an Embodied Practice of Unmasking

The **crossovers** between **dancing** and **stimming** are clear. Both are caused by an **innate human sensori-motor response** that integrates sensory experience with motor activity – be it of internal or external sensory stimulus. Through **rhythm and repetition**, both **stimming** and **dancing to music** can produce **a shift in consciousness** and change in feeling through physical embodiments of what could be understood as '**intuitive pattern making**' (Yuill, 2021). As a result, **I argue that dance can be particularly important for neurodivergent bodyminds** as a mode of **stimming to self-regulate** 'excessive' or 'inefficient' sensory processing.

Through the neurodivergent cultural practice of **stim dancing**, **dance can be utilised as an embodied practice of unmasking**: it works to reclaim dance for neurodivergent bodies outside of neuronormative aesthetic values, **greatly benefits the wellbeing of neurodivergent people and their sense of self** – both on a psychological and interoceptive level – and **allows for self-expression** that neither 'hides' or 'overcomes' neurodivergent corporeality to **radically practice self-acceptance**.

'Stimwork': Neurodivergent Artists Utilising Stimming as a Creative Method

Approaching **dance as a stimming practice** may offer means for **unashamed choreographic methodologies and aesthetics** which reclaim neurodivergent embodiment and resist neuronormative choreographic ideals. Yet, if stimming fundamentally serves the inner rhythms and interoceptive sensorial landscape of the neurodivergent body, **how might this translate for the purpose of an audience's external spectatorial gaze?** Is it possible to utilise the creative potential of the in-flux, intuitive-pattern making process of stimming in a creative 'product'?

There is an emerging body of what Yuill (2021) refers to as **'stimwork'**: creative processes and artworks by neurodivergent artists who consciously explore **embodied practices of stimming**. Visual artist **Sam Metz'** approaches **drawing as an act of stimming** and creates what they conceptualise as 'choreographic objects' – multidisciplinary works across sculpture, drawing, animation, live art, and film created through 'a relationship to the body and movement' (Metz, 2022). Their installation work *Making Solid: Unpredictable Bodies* is such an example. Responding to the 'unpredictable' nature of their neurodivergent and disabled bodymind, Metz seeks to **'make movement solid'** by poetising and documenting the 'fleeting interruptions' of their embodied experience of Tourette's, Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, and sensory processing differences (Unlimited, 2022).

Through their multidisciplinary 'choreographic objects', an expression of **stimming as a mode of bodily-knowing** and/or communicating is **translated into physical, artistic material** for the gaze of an audience. Through this approach, Metz challenges society's neuronormative centrality of verbal communication by

creating their own visual language that explores 'alternative, non-verbal communication that comes from neurodivergence, and which is often dismissed, devalued and stigmatised in mainstream society' (ArtRabbit, 2022). This intention further locates **stimming and neurodivergent bodily communication and knowledge as a political act**, and centres it through their own agency as an artist. Through visual communication and creative documentation, Metz successfully solidifies the ephemerality of movement and produces an artwork that utilises the creativity and agency of the live stimming body.

Xan Dye, a dyslexic and dyspraxic dance artist, **investigates the space between stimming and dancing in *STIMMING*** – an ongoing project that has so far resulted in digital outputs of photography and film, alongside studio-based practice-research. Rather than pursuing a canonistic performance of dancing as virtuosic, technically focused spectacle (Dust, 2022), Dye explores **what aesthetic form** can materialise when neurodivergent **dancers tune into sensory input and the self-regulating embodied language of stimming**. By understanding it as a 'liminal space between thinking and feeling ... [a means of] passively receiving and actively seeking out' sensory input (Dye, 2022), Dye recognises stimming as a responsive, in-flux and regulatory state of being, **an embodied act of listening, processing, play and rest** (ibid), that they situate within a dance context.

STIMMING explores means of **dismantling disabling barriers for neurodivergent bodyminds within dance** culture and practice. By dancing with the 'underlying ethos' of stimming movement to regulate, soothe, care, **Dye seeks to disrupt capitalist values** present in dance culture that centre '**fast learning, fast making**' and aesthetic objects of **virtuosic technique**, through an alternative offer of 'an experience [to] feel and have a sensory response to' (Dust, 2022). By centring the fluid, unfixed relativity of the neurodivergent bodymind (and its sensory processes) at the core of the aesthetic, Dye presents the dancing body in a mode

at odds with neuronormative fixed expectations of traditional dance performance: it is **not immediately 'productive' but attentive**, moved by the flow of the inner landscape, not the demands of the external gaze.

Stimming as Embodied Ornament

Stimworks by both Metz and Dye effectively 'make solid' the embodied process of stimming into an observable creative product. Yet, at the time of writing, they do so almost solely through digital and documented means – removed from the immediate ephemeral corporeality of the live neurodivergent bodymind. Both works capture and then go through a process of creative reinterpretation of the stimming body, producing an aesthetic object with stimming, but not directly of stimming itself. This begs the question: is it possible to present the live stimming body through an artistic product for the purposes of external spectatorship, whilst retaining the true function of stimming as an in-flux, regulatory, internally motivated process? **Can stimming become choreography?**

Yuill (2021) raises concerns regarding the stimming body, and its perceived value – or lack thereof – under the gaze of dominant economic and societal systems. In **conflict with neuronormative capitalist Western cultural values**, Yuill states **the stimming body becomes a 'troubling presence** in relation to notions of human worth' as it **'evokes an efflorescence of energy that cannot be captured as capital'** (ibid). In this regard, stimming is deemed as **a mere waste of energy**; a meaningless act without purpose or value, as it's input of time and physical effort fails to produce a product of monetary value. As a result, the human value of **stimming bodies is considered 'worth less' under capitalism.**

Yuill considers the **low creative value of stimulating** when perceived against the legacy of Western aesthetics and thought which see it as a 'seemingly exotic yet **worthless ornament**' (ibid). An aesthetic concept difficult to define objectively, the meaning of the ornamental in art is 'entangled with that of **decoration, design, patterns and motifs**' (Glăveanu, 2014:83) and can be understood as 'decoration in which the **visual pleasure** of form significantly **outweighs the communicative value** of content' (Trilling, 2003:21). Yuill's relation of **stimulating** to the ornamental **under capitalism** therefore **locates the body as a functional object and stim movement** as arbitrary decoration, just **meaningless frills** on the object of the body. He cites the ornamental as contemporarily 'shunned and distrusted as mere surface effect, an unnecessary distraction and waste of resources' (ibid), suggesting that **the ornamental stimulating body may present as a shallow, useless product** without substance under the aesthetic values of the neuronormative gaze: a waste of energy.

I see how **the stim dancing body may be perceived** as such against the aesthetic legacy of Western dance, which centres athletic shows of virtuosic skill for the gaze of outside spectatorship. A neurodivergent bodymind responding to their inner-rhythms, sensations or need to regulate through an act of dancing may be deemed **self-indulgent without expressive purpose, 'skill'** or overarching choreographic intent. If stimulating is ornamentation seen as a mere decoration of the body, where 'pleasure of form significantly outweighs the communicative value of content' (Trilling, 2003:21), then it may be questioned: **what is the stimulating body 'saying'** in a choreographic sense? As Jonathan Burrows writes, 'I like to move isn't necessarily a good reason to ask other people to watch you move' (2010:106). **Can the stim dancing body ever present choreographic value?** To my own question, I would then respond: well then, **what is choreographic value and who gets to decide that?**

Yuill finds **value within the ornamental** citing it as the origin and development of material **patternmaking**. He refers to David Brett's description of ornamentation as a human '**impulse ... an innate propensity that is part of our being as a species. A capacity that helps us make perpetual sense of the world ... which includes the sense of our own bodies**' (Brett, 2005 cited in Yuill, 2021). In this sense, both **stimming** and the ornamental are considered innate human impulses that make sense of the world through creative, embodied patterning. This viewpoint could assist **seeing the validity of stimming as choreography in and of itself** – as material patterns of the body. Yet of course, the legacy of **Western aesthetics that shuns the ornamental** may fail to see the intrinsic choreographic value in the **stimming body**. Alternative **aesthetic standards would need to be propagated** and accepted in dance culture for the inherent patternmaking of **stimming** to be recognised for its choreographic potential.

'Rethinking' Stimming as Embodied Ornament

In 'Rethinking Decoration: Pleasure and Ideology in the Visual Arts', David Brett sets out a task of 'rethinking' in a bid to '**restore the ornamental, the decorative and the pleasurable**' with some 'theoretical dignity' (2005:1). He voices **ornamentation** as 'a family of practices **devoted mainly to visual pleasure**; and treat[s] this pleasure as a family of values, which includes **social recognition, perceptual satisfaction, psychological reward and erotic delight**' (2005:4). Thus, Brett argues for multi-faceted value in the ornament through practices of pleasure. In doing so, **the ornament transcends an immediate 'productive' exchange** between aesthetic object and consumer, and instead **forms a more experiential and phenomenological response**. This relates to Valsiner's perspective on the ornamental as 'not merely "aesthetic accessories" to human activity contexts but as **holistic devices of cultural guidance** of human conduct

that acts through the subjectivity of personal **feelings'** (2008:67) – **the ornament** holds a personal, social, and cultural significance that is **deeply human**.

If we extrapolate this to concern the ornamental stim dancing body, a different type of aesthetic value system may emerge. **Instead of perceiving** a dance of **stimming** against the legacy of Western-centric aesthetic values **as a cultural 'product' of 'mere surface effect', its worth can be 'rethought' – or 're-embodied' – as more of a cultural 'process'**. This aligns with Lovatt's view of dance as intrinsic to human nature, resulting from our propensity to seek out rhythmic patterns and move to them, which can produce beneficial shifts in consciousness. In this regard, aesthetic offerings of the live stimming body may incite **a more collective choreographic value by communicating a democratic, universal relation to dance that leans into the pleasure, satisfaction, sensorial delight and psychological benefit** (Brett, 2005:4) **of stimming embodiment**, and locate it within a shared aesthetic experience of dance. The emergence of such a choreographic methodology may also have political implications, as centring the quality of **stimming's experiential value may act to validate, restore, and destigmatise perceptions of the stimming body** itself – whilst further antagonising and expanding aesthetic and social values of what choreography is and who can be seen as a dancer.

Collectively 'Feeling In' to the Stimming Body

Regarding concerns of dancing as stimming being self-indulgent or lacking communicative value to outside spectators, we can look to **'kinaesthetic empathy'** – a concept founded on aesthetician Theodore Lipps' theory of 'Einfühlung', which translates as 'empathy', or more specifically **'feeling-into'** (Burns, 2021). Lipps articulates an experience of 'inner mimesis' for spectators observing bodies in

motion, as they feel an embodied sense of the movement they are witnessing. Dance critic John Martin believed an intrinsic **kinaesthetic connection between movement and emotion**, furthering this mimetic rapport to also include an emotional empathetic relation between mover and viewer. He further argued dance as a joint kinaesthetic experience between dancers on stage and spectators in an audience as the essence of dance's communicability:

When we see a human body moving, we see movement which is potentially produced by any human body, and therefore our own ... through **kinaesthetic sympathy** we actually reproduce it vicariously in our present muscular experience and awaken such associational connotations as might have been ours if the original movement has been of our own making (Martin, cited in Leigh Foster, 2011:7)

In this sense, both **movers and observers are kinaesthetically active** in their engagement – with both parties **sharing an emotional-physiological experience**. The discovery of mirror neurons in neuroscience bolsters this and has provided neurophysiological ground for understanding the intersubjective relationship of dancer-spectator and the inherent communicative value of dance. **Mirror neurons are a form of sensori-motor neuron** that act as 'synaptic connections in the cortex that fire both when one sees an action and when one does that action' (Leigh Foster, 2011:1).

Mirror neuron networking is a functional mechanism to what neuroscientist Gallese refers to as '**embodied simulation**', a form of experiential understanding that **allows us to 'tune in' to the emotions, language, and physical state of others** (2010:37, as cited in Zardi, et al. 2021:3). This raises interesting considerations regarding the value of watching stimulating bodies. Through spectatorship, is there potential for the internally motivated, regulating action of stimulating to become a

shared kinaesthetic experience? Could the intersubjective **'stimmer'/spectator relationship produce an 'inner-mimesis' – a 'feeling-into' – of stimulating embodiment**, and if so, might that incite a similar psycho-physiological shift in the viewer as potentially achieved by the stimulating body through rhythm and repetition? Could acts of embodied self-stim(ulation) incite a collective 'embodied simulation' for observing bodyminds? I content it could, with potentials to present a significant personal, social, and experiential value for an aesthetic of the live stimulating body.

Within a comprehensive literature review by Zardi et. al, 'Dancing in my Head: An Interdisciplinary Review' (2021), we can locate findings of a neuroscientific basis to support this hypothesis. Rizzolatti and Craighero found **a correlation between the viewer's motor system and action they are observing**, in that actions observed that are not a part of their pre-existing 'motor repertoire' are only experienced with sensorial engagement, whereas observed movement that is a part of their 'motor repertoire' actually 'resonates' with their motor system (2004:179, as cited in Zardi et. al 2021:2). The level of **kinaesthetic empathy and mirror neuron engagement is more resonant when observing movement that our bodies already 'know' and can 'do'**. A study by Calvo-Merino et. al (2006) matches this, as their findings show the level of neural resonance to observing action is dependent on their previous motor experience of said action. Therefore, one could argue, the potentially more **democratic 'pedestrian' language** of the stimulating body, without codified virtuosic 'technique', **may kinaesthetically resonate more deeply with an 'untrained' audience** of the public.

However, I raise concerns to the perceived stability of these findings by bringing attention to certain social, political, and cultural biases within such research. Firstly, the studies noted in the review of Zardi et al. centre a range of codified movement languages, including classical ballet, capoeira, Indian Bharatanatyam,

and contemporary dance. As diverse a range of movement practices they may be, the studies privilege set 'performative techniques' and thus fail to consider the potential neural resonance and kinaesthetic empathy for observing somatic embodiments of dance. Somatic traditions, such as contact improvisation, move 'from within' the dancer in response to their immediate environment, rather than in relation to external, predetermined structure, and therefore present more relevance to our discourse on stimulating. Yet, due to the absence of neuroscientific research into the audience-spectator kinaesthetic rapport when watching somatic dance, there is a lack of empirical investigation concerning stimulating's ability to incite an 'embodied simulation' in observers³⁴.

Dance as Innate Human Behaviour for Social, Cognitive and Neurobiological Benefit

The emerging discourse of the **neuro-biobehavioural science of dance** presents empirical rationale for the value and function of an aesthetic of the stimulating dancing body. Through a review of neuroscientific and biobehavioural evidence, Christensen et al. (2017) argue **dance as an innate human behaviour of social, cognitive, and neurobiological benefit, for both dancing bodies and their observers**. This viewpoint transcends dance as for 'experts only' and locates its purpose as **'an external system of autoregulation that aids the maintenance of**

³⁴ I seek to highlight a probable absence of neurodivergent representation within the participant pools of the studies, as those with neurodivergent diagnoses are likely to be omitted from the inclusion criteria to keep the participant pool controlled and 'fair'. By doing so, studies are foundationally based on a neuronormative standpoint – they present as objective, empirical findings in relation to 'the role of sensorimotor mechanisms in the execution and observation of movements' (Zardi et. al, 2021:11) but likely fail to include – or even acknowledge – neurodiversity and the infinite variation of neurocognitive functioning within our species. In the attempt for a 'fair test', such neuroscientific research excludes neurodivergence and further centres the assumption of neurotypicality as 'normal', glossing over the experience of neurodivergent people. Considering as both dancing and stimulating are of a sensori-motor basis, investigations into the neural resonance and impact of neurodivergent audiences watching dance could provide interesting results.

psychobiological and mental health' (2017:9). This decentres the aesthetic trends of 'beauty, bliss, and sublime perfection' (2017:21) of Western dance tradition – a legacy of the white, European upper-classes. Instead, Christensen et al. present a framework of six primary functions and positive experiences of dance connected to human neurophysiological mechanisms. **Functions of dance as a) inducing flow, b) an emotional experience, c) communication and d) social cohesion** are mostly relevant to the potential value of an aesthetic of dance through the live stimulating body.

Christensen et. al. reports **dancing, or watching dance, can enable a state of flow**³⁵; focusing the mind and biological systems of the body in **one 'singular coherent state' through 'one singular activity'** (2017:16). From a biobehavioural standpoint, this flow-state induced by dance is **'beneficial after episodes of sensorial overstimulation, information overload, [and] stress'** (ibid) with states of pleasure and happiness occurring in result of 'the reestablishment of biochemical imbalances caused ... by stressful episodes' (2017:17). **Through flow, dance fulfils a stimulating function** – it is an act of self-stimulation that focuses and regulates the inner landscape following triggers, bringing the bodymind into balance. The similarities between dancing and stimulating can also be found in Christensen et. al.'s function of **dance as a basic emotional experience**. They suggest **dancing, or watching dance, may be a biological need** for 'particular biochemical agents (e.g. hormones or neurotransmitters) whose release/uptake is triggered by particular emotional experiences' (ibid) – dance is **a means to emotionally balance oneself**. Positive emotional states for biochemical benefit are also reported in **dance's ability to stimulate and surprise to boost mood and relieve stress** by enabling a state of relaxation.

³⁵ I dive into flow with more detail in Chapter 9

The purpose of **dance transcends a sole individual benefit** in Christensen et. al.'s functions of **communication and social cohesion**. Dance allow us to **communicate non-verbally to comprehend the emotions and intentions of others** through 'resonance mechanisms', which assists the development of 'affective sensitivity to interpersonal connection' in the individual (2017:19). A collective benefit of dance continues on a community level, as Christensen et. al discuss the use of **dance to promote social bonding, tackle social problems,** and 'provide a platform to **channel interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts to benefit of the community**' (2017:20). Moving in synchrony with others releases **hormones of social attachment and bonding**, whilst sharing contact and presence with others through dance reportedly induces the 'subjective feeling of **"the pleasure of being together"**' through vasovagal parasympathetic activation (ibid). **Dance is a social process** that creates **collective resonance** to aid the workings of the **community**. This function of **dance transcends the binary of dancer/spectator** and identifies the **collective power and pleasure** of being together through dance.

Dance *is* Stimming, Stimming *is* Dance

By recognising **stimming through the ornamental** and dancing as **an innate human behaviour** of social, cognitive, and neurobiological benefit, I **argue *stimming is dancing, and dancing is stimming***. As innate sensori-motor processes that regulate, soothe, and bring the bodymind into balance, both **dancing and stimming are instances of 'intuitive patternmaking' with social, cognitive, and neurobiological value to human experience**. It is the hangover of Western aesthetic tradition and hegemonic capitalist ideals that socially detaches dance as a collective site of belonging, which produces an individualistic value system that considers dance as product, reducing the body to an aesthetic object and

dance to the sole purpose of communicating 'content' to its spectators. A choreographic standpoint embodying a belief that **dancing is stimulating** brings instability and challenge to such values and **allows a different aesthetic exchange** to emerge. I coin this emergent choreographic aesthetic – wherein stimulating and dancing are recognised as one and the same – as **'stimdance'**.

Stimdance as Neuroqueer Choreography

Stimdance is a choreographic aesthetic for the neurodivergent bodymind. As an intuitive language of the body, it presents an alternative mode of dance performance distinct from codified techniques of aesthetic tradition. Instead, **stimdance moves in relation to the internal or external environment** to produce a **subjective body in process** and a **dance in flux** that emerges **in response to a landscape of 'the now'**. Such an aesthetic confronts fixed neuronormative ideals of what constitutes both dance and dancer, presenting a **democratic representation of dance** that reconnects to human nature; **dance belongs to every bodymind**. Stimdance provides opportunity for those disabled by neuronormativity to dance on their terms and embrace their neurodivergent embodiment as a source of creative and expressive potential.

As a choreographic mode of 'intentionally liberating oneself from the culturally ingrained and enforced performance of neuronormativity', stimdance is inherently neuroqueer (Walker, 2021:155). By attending to one's inner rhythms through dance, **the positive wellbeing and mental state of the dancer becomes central, and potentially shared through a collective experience of 'embodied [stim]ulation' through the 'inner-mimetic' stimmer/spectator relationship**. Through this potential collective 'feeling-into' of stimulating movement, the **binary of mover/observer becomes disrupted** through shared experience, something that

could be pushed further through an invitation of active engagement. Through neuroqueer aesthetic values, certain 'fixed' and 'taken-for-granted' logics of dance performance could be destabilised to bring instability to the traditional neuronormative etiquette of watching dance. Here, there is potential to **decentre the individualistic importance of the dancer** as aesthetic object and spectacle, and further **democratise the dancing body** by granting permission for audiences to stim along and move to rhythm together. A neuroqueer choreographic aesthetic of stimdance has potential to **enable a democratic performance site** where all – artist and audience – have the option to attend to the flow of their embodiment without shame.

Neuroqueering dance performance **as a site of collective stimming** may enable an experience of **social cohesion**, producing **collective feelings of the 'pleasure of being together'** (Christensen et. al, 2017:20). In this age of digitalisation, capitalist individualism, and global pandemic, **social isolation is high**; especially for neurodivergent people³⁶ who may already experience marginalisation due to

³⁶ I wish to state how my identification of 'neurodivergent people' here is inclusive of learning disability. I have observed a trend wherein discussions of 'neurodiversity' exclude learning disabled perspectives, and centre specific neurominorities, such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia. Perhaps because they're the most researched? Perhaps because those neurominorities may possess greater agency to advocate for themselves? Regardless, learning disabled perspectives are often left out of the discussion, despite the fact they are arguably the most marginalised and oppressed by neuronormativity. I have witnessed ableism within the neurodivergent community – *'Yes, I may be neurodivergent, but not like that! This space is for us, not for them'* – that threatens to further exclude and marginalise other neurodivergent people who are in most need of solidarity. My identification of neurodiversity is also inclusive of madness and chronic mental or psychiatric illness, with whom I have also observed a similar distancing from a broader neurodivergent community. Neurodiversity is the infinite variation of all brains and minds, in my view that absolutely encompasses learning disability and psychiatric illness. Of course, all states of being are vastly subjective, distinct from one another, and not at all appropriate to be singularly defined through an all-inclusive term. However, all are similar in that they diverge from an expected societal standard of a 'normal' mind, and all are at risk of marginalisation, oppression, exclusion and hurt by neuronormativity. Such neurodivergences experience different levels of marginalisation. Different neurominorities present very differently and require significantly different considerations in relation to dance. Neurodiversity – and accessible provision for it – can never be 'one size fits all'. (Generally, a red flag for anything that claims its 'completely accessible'). Neurodiversity is infinitely nuanced and demands complex consideration. The

neuronormative societal ideals and practices. Therefore, a neuroqueer **stimdance** approach is particularly valuable to neurodivergent people, who may feel (and genuinely be) **unwelcome, unsafe and unconsidered by cultural venues and experiences**. Such neuroqueer choreography presents opportunity to **bring together disparate demographics** – ‘traditional’ dance audiences and previously excluded neurodivergent people – to form **a cultural meeting space across neurological identities** through dance. This centres a different exchange in aesthetic sense; not one of spectatorship or spectacle but of **mutual experience and empathetic feeling**, a site of **connecting to our own inner landscapes and each other**.

specifics of such considerations for differing neurodivergences in the dance arena requires further, more specified, lines of thinking. Yet, in all complex nuance, one thing is clear. All do deserve to be considered and all have a human right to the access of culture.

6.5 The Paradigm Shift

This chapter signifies the moment of a paradigm shift – the time of change, whereby all became reframed through the neurodiversity paradigm and as a practice of neuroqueering. From the shift emerged a new voice, perspective and agency to my research. This reframing extended more broadly into my life and came at a significant moment of change and challenge. As my life rearranged itself, I embraced change to choose my self acceptance, joy and truth above shame and repression. New potentialities for my identity and lifestyle opened. Here, I enclose a letter to neurodivergent belgian photographer, visual artist, and peer of mine, Anna Püschel. It features in her upcoming book 'Encyclopedia of the Uncertain'³⁷. This chapter is short; it does not signify a quick moment of transformation, but an interstitial juncture – a specific place of fluidity in an ongoing state of change.

³⁷ 'Encyclopedia of the Uncertain' by Anna Püschel is due to be published in March 2024, by The Eriskay Connection: Breda, Netherlands.

A **paradigm shift**, as you may recall, requires that all data be reinterpreted through the lens of a new paradigm. If you reject the fundamental premises of the pathology paradigm, and accept the premises of the neurodiversity paradigm, then it turns out that **you don't have a disorder after all**. And it turns out that maybe **you function exactly as you ought to function**, and you just live in a **society that isn't yet sufficiently enlightened** to effectively accommodate and integrate people who function like you. And that maybe **the troubles in your life have not been the result of any inherent wrongness in you**. And that **your true potential is unknown and is yours to explore**. And that maybe you are, in fact, **a thing of beauty**.

(Walker, 2021:28)

A Letter from The Opening

Dear Anna,

I hope all is circling well in your orbit as we land into Springtime. Are you enjoying the seasonal shift in Ghent? Here in Glasgow, I've very much welcomed the crisp air, sun beams emerging through clouds, and little Snowdrops popping up in the park. New life is in the air, and I am feeling this shift in nature inside of myself too.

I write to you now as a bodymind in a time of emergence. I feel as if I am occupying a persistent state of becoming, with a fluidity of my being that is given shape by my actions in the here and now. Each day I am closer to completing my thesis and as I spend more time absorbed by my research in neuroqueering choreography, I am increasingly embodying its politic. Moving beyond theory,

beyond dance, and deepening into life. Liberating myself from the oppressive constraints of normativity becomes my present agenda and it is fertilising growth, expanding a horizon of possibilities. I am done with aspiring to fit the typical – neuro, mono, hetero – binaries and limits. Such categories bound by hegemonic powers narrow my path and dim my shine, closing me off by how one 'should' be. How one should move, think, express, behave, love, live, be. I have spent too long containing and denying myself, being a bodymind suppressed, tight, small, and rigid, living through constant question and mimicry to perform myself as I believe others want to receive me. I have perfected that role, and now my task is to unlearn it as an act of self-love.

*I transform myself, yet I will not become fixed; I remain fluid. But not like goop – a boundary-less pourable substance that takes the shape of whatever contains it – I take my own shape by my own motion. Back and forth, I release myself – each sway a shift, rooting me into the present and into connection with myself in each moment. I am building a practice of listening inwards, sensing the internal landscape, and making action that honours its truth. As a bodymind thinking, moving, feeling, sensing, and playing from this place, I am in a place of opening. There is vulnerability in the unknown and growing pains to sit with and soothe but living in a way that realises my own needs, expressions, desires, pleasures – it feels **good**.*

I thought you might appreciate hearing these thoughts. I'll leave you with a provocation arising from my work in neuroqueering choreography, although in a different context to your work I'd be curious if it resonates with you at all.

A Manifesto for Neuroqueer Unmasked Self-Practice

*Create from pleasure, selfhood, joy, and security,
Not from comparison, mimicry, perfectionism, and fear.
Dance and stimming are somatic acts of self-love,
They are vessels for interoceptive sensing.
Listen to internal feelings, thoughts, sensations across the bodymind
and honour them through practice.
Special interests and healthy hyperfixations are pools of creative potential.
Allow the joy they give to fertilise the process; be inspired and unashamed.
Exorcise your thought demons and banish them through dance.
Reclaim and embrace your stigmatised neurodivergent qualities;
Weird, hyper, sensory, clumsy, emotional, intense, sensitive,
out of order, slow, impulsive, repetitive, dreamy, obsessive, in your own
world.
All are tools in the arsenal of your own aesthetic.
Practice acceptance in the face of mistake, mishap, trip, or sudden change,
Deviations from the expected can bring about unexpected truths and
pleasures.
No punishment; obey only wellbeing.
Lie down and close your eyes, alone.
Rest, let things settle,
Have a little cry; process and regulate,
Shake it out and move on.
Be who you are as you are in totality.
Move with what's inside you to take you somewhere else.
Honour the needs of your nervous system.
Trust your own genius,
And let it out.*

Much love, Aby x

7. The Emergence of a Neuroqueer Choreographic Aesthetic

As the vision for a neuroqueer choreographic aesthetic begins to emerge, this chapter turns its attention to choreography itself. It considers how an aesthetic of neuroqueer dance may be ordered to benefit embodiments of both neurodivergent performer and audience. If not following the route of neuronormative choreographic tradition, then what other aesthetic legacies may support the composition of the neurodivergent bodymind in time and space?

Improvisation is Slippery, Fluid and Hard to Capture

Improvisation is always the starting point for my creative process. I have continually used it as a **generative tool for performance**, a means for materiality to emerge through a state of playful exploration in response to stimulus. It is an **enjoyable and responsive process**, whereby I trust myself in the here and now. I am present, playful, and able to make intuitive choices. I feel **myself in flow** and feel 'at my best' in performance. Improvisation is fun, being bound to the present moment – and not predetermined, linear structure – can bring me **pleasure** and enact a **sense of power** in myself.

However, like stimming, I often experience improvisation as an 'efflorescence of energy that cannot be captured' (Yuill, 2021). Using it as a process to generate

choreography requires said choreography to be revised and reproduced outwith the moment of improvisation. This is something I struggle with. Of course, consciously revisiting material that emerged unconsciously will naturally arise a challenge. However, as a neurodivergent bodymind with a **slippery working memory** – the ability to hold information in the short-term to effectively ‘work with’ it now – I find it significantly hard to reembody and reorganise my own bodily materiality, even if it emerged effortlessly a short moment before. **Retracing my own steps requires an active relearning of previously intuitive patterning**, and I often fail to grasp it. I use video or graphic documentation to capture ephemeral improvisation, producing a record that signifies whatever unfolded to assist with recall. However, in doing so, more challenges occur. In referring to external documents in attempt to internally transpose their materiality, the performance content becomes removed from the body and requires cognitive processing. It requires a high level of mental energy to observe my own flowing embodiment, analytically break it down, and rebuild it block by block. I don’t enjoy it, and I rarely achieve it. Instead of **the positive psychological experience** through which the choreographic content initially emerged, attempting to reembody it **becomes a negative experience**.

For me, **improvisation is slippery** – it emerges fluid and in flow – but is **difficult to wrangle and grasp for purposes of reproduction**. Attempting to ‘set’ improvisation requires it to become choreographically sequenced, wherein the **focus shifts from a ‘felt’ and ‘in-flux’ doing to a ‘fixed’ doing of ‘thought’**. The disconnection between the pleasure of emergence and the frustration of recollection **triggers an emotional response** in me, and consequential thoughts that lead me to become **removed from my body and ‘in my head’**. Attempting **exact reperformance of improvised material maintains the neuronormative tradition of choreography** as sequenced, linear, and set products of dance. Such a process reproduces my prior experiences in neuronormative dance

environments, whereby my freedom of embodiment is stunted, and I become physically and psychologically tense, self-conscious, and in stress. The pain and grief of experiences past resurface and present a psychophysical barrier to dancing in the present moment.

Choreography as Disabling Arbitrary Architecture

By doing so, I reduce my own dance to – what I have coined as – **'arbitrary architecture'**. Arbitrary architecture describes the experience of choreography as an inaccessible construction. For when one cannot attain it in the body, its compositional structure becomes a **system without reason**. Without the privilege of acquisition, such choreography becomes a **non-sensical, meaningless, and pointless vessel** that fails to do its job and produce dancing at all. As a neurodivergent bodymind often in environments that dance to the tempo of neuronormative standards of processing and learning, I know full well the experience of choreography as arbitrary architecture. After all these years, it still greatly frustrates me that I do not get the privilege and pleasure of flowing through sequences of dance. **It is not because I am not capable**, it is because **there is not the resources, knowledge, or patience to accommodate me** in those environments.

When encountering new choreographic material, most people will experience it as arbitrary architecture to begin with. It takes time to navigate and build a familiar pathway through movement, and learning can be frustrating. Yet, as a neurodivergent bodymind, **I reside more permanently in the sticky arbitrariness**; outside of equal opportunity to access flow in the sequence. With such arbitrary architecture, **my experience is not really of dancing** – it is of skimming the surface; stumbling through – I do not get the satisfaction of exercising my

potential through movement. Without the means to fully embody new choreographic patterns, I am not given equal opportunity to form new neural pathways that could, ironically, strengthen my ability to process material in future. **I don't receive such embodied tools** to take into my own practice. The neurodivergent experience of **choreography as arbitrary architecture is exclusive and disabling**. Didactic choreography taught to neuronormative expectations disables the neurodivergent bodymind and forms an inequitable experience.

Experiencing choreography as **arbitrary architecture has negative psychological impact**. Failing to meet the standard and **being so visibly 'out of order' is frustrating, exhausting, and embarrassing**. In the past, these feelings create behaviour that seeks to solve the 'problem' through what I can control – my own effort. Again, I overextend myself with a **'must-try-harder' attitude which escalates the problem** when I am still unable to keep up. This negative state of consciousness then often bubbles up into an emotional meltdown, resulting in a **fundamental need to withdraw from participation**. During a training intensive with Candoco Dance Company, in the middle of a **meltdown** by the side of the dancefloor, I cry as I write:

I follow but **it doesn't stick**. It feels as if I am trying to hold something, **gripping tightly** with all five fingers ... gripping as hard as I can to hold on - giving it **all my energy**, a clenched fist that shakes and is red with white knuckles, but I open my eyes and my hand and **there is nothing there**. Just the imprint of my own tight grasp and a **sadness that feels deep** and hollow. And then there's **tears** and I have a **desire to withdraw** and **bury that feeling** even further (Researcher's Journal, 2019)

By attempting to form improvisation into set choreography, **I reproduce and resurface the disabling experience of arbitrary architecture** through my own practice.

Capturing Stimdance

As aforementioned, a strategy of neuroqueer choreography seeks to **resist the reproduction of neuronormative limitations and liberate the neurodivergent bodymind** from their constraints. An aesthetic of stimdance emerges, as a self-stimulating choreography of intuitive patternmaking that assists bodymind equilibrium. **The idea of 'set' choreographies of stimdance is inherently at odds with the functionality of stimming.** As 'a doing of here' (Yuill, 2021), stimming is inherently un-fixed. It is a process that responds to the fluid internal and/or external sensory landscape with a regulating and grounding effect. As Yuill states, it is an energy, an act, that cannot be captured. **An attempt to objectively hold that energy in a fixed shape transforms it to something else – a hollow shell of action that, in the reproduction, no longer can enact the transformative bodymind process of stimming** itself. Such an experience is reflected by autistic artist and performer Anne Kjær Jørgensen:

As I stand on the vinyl floor in the studio ... trying to remember how I'm supposed to feel as I do this twisting motion of my spine around my axis, I am overcome with grief... **A grief that comes with knowing that my body will not truly cooperate and get in line with my expectations.** Once I try to remember what I decided is the correct expression of the steps and movements, **it loses all function as stimming – it stops being something I use as a tool** for regulating an unstable nervous system and instead

becomes the exact opposite: **something that discombobulates** (Kjær Jørgensen, 2021:18)

Kjær Jørgensen's physio-psychological 'grief' voices the emotional consequence of working with – or as it may feel, against – your own non-docile body. She articulates the **pain of losing pleasure and finding sorrow in the same movement**, transformed simply by an attempt to 'order' and reproduce it. Doing so puts physical shape *on* to the body, rather than it being *of* the body as it initially emerged. This consequentially creates a **'correct' expression** of its bodily arrangement, subsequently **creating ways to be 'wrong'**. This systematizes the body and requires one to be correctly 'in line' with the decided sequence or movement. What initially emerged as an **organic impulse** in dialogue with the bodymind then **becomes a removed, ordered systematic language** to obey, leaving little – or no – room to address one's needs in the moment. As Kjær Jørgensen articulates, attempting to choreographically capture stim movement diminishes any function of stimulating – it neither allows for embodied flow or regulates the self, and may do more harm than good. **Can stimdance then ever become choreography?**

Beyond Choreography as an Apparatus of Capture

This question raises concerns regarding the nature of choreography itself. Lepecki articulates **choreography beyond modes** of bodily technique, discipline, composition, register or archive **to 'make dance stay around'** (2007:120), and instead situates it as an **'apparatus of capture'**. By applying Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of 'apparatus' to choreography, Lepecki locates it as a **'mechanism that simultaneously distributes and organises dance's relationship to perception and signification'** (2007:120). However, **such a system of parts is not**

neutral, as Lepecki illustrates from a Foucauldian perspective that an apparatus 'foregrounds perception as **always tied to modes of power**' which determine the visibility or significance of things (ibid). Thus, **to realise choreography as an apparatus is to capture dance within the limits and boundaries of hegemonic powers**; to work within the dominant modes of 'aesthetically perceiving and theoretically accounting for dance's evolutions in time' (ibid).

Such discourse is expanded by Ramsay Burt as he examines **apparatuses of our contemporary neo-liberal capitalist context** – which commodify human relationships and centre individualism – which dancers fall target of. Burt reviews a selection of works by **choreographers that avoid capture** by the apparatuses operating in cultural institutions that sustain normative, dominant ideologies. The reviewed works – Nicola Conibere's *Assembly*, Katy Coe's *(To) Constantly Vent*, and Alexandrina Helmsley and Jamila Johnson-Small's *Voodoo* – resist aesthetic norms but also **'rethink the spaces of performance of social relations'** by **'radically reconfiguring'** the performance space and the audience-performer relationship (2018:100).

Therefore, questioning how **stimming** can become choreography raises considerations beyond to how simply to make it 'stay around'. We must consider the apparatuses, and consequential social relations, operating within the dance performance space. Burt discusses how the **normative performance space** is organised and **the consequential power dynamics at play**, namely the **social relations** as produced by the proscenium stage. Such configuration produces **Lefebvre's notion of a 'logic of visualisation'**; a critical distance between performance and audience that **'establishes detached, individualistic spectatorship'** and **prioritises visual perception** above other forms of sensorial engagement (2018:101). Burt acknowledges Lefebvre's relating of this logic to cultural hegemony, and **the 'naturalised' dominance of a social group**.

I argue the **normative dance performance space is a site of cultural hegemonic neuronormativity**. Such an environment is of **dominant neurotypical spectatorship**, whereby the social etiquette fails to consider the equitable participation of neurodivergent audiences. The **'right to see without the distraction** of being physically affected by or affecting others' (ibid) **assumes a passive and uniform stillness, silence, and a shared singular focus** of spectators, which is at odds with the nature of some neurodivergent embodiments. It **neglects to value and utilise other senses of perception** for experiencing dance, and ultimately fails to account for the natural complexity of differing human needs and ways of being. Such an individualistic dynamic within sites of dance performance effaces modes of natural human embodiment and **denies divergent engagement**, and furthermore detaches from a fundamental quality of an audience itself, as a group of people communing in a shared space for a shared purpose – all of whom have a right to access culture.

'Disordering' the Dance Performance Space

Thus, considerations of a neuroqueer choreographic aesthetic must address the liberation of neurodivergent embodiment beyond concerns of 'ordering' a dancer's stimming. **An alternative choreography of social and spatial relations is needed to 'disorder' the normative dance performance space** and evade capture of the dominant neuronormative apparatuses at play. This **radical reconfiguration** becomes a 'strategy of resistance ... adopted by those who are conscious that their interests are not taken into account' (ibid), where unmasked neurodivergent embodiment becomes a central social concern.

By **decentring** the traditional logic of **visualisation** – and the consequential **individualised passive detachment** to the work and each other – new relations of perceiving dance are open to audiences beyond sight and sound. Such active spectatorship enables **new possibilities for engagement**, inviting choreographic potential through the **audiences' sensing of their own touch, alongside their senses of movement and position (proprioception), and balance and gravity (vestibular)**. **Stimdance then becomes** something not exclusively accessible to the realm of performer, but is **open to audiences as active, sensorial engagement with the work; thus, destabilising the audience/performer binary**. The traditional role of 'viewer' becomes 'doer' through expressive activity and agency in the dance space, reforming the power dynamic inherent in the binary dancer/spectator relationship to bring visibility and significance to the audience's unique presence.

Such disordering raises concerns to the meaning of 'dance performance'. Is such audience/performer exchange of **aesthetic or social value**? How does such work remain a 'piece of dance' and not a workshop, a dance party, or a playspace? Are we talking about an aesthetic product or a cultural process? As with the nature of queerness, I find antagonistic value in the instable and fluid questioning that this proposition occupies between such binary determinations. In the face of reductionism, I **favour abundance and multiplicity** in my imagining of a neuroqueer choreographic aesthetic. It can be *both* **aesthetic and social, performance and playspace, product and process**. In the straddling of such dichotomic understandings, new doings can emerge that resist apparatuses of neuronormative capitalism. Aesthetic experiences may be created that recognise dance as a universal sensori-motor process of human nature that transcends Western aesthetic tradition and belongs to all bodyminds. A neuroqueer choreographic aesthetic honours natural human neurodiversity and recognises

the valuable presence of neurodivergent embodiment to foster collective togetherness over individualism in the dance cultural space.

Constructing a Neuroqueer Niche

A neuroqueer choreographic aesthetic is a niche environment for dance that supports the neurodivergent embodiment of both performer and spectator. Through a method of stimdance, a neurodivergent bodily language of in-flux, non-linear, self-regulating movement emerges to empower the performer. Whereas **other modes of sensing** through experiencing performance **are opened for audiences**, enabling **an increased collective experience** in the dance performance space. The vision for this niche distinctly and radically diverges from the neuronormative canon. So, **what other aesthetic legacies can assist the formation of this neuroqueer niche?** Where do we start for grounding?

Aesthetic Legacies to Support Neuroqueer Choreography

A. Postmodern Dance

The **democratic agenda** and **'anti-dance' aesthetic** of Postmodern Dance is of significance. The movement radically upturned notions of what dance could be through purposeful **violations of classical convention**, and thus provides groundwork for an aesthetic of the non-docile, sensorial, in-flux dancing stimulating body. By **transgressing technical skill, elegance, beauty, and spectacle** – alongside the notion of dance as a 'product' for performance only by elite trained bodies – postmodernist choreographers present **dance as a human act, belonging to every *body***. The postmodern aesthetic evokes **a multidisciplinary sensibility**, extending the dancing body across landscapes of voice, text, image,

and object, whilst **deskilling dance** through minimalism, everyday movement, and task-based action, presenting a refusal 'to be seduced by mere skill' (Banes, 1979:17).

This '**anti-illusionist**' position locates aesthetic pleasure through baring the 'natural' underlying form of the dance; its system, structure and 'imperfect' bodily materiality that comprises actions of '**casual activity**' with 'rough edges [that] takes exactly the length of time it might take outside the theatre' (ibid). This sensibility of postmodern dance can extend to include stimming embodiment, as 'doing[s] of here' and now (Yuill, 2021), as an everyday movement language of the body in process, unfolding and taking form across the senses. Postmodern choreographic **methods such as improvisation, use and/or manipulation of objects, repetition, tasks, games, and relaxed time structures** (Banes, 1979:17) could facilitate neuroqueer practice, as such devices decentre linearity, imitation, and reproduction, thus potentially enabling possibilities to relax normative, dominant modes of dance presentation to aid the non-linear, sensorial, playful approach of stimming dancing.

More specifically, Deborah Hay's philosophy of **dance as acts of consciousness** may offer an important legacy to build on. As **structures that 'alternate between inner and outer sensing'** (Banes, 1979:114), Hay's *Circle Dances* focus on **the physical sensation and awareness** of the dancer to explore their consciousness of attention, perception, and social experience, through **scores that foster energetic connection and shared awareness** of the group performing them. As accessible and simple instruction taking place in a relaxed atmosphere, such scores are not made for observation – but **are for *doing***, without self-consciousness, **with the aim of *feeling good***. Heavily influenced by Tai Chi and Taoist philosophic values of '**process, not the product; the passage, not the path; the motion, not the positions**' (1979:120), the choreography's significance unfolds

inside of the experience of its pattern, not through external observation of it. Hay's ritualistic *Circle Dances* incite an almost transcendental experience through the realisation, **rhythm and repetition of simple movements**, as 'one is lifted into timeless easy flow ... [that] **mesmerizes and relaxes the body** ... transforming experiences of time and perception' (1979:123), this in turn creates an experience of social cohesion through a shared process of 'increased awareness, of deepening consciousness, [which] knits the group together' (ibid).

As an aesthetic that centres the positive psychophysical experience of the dancer through a relaxed embodied process, Hay's legacy supports a neuroqueer agenda of dance. By realising dance's impact on consciousness, an aesthetic of *bodymind* experience is produced – a form that transgresses dualistic paradigms to centre the transcendental potentials for positive shifts across bodymind and social relations. The influence of the Tao concept of '*wu-wei*' – of **letting go, not doing** – in Hay's work produces **dance** not as a vehicle for doing, but **as a mode of being**. As there is no 'correct' way of performing a *Circle Dance*, there is consequently no 'correct' way of being. Such a philosophy could be adapted through a neuroqueer aesthetic to incite embodied unmasking through the 'casual activity' (1979:17) of stimdance. Building on Hay's arrangements of everyday movement realised, repeated and in rhythm through active invitations of stimulating, a focus that negotiates inner and outer sensation could be fostered to 'let go' and 'not do' neuronormative performance to achieve greater interoceptive awareness that *feels good* in the moment, nurturing a stronger connection to self and each other.

B. Performance Art

The legacy of Performance Art offers a strong aesthetic rationale for a neuroqueer choreography. As art comprised of **bodily actions taking place in a**

particular timeframe and space for the spectatorship of a live audience, such works hold **the live presence and real activity of the artist** at their core, creating an ephemeral event and experience between artist and spectator. Rather than producing a fixed representational aesthetic artefact, performance artists of the 1960s onwards blur the lines between art and reality through **acts that cannot exist**, or be reproduced, **independently from the artist themselves**: a challenge to the commercialisation of art itself. In this regard, the live stimulating body – its transformations, evanescent flow, and ultimate presence in the rhythms of the now – forms the aesthetic experience. Through a performance art lens, genuinely functional acts of **stimming could be aesthetically positioned without capture** of its 'efflorescence of energy' (Yuill, 2021), but could be given space and duration **to emerge as an embodied event**, enabling an audience to bear witness to stimulating as a homeostatic act unfolding in one's bodymind reality.

Such an unfolding presents a neurodivergent corporeality in process, bringing forth an ephemeral 'doing' of energy and presence. Through the dancer's phenomenological experience of **stimming as a 'state of sensory conviviality'** (Yuill, 2021), **a source of energy and power (or 'stream of magic')** may emanate **from the performer to command space**, hold attention and incite an inner-sensation for spectating audiences, through an ability defined by Fischer-Lichte as a **'strong concept of presence'** (2008:96). Through the genuine manifestation – not representation – of stimulating *hit et nuc*³⁸, its 'pure aesthetic joy' and efflorescent energy (Yuill, 2021) becomes a force of the neurodivergent performer; a 'special presence' that **yields a physical display of consciousness**. Such a force empowers the stimulating body to transgress neuronormative understandings of it as a useless waste of energy – **it isn't what it can produce that gives it its power, it's the vibrant charge of the act itself**.

³⁸ Latin for 'here and now'

Fischer-Lichte agrees with Lehmann's claim that 'presence is an 'untimely' process of consciousness' (2008:98), thus collapsing the mind-body dualistic paradigm. Stimdance brings forth the energy of neurodivergent corporeality and consciousness through a 'magic' presence of an embodied mind; a bodymind in a state of becoming. **Fischer-Lichte claims a reciprocal effect for the audience** witnessing such a presence, as they too experience themselves as an 'embodied mind in a constant process of becoming' **through sensing the performer's 'circulating energy as a transformative and vital energy'**, stating such a process as the 'radical concept of presence' (2008:99). In this regard, stimdance is positioned as **a radical choreographic act that presents a radical presence**. The aesthetic legacy of performance art may locate live stimulating embodiment as a site for energetic, transformative exchange between the force of a stimdancing bodymind and their embodied spectators, in an event of here and now.

C. Somatic Practice

The **body-mind integrated sensibility of somatic practice** could benefit neuroqueer choreographic strategy, through applying its principles outside of a therapeutic context and into stimdance performance. Hanna contends there **are two ways to view a human, from outside in – the *body* as external shape, or inside out – the feelings, movements, intentions of the *soma*, the living body** (1988:19). Traditional performative techniques of dance primarily concern the 'outside in' approach in the presentation of externalised bodies as objects, moulded by technical codifications for consumption from the outside gaze. Whereas a somatic approach attends to bodies sensing from the inside out, as **'self-sensing, self-moving' and self-aware** (Hanna, 1988:20) subjects as well as

objects; humans are somas who can **change themselves through sensing, awareness, and movement.**

From this perspective, **stimdance presents a soma in action:** a living body with agency to self-regulate, self-stimulate, and self-sense, open to change through performance. Akin to **stimming, somatic practice manifests awareness across sites of the internal body (interoception), the external environment (exteroception) and movement in space (proprioception)** (Meehan and Carter, 2021:1). The stimdancer as soma becomes **a sensory seeking body accessing a 'stimstate'**; able to *feel* through tactile engagement (with self, environment, objects, perhaps other somas) to produce 'sensory information used by the mind to assemble an accurate image of the body and to regulate its activities' (Juhan, 1987:xxv). Thus, presenting a performance mode of **stimming** that maintains its function as a self-regulatory action that incites a calming feedback loop (Kapp et al. 2019: 1788), and composes the stimdancing body by deepening inwards, rather than projecting outwards. The **choreography becomes a dance of consciousness** between both inner and outer experience, formed across bodymind perception and relation between fixed capacities of the moment – the objects, the environment, the physical faculties of the body – and the fluid, responsive, stimulating soma in unfolding sensorial dialogue.

The **stimdancing soma occupies a state of becoming;** an embodied site for potential personal transformation, healing, and growth that can actively aid as a physical practice of unmasking. Here, there is **potential for an unmasking that extends beyond concerns of aesthetic presentation and into personal processes** of self-learning, knowingness, and connection. By internally listening through tactility and sensation, **the neurodivergent bodymind can learn about itself** in the way we 'learn about any other object, through feeling it' (Juhan, 1987:xxvii). If bodywork is a 'kind of sensorimotor education' that 'carefully

generates flow of sensory information to the mind of the client' (Juhan, 1987:xxix), then stimdance could assist as a site of sensori-motor self-education; an autodidactic approach to movement, guided by the sensorial impulses of one's own neurodivergent bodymind. This presents **a dance practice of feeling and sensing, not thinking or following**; an ongoing self-practice of **nurturing, attuning, and connecting to one's inner stirrings to develop greater interoceptive awareness, expansive self-expression, and self-acceptance**. Such practice promises significant benefit for the personal and professional wellbeing of the stimdancer, as a means to reshape themselves outside of assimilation to the neuronormative canon that 'threaten[s] to engulf [them] because of [their] unwitting compliance' (Juhan, 1987:xxxi).

A neuroqueer approach of somatic stimdancing is an act of unmasking, where performance can become 'a radical act of self-love' (Price, 2022:11). Guided by senses of proprioception, interoception, and exteroception, the dancer's true inner experience, perceptions and sensorial pleasure can conduct the performance, empowering stimming as a self-regulatory act through an embodied stim-state of flow that locates sensory joy and sensorimotor play in the moment. This liberates from the stress and forms of neuronormative expectation and centres the wellbeing and growth of the dancer, enabling performance to emerge as an act of self-care, a doing of self-knowing, and a turn of becoming anew.

D. Art Brut

Recognised as **Outsider Art** within the English-speaking context, *Art Brut (Raw Art)*³⁹ was the term originated by French artist Jean Dubuffet. **External to the dominant mainstream culture and norms** of aesthetic tradition, Art Brut has historical roots in the practice of **neurodivergent, learning disabled and mentally ill artists**. It originated through collections of artworks created by patients in psychiatric clinical contexts. However, the aesthetic extends beyond that environment to include art produced by children, incarcerated persons, and others occupying societal margins.

Self-taught, untrained, and individually distinct, the work of Art Brut Artists occurs from strong creative impulse as 'an imperative out of their 'inner selves'' (Rhodes, 2000:9); formed **without mimicry of artistic tradition** or fashion to produce a diverse aesthetic through a 'raw, unpremeditated nature' (ibid). This evokes – what psychiatrist and art historian Prinzhorn defines as – *Fremdheitsgefühl*, **a sense of strangeness** (cited in Cardinal, 2009:1459). Neuroqueer choreography could find solace in such a sense, as a dance agenda that seeks to subvert dominant neuronormative practice to reclaim and express 'one's uniquely weird potentials' (Walker, 2021:162). Furthermore, the legacy of Art Brut may serve the neurodivergent dancer – excluded from avenues of mainstream practice and technical training – to **actively step away from the cultural conditioning of the canon**, by accepting their outsider positionality to discover its creative potential.

Cardinal discusses the work of autistic artists in tandem with Outsider Art appreciation, noting similarity in their **styles of expression that deviate from the norm**, 'running free of the communicative conventions to which we are

³⁹In 1972, Roger Cardinal brought Art Brut to English speaking audiences coining it as 'Outsider Art'. Dubuffet disliked the term, critical of labelling anyone as an 'outsider'. Since it has been critiqued as exclusionary and reductive, and is falling out of usage (Flint, 2024)

accustomed' (2009:1461). He notes aesthetic qualities arising from art of such divergence, namely an underlying intention to convey **a vivid inner experience; a private world** expressed through the 'bustling dynamism and coherence of a visual (and perhaps even visionary) system, orchestrated by the individual performer' (2009:1464). Cardinal articulates an Outsider autistic aesthetic that emerges as a 'projection from within... through [an] autistic window' (2009:1465); an expression of an internal autistic worldview with a 'palpable zestfulness... **a physical and emotional energy made visible**' (2009:1463). Therefore, conjuring a sensibility comparative to expressive qualities of the stimming body, as a physical manifestation of inner experience through embodied projections of energy and consciousness that subsequentially forms a 'doing' of neurodivergent lived experience: the internal, private world taking form through creative action. As an untrained, self-generated, and unconditioned physical language stemming from internal impulse, one could argue **stimming as *Dance Brut*** – embodiment 'uncooked' by mainstream dance culture; raw form that emanates 'directly from the psyche... touched by a raw nerve' (Maizels, 2015:33).

The invoking of **alternative worlds** remains a feature of Outsider Art. As a **transcendence** of the artist's harsh realities that extends beyond mere escapism, artists react 'not so much to external forces as to **an inner imperative ... [as] other worlds are not so much invented as discovered**' (Rhodes, 2000:104). Through discovering alternative worlds, **alternative logics and relations can occur** that serve the neurodivergent artist and produce means to 'savour the **extreme experience of otherness**, in the form of a seductive exoticism that produces an **inarticulate yet intense pleasure**' (Cardinal, 2009:1466).

Locating dance performance within a constructed alternative, neuroqueer imaginative world could offer **a site to transcend neuronormative aesthetic tradition** and cultural etiquette, and seduce audiences **through an empowered,**

pleasurable presentation of the otherness of neuroqueer embodiment. The conjuring of neurodivergent-centred fictional realities through performance is already in play. A notable example in a dance context being *Dadderrs* by Frauke Requardt and Daniel Oliver which takes place in *The Meadowdrome*, a 'fantastical escapist world ... created in response to [their] experiences as neurodivergent lovers, parents, and weirdo performance makers' (Tramway, 2022). Through an alternative realm, Requardt and Oliver devise an alternative site and logic for dance that defies canonistic ideals, embraces the pleasure of neurodivergent weirdness, and makes space where 'clunky (mis)understandings of bodies and actions can be discussed, explored and ultimately celebrated through ritualisation and play' (ibid).



Figure 6. *Dadderrs* by Frauke Requardt and Daniel Oliver. Image by Zoe Manders

However, as *Dadderrs* is created by experienced artists for presentation in a professional cultural context, it is questionable if such work can be considered Outsider Art. Dubuffet's term *Neuve Invention (Fresh Invention)* is more appropriate, as a categorisation of artwork that occupies the borderline

between Art Brut and the mainstream (Rhodes, 2000:14). Therefore, an aesthetic of the subversive 'unmasked' practice of neurodivergent dance can be recognised for its *Fresh Invention* within the dance cultural sphere, as a distinct expression of individuality outside of the classical ideal and cultural barriers of the field. Thus, building on the legacy of Art Brut whilst enabling **opportunity to operate *inside* the 'cultural circus of art promotion'** (ibid). A virtue of such *insider* promotion is the means to share with and impact a wider audience. Yet, ***outsider* work that becomes visible to an *insider* public bears risk** for the artist working outside the dominant culture **to become 'tainted by its mores ... without social emancipation for the maker'** (Rhodes, 2000:16). When working in institutional structures, there is **danger of assimilation** to the norm that reduces one's liberation.

Conversely, I put forward the potential for neuroqueer dance to **specifically engage an *outsider* public**, namely neurodivergent audiences who are routinely excluded from cultural spaces due to neuronormative barriers and disabling practices. Through adopting strategies of relaxed performance (more on this soon), I propose **a foundation can be built** for a cultural exchange that centres the needs, capacities, and expressions of non-neuronormative engagement within a dance performance context. In this regard, **a literal alternative reality is stimulated** – one that reimagines how we can be together through dance performance by decentring neuronormative etiquette and ideals.

An inclusive endeavour to bring the *outsider inside* is challenge to the neuronormative status-quo within cultural operations. Although, I do not wish to segregate audiences through prohibiting mainstream audiences from engaging with such work. On the contrary, I think it valuable to invite them into the exchange; **a fluid audience comprised of *innies* and *outies* in a neuroqueer world.** Cardinal's discussion on witnessing the 'inner joy' of autistic Outsider Artists through their work assists my rationale:

Their self-engrossed pleasure in their own mastery can become our **secondary pleasure** as witnesses thereof, and encourage us to attempt further acts of **empathetic response**. These should lead us beyond selfish indulgence, for in due course we will find that aesthetic pleasure has begun to coincide with our poignant engagement with another sensibility, another personality; at which point **art appreciation is revealed not as a peripheral supplement** to human experience but as **a privileged medium of human contact** itself (2009:1466)

A neuroqueer expression of **the pleasure of the stimdancing body** may incite a 'secondary pleasure' in witnesses, enabling an empathetic relation and 'poignant engagement with another sensibility, another personality' (ibid) through live performance; that of unashamed neurodivergent embodiment, **rarely seen, centred, and celebrated in shared public space**. Expectantly, this may be bolstered through the embodiments of neurodivergent audience present, as they are welcomed to respond naturally and indulge in their own unmasked embodiment. In this regard, **by centring *outsider* positionalities** that deviate from neuronormative conventions ***inside* of the cultural dance space, the pleasures of non-neuronormative ways of being can be discovered for mainstream cultural audiences**. Dance appreciation can then be revealed as belonging to everyone, as a form of human contact that can bring us together across our differences.

8. Principle Methods of a Neuroqueer Choreographic Niche

A neuroqueer niche of dance evades capture; it moves from a position of the neuronormative hegemonic apparatuses at play in dance aesthetic tradition and cultural institutions to build radical neurodivergent-centred alternatives. However, by destabilising such governing powers in the dance cultural space, I do not propose a state of absolute disarray, whereby anything goes. For neurodivergent people who need structure and a clear understanding of what is going to happen to feel safe, order and organisation are essential for their secure engagement. Alternative structures, agreements, and methodologies are required to guide and hold neurodivergence safely and successfully in the dance space. This chapter puts forward such methods and strategies found through my practice.

As aforementioned, the construction of a neuroqueer niche is imperative to transgress neuronormative tradition and create a dance environment where neurodivergent embodiment can thrive. This concerns sites of both artistic creation and audience experience – studio environment and performance space – and gives rise to vastly differing concerns to the structures and methods

required to centre neurodivergent embodiment. How is the dance performance space organised to support neurodivergent audience engagement? How does a choreographic process honour differences with sequencing, organisation, and memory for dance to remain fluid and unfixed? How can the 'uncapturable' nature of stimming be held in a live aesthetic presentation?

Assistive Technologies of a Neuroqueer Niche

In my own neuroqueer choreographic practice, I am often both the maker and performer of the dance. From this position, the use of **assistive technologies** can offer value to the construction of a neuroqueer choreographic niche. Tailored to the specific needs of the individual (Armstrong, 2010:19), assistive technologies **are tools that serve as 'twigs in the nest' to enable positive functioning in the niche environment** (2010:20). In the context of dance, **such 'twigs' can manifest as access strategies and choreographic principles.** These technologies give foundation to a neuroqueer choreographic methodology that **constructs a controlled, safe environment** for the neurodivergent bodymind to be present, and loosens neuronormative expectations by bolstering modes of unmasking through dance. Furthermore, such methodologies may **assist to hold the stimming body's presence in performance** through gentle direction and grounding, whilst remaining fluid enough to maintain the functionality of stimming.

Now, I share my strategies found through research. In doing so, I wish to remind you of **the infinite diversity of all bodyminds.** This presentation of a **neuroqueer choreographic methodology is not a fixed or 'how to' proposition.** These are my strategies; useful for my bodymind and applicable to my practice. I speak to any neurodivergent readers here. **You are very welcome to try on these tools** for size, if they work for you – great, make them your own and flourish – if they don't, I

encourage you to consider what the approach of 'your own hand' is (Phillips in Disability Arts Online, 2020). What neuronormative barriers do you need to dismantle to thrive, and what would you need to do that? **What does your own niche look like?** Developing that understanding may take time, experimentation, trial, and error – or it may be clear to you, an extrapolation of what you already know about your needs into the context of making dance. **You are the expert of your own practice**, embodiment, and style – you can guide yourself if you listen inwards.

1. Relaxed Performance and Process

What is Relaxed Performance?

Relaxed Performance (RP) is an inclusive strategy for those who find it difficult to follow the traditional behavioural etiquette for accessing live performance. Originating across contexts of cinema and theatre, a 'relaxed' approach has developed over the last two decades to form environments that welcome audience expression that would typically be seen as disruptive. With roots in access for autistic, neurodivergent and learning-disabled audiences, **RPs loosen the normative social rules of spectatorship to give permission for the natural responses and needs of divergent audiences**, which historically are poorly tolerated in mainstream non-relaxed – or 'up-tight' (Touretteshero, 2016) – performance spaces.

Instead of the codified etiquette of stillness and silence, movement and noise are warmly welcomed as **audiences can vocalise, stand up, walk around, stim freely, and leave to return to the space** as they wish, without judgement. The production may also be **adapted to consider sensory sensitivity** – the house lights

may remain up with lower levels of light and sound, alongside the removal of flashing lights and sudden noises. There may also be **additional resources** offered for the comfort and access of relaxed audiences, including a **chill-out space** to visit when in need of a break, **self-regulation tools** to reduce sensory overwhelm (i.e., ear defenders, stim toys) and **visual information materials** to support familiarity and understanding (i.e., a visual story that outlines the show and what can be expected of their experience).

The principles of RP expand beyond the production into wider concerns of inclusivity and **access across the cultural venue**. There is currently no definitive answer to what objectively constitutes a RP. Leaders in the relaxed method, Touretteshero – a company co-founded by neurodivergent artist, performer, activist, and part-time superhero Jess Thom – **encourage venues to develop their own distinct house-style** of delivery that suits their character, ethos, and brand (Touretteshero, 2016). However, there are key principles of RP that Touretteshero offer to maintain consistency across practice:

1. **A clear explanation** for all audience members about **what a relaxed performance is** when they book.
2. **Pre-show information** that clearly describes the show so that anyone can **make an informed choice** about whether it's something they want to see.
3. **Staff** who take an **inclusive approach** from start to finish.
4. **An introduction at the start** of the show – ideally by one of the actors – **to remind the audience that it's a relaxed performance** and giving anyone who needs to move or be noisy the freedom to do so. Audience members should also be able to move around, leave and return to their seat at any point.

5. Consideration given to **the production's sound and lighting levels**, taking into account sensory sensitivities: for example, strobes or sudden loud noises might be removed.
6. **A clear plan for how any complaints** from audience members will be managed.
7. **A quiet space** outside the auditorium where people can go during the show if they need to.

(Cock et. al, 2019:39-40)

Expanding Relaxed Provision into New Radical Dance

As a relaxed approach recognises and supports natural embodiments of neurodivergence, the rationale for its adoption within a neuroqueer choreographic niche is clear. Such liberation from neuronormative etiquette could enable neurodivergent audiences to access dance performance with safety, acceptance, and care. Yet, **despite significant increases in global delivery of RPs, the provision of relaxed dance performance is severely lacking.** Research shows a strong majority are children's productions aimed at young audiences (54%) or are the family-friendly genre of pantomime (22%), according to a database of global RP as gathered by Ben Fletcher-Watson (2015:68). Productions open to adult audiences, such as musicals (15%) or theatre using adult texts (8%) are reported to be minimal in comparison, as Fletcher-Watson observes **a lack of cultural provision for autistic adults.** The vast genre of dance fails to be reported in these numbers at all, signalling a severe absence of accessible dance work for neurodivergent audiences who would benefit from a relaxed environment.

The data may prove differently if undertaken now. Works by artists such as Freestylers (*Everybody With Me, Always*), Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome

(INCHOATE BUZZ), and Daniel Oliver and Frauke Requardt (*Dadderrs*) are innovative, exciting examples of relaxed dance performances informed by neurodivergence. However, despite these specific instances, **I do not see evidence of a significant shift reflected more broadly in the dance cultural sphere.** Unmistakeably, a gap of cultural provision remains for exciting, innovative, and accessible dance performance specifically aimed at adult neurodivergent audiences, and I believe a neuroqueer agenda presents opportunity to address it and respond by **building on relaxed practice for more radically inclusive potentials** in the dance performance space.



Figure 7. INCHOATE BUZZ by Fernanda Muñoz Newsome. Image by Anne Tetzlaff

There are **two distinct approaches** for RP: 1) as a **'bespoke cultural offer'** (Cinéma Différence, 2020:19) exclusively created for neurodivergent audiences – relaxed from the ground up, 2) as an **'inclusive accessibility scheme'** for a mainstream performance – relaxing a pre-existing production by adaptation (ibid). The former aligns with a strategy of neuroqueering, opening potential to radically rechoreograph the social and aesthetic potentialities in the dance

performance space. Composing dance with a **relaxed agency from the offset** can fertilise all that unfolds along the process, as opposed to a secondary action of 'relaxing' through dilution, adaptation, or removal. Embedding relaxedness as a fundamental choreographic principle **enables dance to emerge that deviates from constraints of neuronormative performance** for audience and performer, thus developing **new terms for engagement and potentialities with form**. Choreographic strategies to 'relax' the experience of performer are discussed later in this chapter. Such strategies seek to **alleviate anxiety in the neurodivergent dancer**, reduce tension about 'getting it wrong', and allow them to **relax into the work, loosening to find pleasure** in the flow of performance.

Neuroqueer choreography may expand relaxed practice to **destabilise the binary relation – and consequential etiquette** - of the audience/performer relationship. If a central viewpoint underpinning a neuroqueer aesthetic is that 'stimming is dancing and relaxed performance warmly welcomes audiences' stimming, then arguably, **it is hypocritical and unfair to limit stimdancing solely to the realm of performer**. Democratising the act of stimdancing encourages **a more fluid dynamic that decentres individualistic spectatorship and fosters collectivity**, whereby movement from audience is not just 'tolerated' and functional (e.g. walking around, leaving the space) but is expressive and communicative, **expanding audience engagement into sensorial stimulation** through embodiment. Such 'disordering' of the traditional relations and etiquette within the professional dance performance space enacts a fundamental neuroqueer principle: to 'transform social and cultural environments to create spaces and communities ... in which [practices of neuroqueering are] permitted, accepted, supported, and encouraged' (Walker, 2021:163).

From Relaxed Performance into Relaxed Process

A neuroqueer niche can **extend relaxedness beyond performance** and across the project's creative and production processes. **A relaxed process seeks to counter capitalist and neuronormative ideals of productivity, efficiency, and individualism** – and their consequential effects of stress, overwork, and rigidity of structure – that may occur when presenting professional creative work. In the past, I have experienced bodymind distress bringing my performances to fruition as a neurodivergent artist. The pressure to juggle the responsibilities and execute all the skills required (i.e. organisation, time management, 'professional' presentation of self, effective communication) to a neuronormative standard has required my upmost masking performance. In these moments, I suppressed my true needs to 'power through' and 'get the job done', always at the expense of my wellbeing. I was unable to address how I felt and action what I needed, leaving me burnt out and mentally unwell. In these working processes of the past, I prioritised the creative product over the wellbeing of myself.

Now, I hold **alternative values to centre neurodivergent wellbeing** across the **processes** of my work. This intention extends beyond me and **is of collective concern**, with consideration to all connected through the work (the creative team) and across the spaces it takes place in (rehearsal studio, company meetings). A neuroqueer niche seeks to create **spaces, working structures and support networks that foster a care-full culture of unmasking**, whereby anyone – regardless of neurodivergence – needs not suffer under the pressures of neuronormative performance.

A. Radical Honesty

Radical honesty⁴⁰ is a term expressed by adrienne may brown in her book, *Pleasure Activism*. In discussing radical love, a practice of loving as political resistance to socialised understandings of 'love' under capitalistic values, brown considers **the lies we are conditioned to engage in that do not voice our true feelings**. She writes:

We have to engage in **an intentional practice of honesty to counter this socialisation**. We need radical honesty – learning to speak from our root systems about how we feel and what we want. **Speak our needs and listen to others'**. The result of this kind of speech is that our lives become **a building block for authentic community** and ultimately **a society that is built around true need and real people**, not ... bullshit norms (2019:62)

Radical honesty is a vital tool for unmasking. As a principle of a relaxed process, fostering a **safe space that practices radical honesty can be an act of resisting socialised norms around thinking, feeling, and being**, that consequentially creates a more secure environment for neurodivergent community. To be honest with others, **we must first be honest with ourselves** – radical honesty requires us to listen inwards, feel our feelings, identify our needs, and then create dialogue that seeks to honour them. **This is a practice of interoception, listening to our internal state and responding by seeking external actions to bring balance**, which can prevent distress and meltdowns. However, a supportive and compassionate working environment is essential for neurodivergent people to feel safe to be vulnerable in sharing their honesty – those with the most power in the room should lead by example. In a relaxed process, **radical honesty allows us to be transparent with how we feel**, both about the creative work at hand and in

⁴⁰ Radical honesty is not 'brutal honesty'. Radical honesty is a practice of sharing connected to love and compassion, it is not a sharing of mindless, hurtful comments under the guise of frankness or transparency.

ourselves collectively as people, as we share space and engage in discourse with compassion.

B. Honouring Needs

It is one thing to be honest about what we need, and it is another for **those needs to be honoured through action**. This is another vital aspect of a **relaxed process which recognises and respects that different people have different needs, and does not assume blanket, universal and neuronormative levels of capacity, ability or need**. Up front transparent communication is required prior to practical engagement to ensure needs can be met within the context of the project. **See Appendix 1** for examples of what honouring needs during a relaxed process may look like in practice.

C. Feeling Good

A relaxed process facilitates **feeling good as much as possible**. This aligns with adrienne may brown's notion of Pleasure Activism, which asserts to 'reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy' (brown, 2019:13). A relaxed process seeks to 'relax' dominant neuronormative ways of doing that subjugate neurodivergent people, making them ultimately 'feel bad'. Centring the pleasure – understood here as 'a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment' (brown, 2019:13) – of neurodivergent people is a doing of activism through a relaxed process. **Encouraging neurodivergent joy is fundamental and offers a rich ground for exploration** – practices of **stimming** and **working with special interests** are two central examples for neurodivergent joy to be creatively generative. Facilitating **openness, respect, and interest** in the neurodivergent joy of individuals doesn't

only create a safe space for their joy to be expressed, but also may **foster sympathetic joy in the collective**, like the Buddhist mindstate of *Mudita* – taking joy in the joy of others (Hernández, 2021). A relaxed environment that values collective joy may bestow greater positive feelings of connection, enjoyment, and happiness within the creative process.

D. Collaboration and Collectivity

A relaxed process recognises **the power of the collective**. Collaboration is essential – for both generative, creative benefit to the work and the social experience of the process. **Human resources** are important to **share the responsibilities of the workload and offer a support structure** to prevent neurodivergent overwhelm and meltdown (see point 4). A relaxed process understands **collaboration and collectivity as principles in a culture of care** – whereby folk are fundamentally responsible for themselves but, through their investment in the process, **share responsibility for each other and their work together**.

A relaxed process is **antithetical to capitalistic value of hyperindividualism** and recognises collaboration as a social process that allows a pleasure of being together, through mutual shared creativity that involves connection and play. When specifically exploring the subject, or embodiments of, neurodiversity in a creative process, **it is important to involve multiple neurodivergent perspectives**, where possible, to manage the risk of reducing the endless potentials of neurodivergent expression or experience into one fixed representation. However, consultation, research, or practical development with a neurodivergent collective must be held ethically and equitably. Honouring the value of neurodivergent collective input to your process is essential – monetary contributions are best

(where possible) or vouchers, if receiving money offers complications to any benefits they are in receipt of.

2. Improvisation / Stimprovisation

Improvisation as a mode of performance, not just an explorative process to generate set choreographic material. Unfolding in the present moment and emerging in response to the now; **improvisation is unfixed enough to facilitate the stimming body** in performance – it's transformations and becomings – without pressure for the performer to remember and 'capture' what occurs. In response to changing inner and outer landscapes, instant choreography emerges then can then fall away, into the next thing without judgement. As a non-linear, non-sequential means of performance discovered through the performer's flow, sensing, and experience, solo improvisation allows for the **distinctive style and presence** of the neurodivergent dance artist to take form, whilst also **being porous** to the unique presence of the audience. Improvisation enables the stimming body to expand its choreography beyond dance or movement and into other sites of sensorial action. **It is, what I coin as, stimprovisation.**

My own style of stimprovisation **extends outside stimdance to explore landscapes of voice** (speech, singing, humming, whistling, breath), **object** (contact, sounding, weight-bearing, manipulation, composition), **persona** (emotions, facial expression, posture, gesture), and **space** (architecture, e.g. floor and walls, acoustics, presence of others). It **builds on my training** in contemporary performance and skills developed through experience with contact improvisation, instant composition, musical theatre, and erotic floorwork (more on that later). It is important to note that the ephemeral, instantaneous, and playful nature of improvisation does not mean it is easy, effortless, and immediately successful.

Skills are needed as both a performer and an improviser; like any artistic practice, experience and practise are essential for improvised performance to unfold successfully and be a safe place to occupy. Plus, doing it alone is very different than in front of an audience. As a creative, physical expression of a bodymind in the moment – with no safety net of a predetermined sequence to follow – **improvisation is inherently vulnerable** as a mode of performance, for both the quality of the work and the performer's state of being.

Wunder claims two major components for **an improviser's 'toolbox': impulse and form** (2006:123). For the stimulating neurodivergent body accessing interoceptive sensing, **the impulse** that 'unbolts the unconscious, that pries open the doorways to fresh ideas and helps find new patterns of physical and vocal behaviour' (ibid) **is likely in abundance**. **Development to observe and attune to one's sensorial impulse is required** for the stimulating performer to listen and enact their sensorial impulses as a creative embodied practice for an external gaze. As Wunder reflects 'the unconscious, intuitive part of the personality must be given the work time needed to reveal itself' (2006:125); **one must develop and confidently occupy their unmasked self to bare their sensorial pleasure** and stimulating embodiment for an audience.

Consequently, improvisation through a stimstate can become a central '**power source**' for the neurodivergent dancer, as **something that 'you like, you enjoy, gives you pleasure**, what turns you on, excites you, a thing that you do easily, something you do unconsciously and frequently, a pattern of physical behaviour, your personal philosophies, personality traits, **anything that empowers you' in performance** (Wunder, 2006:125). With ongoing practice, sub-power sources can emerge as the development of a unique performance aesthetic and choreographic language that complements and empowers one's stimprovisation style. For example, **the materials I choose to work with become my sub-power**

sources through performance. Objects like pom poms and PVC gloves; specific musical 'ear worms'; particular experiential qualities of vocal sounding; all **empower my sensorial engagement** to produce stimming embodiment in an aesthetic language designed **through and for my pleasure**. In this regard, the sub-power sources of sensorial impulse and aspects of the unmasked self can become choreography for one's stimprovisation practice – the **available tools** that arouse the emergence of form.



*Figure 8. Lying alongside some 'sub-power sources' during BFFB2, August 2022.
Image by Thom Scullion.*

But **what shapes that emergent form** with purposeful dramaturgical meaning? What transcends stimpromprovisation from a doing 'for the sake of it' to a choreographic doing with an 'aboutness', with artistic intent and aesthetic concept? **What guides the journey of the stimpromper, so they aren't lost at sea in waves of unending possibility?** In response, I offer a practice of stimprom through **sensory scores to bridge the choreographic gap between predetermined choice and the present moment**; structure and fluidity; roadmap and terra incognita, to hold the flow of the stimpromper with the conscious dramaturgy and composition of the choreographer.

3. Sensory Seeking Scores

Scores traditionally originated as documents of notation composed for musicians to interpret and play through live performance. However, score-based practice expanded to become a tool for composition across artistic disciplines. Visual performance artists of the 1960s adopted the score to **scaffold live action; becoming a practice to loosely structure, direct, and stimulate performance** whilst maintaining its fluid ephemerality. The form that scores can take is broad – such guidelines can take written, visual, or verbal means through description, image, or instruction, with varying levels of detail and information to enact an outcome. As loose directives open for interpretation, **scores enable a multiplicity of possible embodiments and enactments** when 'played' at different times, and potentially by different people, engaging an array of possible results.

As an essential foundation for stimpromprovisation practice, **scores both guide the flow of the stimpromper and ground live action with purposeful choreographic intent.** As fluid, flexible structures, scores maintain stimprom as an embodied process in the here and now, whilst simultaneously presenting a solid

'way in' for it to yield considered, composed creative output. Furthermore, **the multiplicity for interpretation** and usage of score-based practice **invites the distinct individuality of those 'playing' it**, i.e., artistic discipline, sensibility of practice, neurodivergent embodiment, to manifest and empower the unique strengths, 'power-sources' (Wunder, 2006:125), 'radical presence' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:99) and/or 'quirks' of stimprovising performers. Such **boundless possibilities** halt any emerging essentialist presumptions for the aesthetics of stimprovisation; that there is a universal observable essence, form, or identifying quality of practice. Instead, score-based stimprovisation presents a directed mode of performance that nurtures potentialities for creative expression that are as myriad and divergent as the bodyminds playing the score at that time. I propose such practice can be applied to any artistic discipline. However, onward I will discuss my own approach as neuroqueer choreography.

As a compositional meeting place **between predetermined choice and responsive impulsivity** in the present, my score-based stimprovisation practice presents **choreography that unfolds as a process**, occupying the liminal threshold between boundaries of 'set' structure and 'impulsive' interpretation. Such a choice arguably possesses choreographic intent in and of itself, as a purposeful presentation of the stimulating body that conjures phenomenological and political meaning in a dance context. Yet, the scores themselves – what they are composed of and how they are presented – can **layer additional dramaturgical 'aboutness'** to the stimulating body. But how do the scores come into being? What shapes the score? For me, **scores emerge and take form through a developmental process** of practice. This practice has evolved over the duration of my research, through various rehearsal processes to progress the objective of generating a creative outcome. As with the nature of both stimulating and scores, **this practice is not fixed**, finite, or finished. My work with score-based sensory

stimpromisation is an ongoing, shifting process with more many discoveries to be had.

Over a rehearsal process, **I explore and develop states of play** in dialogue with sensory stimulus of my choice. Through play, I listen to and enact my impulses as my chosen co-player stimulates responsive action; **I sense it and it senses me**, forming a playful receptive conversation between myself and another. Through practice, time, and repetition, I excavate and deepen these impulsive dialogues to **generate potentials of relation and form a familiar language of interactivity**. Over invested time and play, this language can become almost habitual, embodied in movement memory for recall without conscious thought – allowing for re-emergence through feeling, not thinking. The **resurfacing dialogue can be observed** through continual practice **to witness, find and note specific interactions of reoccurrence and/or interest**, opening opportunity for more conscious work. These noted dialogues can be **focused, collected, and 'named' through the setting of a score**; either composing a whole score or an aspect of a wider score, made in combination of a few findings. Then, they may be **consciously placed** in relation to each other to compose and score the shape of the whole work with purposeful meaning and choreographic intent. Finally, **the scores are played again** for the purposes of live performance. Thus, the stimpromising performer remains porous, **open to ever expanding possibilities** and remaining in explorative terrain. Sensory seeking scores are unsolidified, elastic, gentle structures that act as a guide – **they are not set in stone**. They can be discarded, forgotten, changed, deepened, and transformed over a creative process or during a performance.

playing → observing → finding → collecting → placing → playing
(exploring → witnessing → naming → setting → relating → exploring)

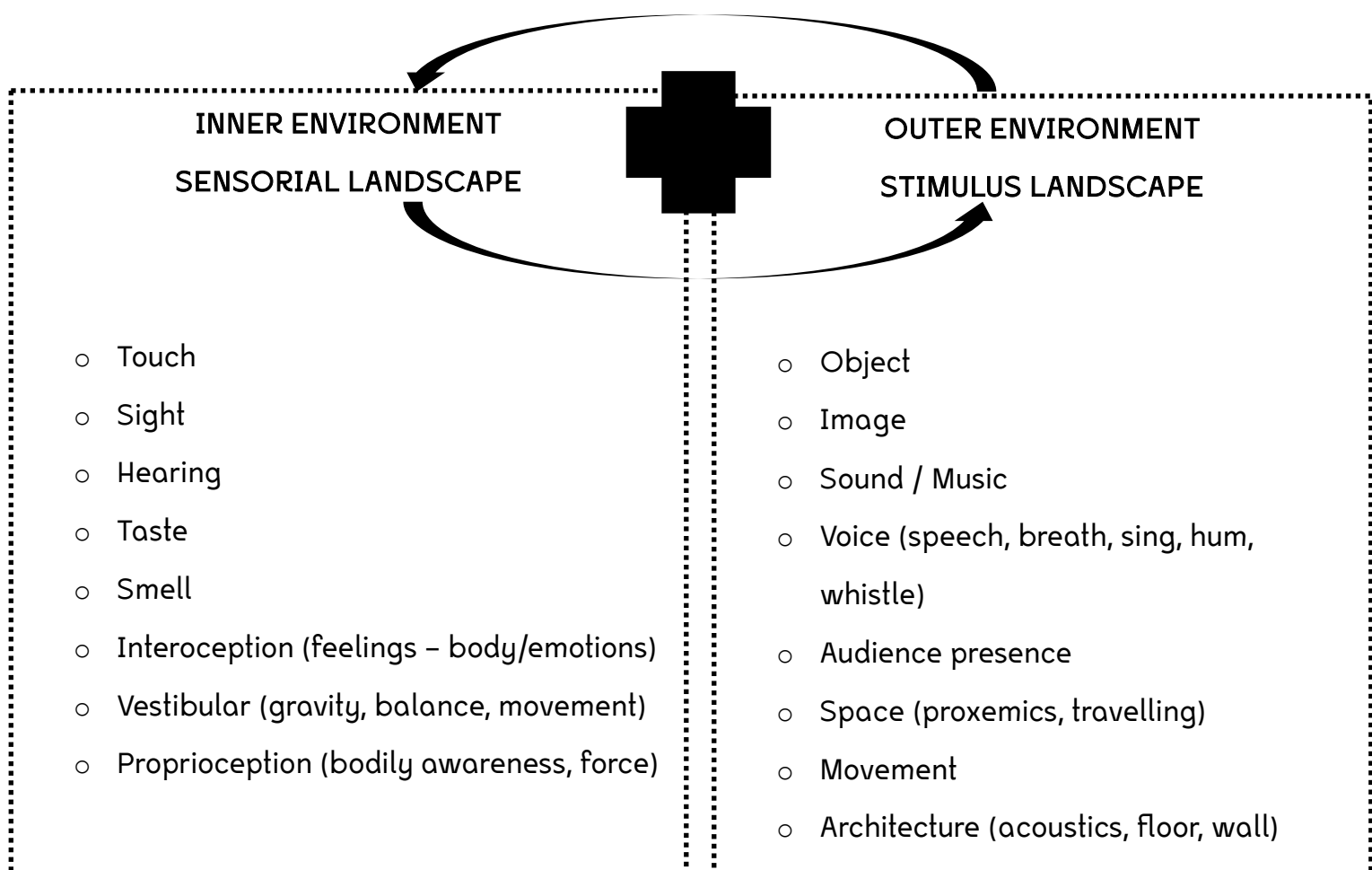
Choreographic intent for the score can be embedded, overlaid, or discovered at different opportunities throughout this process. 'Aboutness' can be rooted from the playing stage, with specific intentions of meaning consciously held and actioned in the sensibility, quality or feeling of exploration – layered within the initial response to sensorial stimulus, haunting the direction of action. Communications of meaning can also be evident through the significance inherent to the chosen stimulus itself. There is potential to either lean into (or go against) such intrinsic significations with the direction of play and formation of score. Aboutness can emerge accidentally through what is discovered in play and is picked up through observation. This can be internally witnessed in, or after, the doing (*that felt like this*) or noted by an outside eye (*it looked like that*). Through finding arising meanings one can consciously work with (or against) for further investigation. Furthermore, 'aboutness' can also occur through placing – what dialogues compose the score and how are the scores composed together? Meaning can be made through relationship, as purposeful layering, juxtaposition, or ordering of scores incites further 'aboutness' through how they 'speak to' each other.

A Collection of Provocations for Neuroqueer Stimprovisation

Playing / Exploring

- Be a sensory seeking body, occupying a stimstate of being.
- Actively embody stimming as a physical process of self-stimulation and/or self-regulation through sensory play.
- Remain purposefully fluid: scores are loose vessels to guide stimming as performative action in the now. They are not for codifying stimming of the past for future 'set' presentation.

- Take your time. Allow enough duration for the bodymind to find and follow flow as it needs and as feels good. There is no need to rush, this is your time.
- Listen and respond to what is inside of yourself: your impulses, feelings, sensations.
- Trust yourself, your intuition and where the flow is taking you. Don't overthink and force outcomes, feel in the body and let it flow without judgement.
- Explore the relation between your inner environment and your external stimulus with sensorial curiosity and pleasure, stimulate action through sensory dialogue.



- Engage in physical dialogue between landscapes to play, explore, discover, question:

- How does it move you?
 - How do you move it?
 - How does it sound?
 - How does it feel?
 - How does it make you feel?
 - How does it look?
 - How can this give you what you need?
- Bring sensory stimulus into the playspace that you are drawn to and/or has meaning for you. These are choreographic choices, be decisive and clear with your intent.
- Your physical environment is also a sensory stimulus, albeit potentially out of your control. Walls, floor, acoustics are open to you. Explore the sensation of your presence in the space, explore your force against it – hold, push, pull, lift, sound to ground an awareness of your body in the here and now.
- In sensorial play and flow, allow repetition and rhythm that may emerge to be a grounding throughline to your activity; an underlying pulse that moves you through, flowing forward.
- Follow, ride out and be immersed in the patterns that develop.
- Embrace loops as a structure within which the end is connected to the beginning, going onward. Yet, keep it generative – be aware of getting stuck in a loop which halts flow and brings stagnation.
- Explore how loops can also become spirals, expanding into new places and deepening for new potentials. Be mindful to whether a spiral creates good or bad feelings – do not follow negative, downward spirals in your investigations, this is not safe.
- Build on your own natural neurodivergent embodied processes through the development of your method.

Observing / Witnessing → Finding / Naming

- Spend time with your sensory stimulus and get to know each other. Build relationships, develop familiarity and depth of understanding between you both through continual playful practice. Find common ground in the language of interaction between you.
- Allow yourself to step out of 'speaking' the language and listen to it, observing what it is 'saying'.
- From the outside, witness interactions that you are drawn to or conjure meaning, note and 'log' them in a way that works for you – naming, drawing, documenting.
- Record them with a level of detail that feels right, ensuring they remain easy to remember and open enough to hold space for interpretation.

Collecting / Setting → Placing / Relating

- Develop scores by playing with combinations of what you have collected or giving specific interactions the space to stand alone.
- Consider and apply intent with your choices – what dramaturgical communication may be evident through this combination? What do you wish to say?
- Scores can be as complex or simple instructions as you wish but must be spacious enough to account for change and evolution, and able to be evoked through the bodymind without too much conscious effort.
- Purposefully place your scores in relation to each other to form the larger score of your performance. Resist 'setting' scores in a strict linear, sequential order to allow for fluidity and responsivity in performance.

- Explore gathering them in distinct pools of play that make sense together dramaturgically, allowing the 'order' of scores to emerge as you flow through it. These pools can be ordered sequentially.

Playing / Exploring

- The performance is a playground; the scores are the 'equipment'.
- To help you recall the score, you can bring them physically into the performance space. This may be utilised creatively as a design choice.
- Play your scores yet be open to new ones developing if the flow takes you there.
- Trust the relation between your stimulating self and the stimulus for things to emerge; specific things can rematerialise but avoid fear motivating you to reperform or 'put on' things from the past.
- Prepare scores as 'outs' or 'ways back in' as a safety net for instances of getting stuck in a loop or experiencing a negative, critical mindset about what you are doing. Such scores that work for me are:
 - 1) Tune into what feels right.
 - 2) Action what you need to regulate yourself.
 - 3) Unmask and be transparent about what you are experiencing – creatively respond to it through action, back into flow.
 - 4) Exorcise the thought – playfully expel the inner critic by banishing it through performance.

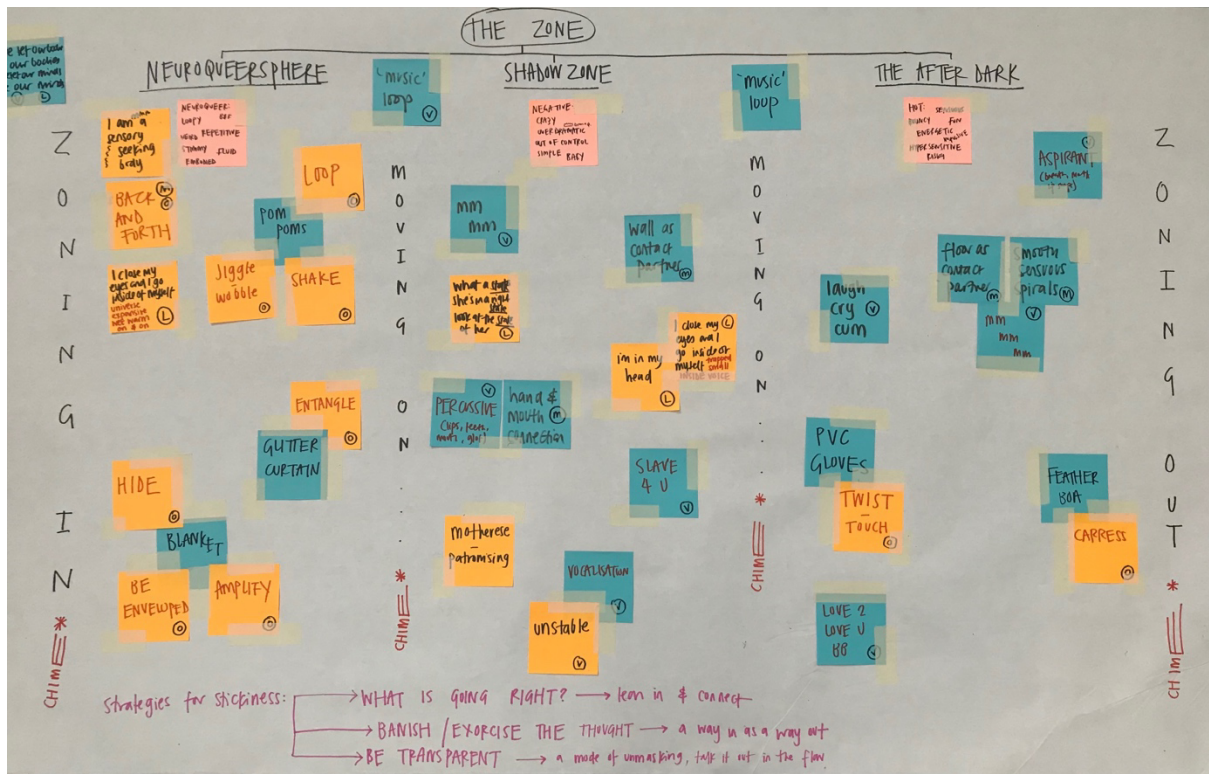


Figure 9. Performance score for BFFB2. Image by Aby Watson.

4. Human Resources

Another dimension involved in good niche construction involves putting together a rich network of human resources that serve to validate, enable, or in other ways support the gifts of the neurodiverse (Armstrong, 2010:20).

It's been incredible to be supported so well during this time. Having Laura⁴¹ there as producer, as a fellow disabled artist and peer – she holds the project with the order it needs, and she keeps me right. I feel safe and seen in my challenges and successes and she grounds me – I can be honest with her – I don't feel the need to mask. Having Thom⁴² there, someone I trust who understands my vision and helps me process the creative material and give structure to rehearsals; an outside

⁴¹ Laura Fisher

⁴² Thom Scullion

eye who has skillsets I share and can delegate to with confidence. Having Penny⁴³ present – practical access support to guide and ground my time in the studio, a person I trust with what support I need. Someone to keep an eye on time, keep me on task, enable my flow by limiting distractions or taking on tasks to avoid me needing to task swap. I am seeing and realising the power of human resources and access support. It allows me to focus on the work, and limits meltdowns, overwhelm, mistakes or oversight that can domino and negatively affect myself, the work, how I feel about it and my mental health and confidence. In this studio, I feel seen – I feel held. I feel respected. I feel valued. As me. As myself. For MY ideas and direction. Bringing artists in to collaborate with – Ewan⁴⁴, Patricia⁴⁵, Aniela⁴⁶ – to input their perspective, strengthen the work and delegate aspects of the process and product so I'm not holding it ALL. The expertise of others allows my vision to be realised and I love it. I am so grateful to connect with such giving, generous and sensitive collaborators, who bring with them expertise from fields so useful to extrapolate here. It's incredible. AND mentorship, consultation with people who know more in areas I want to learn – Jess⁴⁷, Natalya⁴⁸, Claire⁴⁹. I am feeling as the philosophy I am voicing in the work – there is no expectation to be anything other than what you are in the present moment. Giving my audience permission to do that has allowed me to do that, and the pressure of masking being lifted is such a gift and a site of huge learning for myself. The process is being informed by the product, and the product is being informed by the process, and I am experiencing it all at the centre – it rippling out into how I feel about myself and how I want to live my life going forward.

⁴³ Penny Chivas

⁴⁴ Ewan Sinclair

⁴⁵ Patricia Panther

⁴⁶ Aniela Piasecka

⁴⁷ Jess Thom

⁴⁸ Natalya Martin

⁴⁹ Claire Cunningham

5. Mark Making

As a visual thinker with eager hands, I have always used **paper and pen to work out and remember things**⁵⁰. I now use **visual notation** to make sense and grapple with the ephemerality of both dance and memory, **as a documentation tool** in my dance practice to process and capture kinaesthetic information through a visual language that aids processing, reflection, and recall. When 'marking' movement to document a specific gesture, shape, or quality of the body, I notate it graphically – creating an illustrated signifier in reference to the kinaesthetic experience. This can take a literal interpretation – an icon of the body's shape in motion, or something more abstract – a nonfigurative translation, its kinaesthetic referent less immediately observable. Although quick, imperfect, and simple, **I can communicate qualities of weight, rhythm, direction, size, texture**, through how I enact pencil to paper – **representing both shape and sensibility of movement**. Such notation can be immediately useful when in a studio context, observing or developing movement that requires some recall or sequencing, as I can physically reference it.

My graphic notation is not a perfect system – a lot is lost and flattened in the translation from complex, bodily coordination to a static, two-dimensional image. It captures the basic shape or idea but not much more. Yet, this is useful as the loose hold of **an imperfect image still possesses room for interpretation and alternative recollection** in the moment, allowing for fluidity in the recall. By

⁵⁰For my Spanish GCSE at high school, I had to recite an A4 page for an oral exam. After being told I could 'use as many images as I liked to help me', I created a system of hieroglyphics that phonetically represented each word. In the exam, I just read my codified system of images out loud, reducing the need to memorise any of it. Despite not breaking any rules, my teacher was quite cross with me.

accepting the imperfect signification, I move in response – generating whatever is **evoked in the space between image and movement memory**, rather than an attempt for perfect reproduction. It is documentation with **soft edges and open invitation**. Mark making gives form to the ephemeral, and is a useful assistive technology for understanding, processing, and organising my movement ideas. Mark making can also be useful in creating scores.

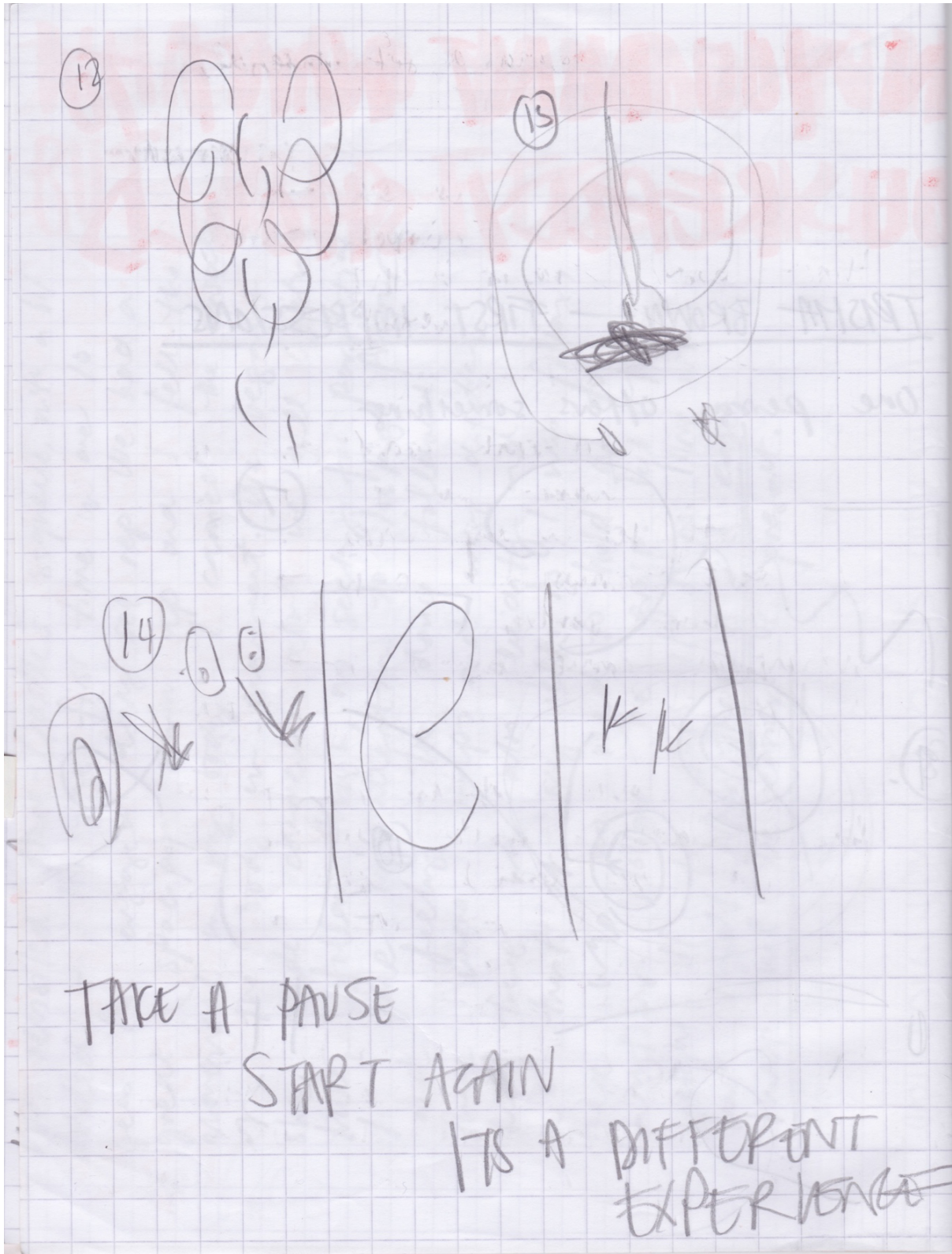


Figure 10. Example of graphic notation, drawn during a workshop with Candoco Dance Company (August, 2019)

An Invitation to Practice

There you have it – **a collection of assistive technologies that support a neuroqueer choreographic niche**. Such practices seek to guide, hold, and release bodyminds from the neuronormative practices of western mainstream dance tradition, and create a relaxed dance environment where neuroqueer embodiment can thrive.

Developed through practice-research, these divergent methods present modes of **scaffolding both dance process and product to honour and securely hold neurodivergence**. They build on my **skills previously developed as hidden 'coping strategies'** within neuronormative structure, and **reforms them as central, practical core principles of a choreographic niche of intentional neuronormative noncompliance**. Such strategies become methods of unmasked practice to liberate, respect, and care for the unique distinctness of neuroqueer bodymind expression in the present moment of dance. As neuroqueer methods, **they are fluid, multiplicitous, and perpetually open to interpretation**, change and evolution, with the wellbeing, pleasure, and playful embodiment of neurodivergent bodyminds at the heart of practice.

These technologies **do not carry an individualistic intention** with a sole interest for my benefit. They are of collective concern, considerate of neurodivergent audienceship and **open for invitation** to other neuroqueer artists seeking routes for dance practice. As aforementioned, you are welcome to actively engage with these methods. **You can directly adopt or amend them**, shaping the strategies to suit the sensibility of your own practice. You can also disagree and **ditch them entirely**, emerging your own and vastly different neuroqueer choreographic niche that works for you. After all, **the notion of a singular neuroqueer niche is at odds**

with neuroqueering itself as a 'continually emergent and potentially infinite array of practices – modes of creatively subversive and transformative action' (Walker, 2021:174). So please. **Challenge, transform, customise, expand, and/or destroy any of these invitations**⁵¹ to further build and diversify the potentialities for neuroqueer choreographic practice. **I'd love to see it.**

⁵¹ I would be very curious to hear if anything is created in response to any of my ideas. Please reach out if you do, I will always respond if I have capacity. If you do directly use any of my ideas, terms, or concepts – in theory or practice – please reference and acknowledge my work accordingly.

9. Back and Forth and Forth and Back: Zoning into a Neuroqueer Choreography

As I moved on from *-ish*, I sought to apply all that I learnt through that process into my next piece of practice research. My experience loops back on itself, moving me onward with the central objective of my overall research – to develop a dance practice wherein my neurodivergence can thrive. This self-reflexive feedback loop brings new objectives into play for my practice, extending to non-neuronormative considerations for audience. How can my dance work create a site that encourages the unmasked embodiments of others to flourish? I explore this through my project 'Back and Forth and Forth and Back', a dance performance made specifically for neurodivergent audiences, which I discuss in this chapter.

A Work in Process

Back and Forth and Forth and Back (BFFB) is a work in process that began in my imagination over lockdown. It has since undergone two phases of practical research and development, referred to as *BFFB1* and *BFFB2* respectively. *BFFB1*

took place over a six-week period over October – December 2021, covering three weeks of practical development with three other weeks dedicated to preparation and planning, taking consultation and mentoring support remotely, with time factored for reflection, processing, and rest. *BFFB1* culminated in a **work-in-progress performance sharing for an invited neurodivergent adult audience**.

I took time to process that development, wherein I realised that *BFFB1* **still held neuronormative expectations for myself** as a performer. I had 'ordered' my 'set' performance material into a **linear structure** which, as I struggled to remember it, **I fixed into a script** that I kept with me to follow throughout the performance. With hindsight, I recognise this as a restriction to my full presence in the moment – **the script becomes a physical barrier to embodiment and the linear sequential order constrains what can emerge** intuitively through the flow of my performance. The script was a comfort blanket for my anxiety about 'forgetting' yet hindered my freedom and ability to 'be with' whatever could emerge. On reflection, **it felt like a tool for masking** in my performance that maintained neuronormative expectations of a 'fixed' product with linear structure, to be reproduced and recalled without error.

BFFB2 responded to these reflections. Taking place over one week at LEVEL Centre, I focused on **developing my practice of stimprovisation**. I built on the **dramaturgical, aesthetic, and choreographic themes** instigated in *BFFB1*, **experimented with new technologies** (such as a vocal effects loop pedal), and **explored possibilities for *BFFB* as a stimprovised, durational performance of sensory-seeking scores**. The process concluded in a **relaxed open studio experiment**.

In this chapter, I will discuss *BFFB* as a piece of neuroqueer choreography, referring to it in a manner that honours its fluidity as an emergent performance,

encompassing past developments, its present form, and the vision for its future. It is unfinished and in development, yes, but as a work of neuroqueer choreography that is based in stimprovisation, ***BFFB* seeks to remain unfixed, fluid, open to change, and responsive to its environment.** It seeks to remain in process through an ongoing feedback loop, wherein what is generated through its output in performance can actively feedback and return as input that can be responded to, impacting on the performance as an ongoing process. The fluid nature of stimprovisation is crucial for *BFFB's* constant potentiality for responsive change.

Being in 'The Zone'

The palindromic loop-like title of *Back and Forth and Forth and Back* evokes the movement of my stimdancing. A physical pattern that **repeats itself, oscillates between two positions,** and has the potential to take me somewhere else – both physically and psychologically, as a vessel for becoming 'in the zone' and finding bodymind *flow*. I am interested in stimming's capability to incite an alternate state of bodymind consciousness, as a vehicle to transcend the mundane and enter a psychophysical state that is intrinsically rewarding. This state of being 'in the zone' is a pivotal and central influence on the concept, as *BFFB* takes place in 'The Zone', a sensory installation that is the world of the performance.

Welcome to the Zone

A dreamworld of my own making

Where my mind goes when I zone out

The place behind my eyes

A home inside my head

A hypnotic place

An internal space
The fantasy
An alternative dimension of consciousness
That you are invited to hyperfocus into
The world outside melts away
And we are here
In a place that flows without time
Absorbed in the present moment
Zoned into a space where
There is no past
There is no future
There is only now

Through music, lighting, and sensory design, audience and **performer transcend into an otherworldly place** that physically manifests where my mind goes to **when I 'zone out' or am 'zoned in'** through hyperfocus. Dreamy, ephemeral, fluid, and non-linear – *BFFB* is an **immersive, durational performance** that builds a **world external to neuronormative timeframes and structures**, wherein its materiality emerges in the present moment. By playing sensory seeking scores, a neurodivergent bodymind evokes self-stimulating compositions of object, voice and movement that unfold in 'the now'. In *The Zone*, **rhythm is prolific** – it pulses across the stimulating body and into meditative loops of sound, music and voice that repeat and reverberate.

Although it is the singular physical location for *BFFB*, *The Zone* is a polydimensional place **composed of different 'states of being'** – like subworlds – that the audience move through over the work's duration. Three in total, each state of being is distinctly different and zones into different facets of my neurodivergent bodymind experience: **The Neuroqueer Sphere, The Shadow**

Zone and **The After Dark**. These states arise multiple tonalities to The Zone's aesthetic and choreography, arousing divergent auratic sensibilities that thematically express the dramaturgy of each subworld. By journeying through these states, the world of The Zone is presented as a **multiplicitous process** and experience **rather than a singular fixed entity**, which seeks to reflect the **non-essentialist nature of neurodivergence**: even one person's experience is not fixed and cannot be categorised through objective essences or qualities, neurodivergent states of being are fluid and responsive to the ever-changing surrounding environment and/or context.

BFFB expands the traditional methodology of relaxed performance; it doesn't just welcome movement from the audience, it actively encourages it. **The etiquette of The Zone centres the individual interests of audience members**, offering them agency to engage as they choose. Strict binaries of audience/performer, watching/doing, passive/active, still/moving of a traditional dance-viewing experience become blurred, and in turn, an alternative performance environment is created: one which feels like **a cross between a living room, a nightclub, and a sensory space**. Audiences are free to move, make noise, stimdance along, and explore the sensory design of the space, following their own enjoyment. The Zone seeks enable an ecosystem for performance that **decentralises the audience's focus, democratising their experience to empower their own access points of interest with the work**: all access points are treated as equal, insofar as personal boundaries and agreements regarding consent and safety are practiced.

The Phenomena of Being in The Zone

The significance of **the phenomena of hyperfocus and flow** to neurodivergence is central to the investigation of *BFFB*. Often referred to as 'being in the zone', both

refer to a **bodymind state of heightened focus to a task, where one's awareness of the external world melts away**. However, the terms are not synonymous – **flow** is a term from the field of **positive psychology**, coined by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, whereas **hyperfocus** emerges from a **psychiatric context** and is often discussed in relation to schizophrenia, autism, and ADHD. What are these phenomena, how are they different, and how do they relate to neurodivergence? As defined by Csikszentmihalyi, **flow** is an 'autotelic' experience that is **inherently rewarding**, creating a **state of deep enjoyment** through **full immersion in self-action** and **complete absorption** in the current experience. For flow to emerge, specific conditions are needed – including, 'perceived challenges, or opportunities for action, that stretch but do not overmatch existing skills; [and] clear proximal goals and immediate feedback about the progress being made' (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, cited in Ashinoff and Abu-Akel, 2019:5). Characteristics of the subjective state of flow include:

- Intense and focused concentration on the present moment
- Merging of action and awareness
- Loss of reflective self-consciousness
- A sense that one can control one's actions; . one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next;
- Distortion of temporal experience (time passes faster than normal)
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding

(ibid)

I strongly recognise this phenomenon within my practice of stimdancing; I experience a psychosomatic state where I am immersed, energised, and motivated in the activity, feeling inherent enjoyment, fulfilment, and satisfaction in myself. Here, I can achieve a joyful and peaceful state of inner experience; an

'optimal state ... [where] **there is order in consciousness** ... when psychic energy – or attention – is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008:6)⁵². All can experience flow, but research finds that the experience of **flow can be particularly important for some neurodivergent people**.

Flow and Autism

Within their paper 'Going with the flow: Reconsidering 'repetitive behaviour' through the concept of 'flow states', McDonnell and Milton discuss how **repetitive behaviours and rituals of autistic people serve to achieve a flow state and incite a positive effect** as means to cope with sensory overload and give a sense of wellbeing and achievement. This perspective counters the neuronormative pathological literature which articulates behaviours such as 'repetitive motor movements' and 'highly fixated interests' as dysfunctional, with negative impact on the autistic person, as it 'tunes them out' from the social world. Reframing from a neurodivergent-centred perspective, McDonnell and Milton recognise such **repetitive and ritualistic behaviours as practices of stimming and special interest**, whereby the autistic person is not 'tuned out' and distracted from world but is **'zoned in' and very present in their world**, as they are 'fully engaged in a given activity and could be said to have achieved a state of flow' (2014:40). They argue this flow-like state of mind is important to wellbeing of autistic people, and suggest it could be **crucial for self-regulation, as means of sensory arousal regulation to reduce stress and bring bodymind balance**, whilst offering intensely rewarding experience that can be a source of **great meaning to an individuals' self-identity** (2014:41).

⁵²Interestingly, in neuronormative dance environments I experience the opposite, an active self-consciousness and hyperawareness of time wherein I feel less in control of my actions and ability to deal with the situation, causing a distressing or uncomfortable experience of the activity.

This importance of flow relates to dialogue emerging from autistic theorists regarding **autistic modes of interest and attention**. Lawson, Lesser and Murray (2005) articulate a model for a distinct autistic mode of attention called **'monotropism'**, which they propose as an **'interest system' of cognition that focuses its attention through an intensity of singular focus** – enlightening like the light shone by a **torch-beam**. This is oppositional to **polytropism, a mode of attention** more akin to neurotypical cognition, **that can attend to multiple focuses at once** – like a **lightbulb**, that illuminates a broad area. Rather than presenting it as dysfunctional, McDonnell and Milton present the **'monotropistic flow state'**, that can be achieved through stimming and/or special interests, as a reasonable and purposeful response to autistic sensitivities to external stimuli and difficulties in processing multiple sources of information.

They state monotropistic flow enables autistics to **'gain predictability and control over their immediate environment, a sense of achievement, and in the moment fun'** (2014:41). However, **interruptions to flow can have a negative impact on well-being**, inciting **'a fragmented perception of incoming stimuli, feelings of unwanted invasion, and reactions of meltdown, shutdown and panic attacks'** (ibid). Milton, who is autistic, discusses **the significance of rhythm to their experience of flow** playing table tennis, stating a feeling of **'control over the activity, as body, mind, bat, and ball come into synchronicity'** (2014:42) – illustrating **the importance of rhythm for finding flow within a state of play** and the potential unifying effect that can occur, balancing the bodymind. He states this flow found through rhythmic action is more rewarding than winning (ibid). This aligns with Kapp et al.'s reports of stimming's capacity as a **'self-regulating mechanism, [that acts] to create a calming feedback loop'** (Kapp et al., 2019:1785) that responds to one's inner rhythm and **'metronomes' the bodymind to be 'at the same rhythm with everything'** (2019:1786).

Overall, the above illustrates the significance of flow for autistic wellbeing and selfhood, alongside the importance of honouring autistic monotropic modes of interest and attention. The 'interest systems' of individuals expressed through ritualistic, repetitive behaviours, such as stimming and/or special interests, are not dysfunctions but are important vehicles for inciting flow through a distinctly autistic mode of being in the world. But is the phenomenon of flow as important to other neurodivergent ways of being?

Hyperfocus and ADHD

As a 'phenomenon that reflects **one's complete absorption in a task**, to a point where a person appears to **completely ignore or 'tune out' everything else'** (Ashinoff and Abu-Akel, 2019:1), **hyperfocus** has clear likeness to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow. However, as aforementioned, it is most frequently discussed in pathological psychiatric literature. Although not a diagnostic criterion for ADHD in the DSM-5, it is a frequently reported experience by adults with ADHD and clinicians and is of common discussion in popular media articles (Hupfeld et. al, 2018). In their paper, 'Hyperfocus: the forgotten frontier of attention', Ashinoff and Abu-Akel (2019:9) propose a definition of hyperfocus by four central criteria:

- 1) Hyperfocus is induced by task engagement;
- 2) Hyperfocus is characterised by an intense state of sustained or selective attention;
- 3) During a hyperfocus state, there is a diminished perception of non-task relevant stimuli;
- 4) During a hyperfocus state, task performance improves

As a result of their comprehensive review of studies concerning states of 'flow', 'hyperfocus' and being in 'the zone', **Ashinoff and Abu-Akel ultimately propose flow and hyperfocus as synonymous phenomena** – the same experience. Yet, **Hupfeld et. al (2018) disagree, finding difference** through reports of hyperfocus episodes that result in **negative consequences**, such as physical discomfort (e.g., stiff neck for screen staring) and substantial 'wasted time'. This signifies that **hyperfocus is not always the positive optimal experience that characterises flow**, which is reflected in distinct qualities of hyperfocus: timelessness, failure to attend to the world, ignoring personal needs, difficulty stopping and switching tasks, feelings of total engrossment in the task, and feeling 'stuck' on small details (2018:2).

I recognise these qualities of negative impact within my own experience. **Whilst in bouts of intense focus, I often stop caring for myself** – forgetting to eat, drink, move, and take breaks. Instead, I overwork into personal time and adopt perfectionistic obsessive focus that get caught in the small details. Sometimes being in the zone incites a disconnect from my interoceptive awareness; a complete focus on external task at hand turns my attention away from my wellbeing. Interestingly, **I notice this most when at a screen** – either writing or using social media – where it is most difficult to avert my attention. Hupfeld et. al suggest hyperfocus is highly related to ADHD characteristics and propose it as a potential type of '**deep flow**' – 'a more intense flow experience that **encompasses feelings of isolation or detachment from one's environment**' (2018:12). This is opposed to '**shallow flow**', a state that does not detach one from their surroundings. They consider hyperfocus as on a spectrum of flow and conceptualise ADHDers as 'deep flow-ers' – able to access deep flow without accessing shallow flow first. How does this reported ADHD experience of hyperfocus correlate with the autistic experience of flow?

Different Attentional Styles

As aforementioned, flow is reported for its positive, self-regulatory impact for autistic experience and is crucially important for wellbeing. However, the literature regarding ADHD hyperfocus possesses contradictory perspectives, presenting **the relation between flow and hyperfocus as both synonymous and significantly different**, with the latter differentiations due to negative impacts that potentially deduct from wellbeing. Reports of flow and hyperfocus phenomena in contexts of autism and ADHD respectively present a spectrum of experience across positive and negative effect. Even McDonnell and Milton add a word of caution for negative 'all-consuming' impact of states of flow that can be isolating and/or distressing, concluding that flow does not 'account for all meanings and intentions behind some repetitive behaviours and rituals', reaffirming that for them to be understood as flow, they must be positive (2014:45).

However, similarities can be found in both phenomena relation to focus. Hupfeld et. al consider the high prevalence of ADHD hyperfocus, suggesting ADHDers may express 'a **'different attentional style'** that includes **greater hyperfocus tendencies**, as well as other strengths, such as **greater creativity** than neurotypical adults' (2018:14). Therefore, rather than a deficit or insufficiency – **attention is abounded, it's just how that focus flows which diverges from the standard** and this can in fact be an asset⁵³. Hupfeld et. al's suggestion of a **different attentional style of ADHDers parallels perspectives of autistic cognition**, namely monotropism as a distinctly alternative mode of attention.

⁵³ This thought parallels the Hunter VS. Farmer hypothesis as presented by Hartmann in his book *Attention Deficit Disorder: A Different Perception* (1997), whereby he suggests ADHD as a result of a lack of adaptation from members of hunter-gatherer societies to their transformation into societies of agriculture – wherein hyperfocus can be recognised as a benefit to hunters. It is the cultural, societal context that creates the deficit in the individual.

There is a likeness between ADHD and autistic modes of focus that is recognised by autistic scholars. Patrick Dwyer notes **monotropism's relevance to ADHD** alongside the similarities between, and high co-occurrence of, ADHD and autism (Dwyer, 2021). He expands the monotropic concept to potentially give reason to why ADHD hyperfocus is reported in literature with negative effects, thus categorically distancing the phenomena of hyperfocus and flow.

Dwyer articulates two distinct sides of the coin to the monotropic hypothesis. Firstly, they conceptualise **endogenous hyperfocus** – the focus type archetypical to understandings of monotropism, a **'top down' attention that is internally motivated**, stemming from one's own intense interests, enacted through repetition, routine, stimming. This **aligns with the monotropic focus** as articulated in McDonnell and Milton, as important for autistic wellbeing through its self-regulatory effect and ability to incite a sense of achievement, fun, control, and a sense of one's identity. Such affects arguably **relate to one's interoception**, garnering greater self-connection and a sense of one's internal bodymind through endogenous flow. On the other side of coin, Dwyer discusses **exogenous hyperfocus** – a **'bottom down' attentional mode** that is **'susceptible to being externally captured by highly salient or distracting stimuli in one's environment'** (Autistic Scholar, 2021). This focus is **externally motivated through distraction** and may result in **negative consequences** such as sensory overload and/or anxiety for autistics (ibid).

Distractibility is a commonly referred characteristic of ADHD (particularly the inattentive type). As exogenous hyperfocus captures and almost overrides one's attention through external stimulus, this may give reason to negative impacts as reported in Hupfeld et. al, that lead to hyperfocus' differentiation from the concept of flow. If **exogenous flow is motivated from external sensory distraction**, there is rationale to suggest **potential causation for a disconnect from interoceptive**

sense, which could lead to ill-being or unfulfillment that results in 'wastes of time' to physical impact on the body. Flow generated through sensorial **external distraction may override the signals from our internal environment**. This postulation correlates to my experience, as activities creating endogenous flow – such as dance improvisation – incite positive impacts on my wellbeing. Whereas actions I can recognise as exogenous flow – like social media scrolling – can have a clear negative impact, where I experience an unfulfilling trance that can result in headache, eye strain, and regret.

Overall, it is **unclear whether flow and hyperfocus are the same** psychosomatic phenomena; if their significances are the same across neurodivergences; and if they are objectively of positive or negative impact. Further research is needed to bridge the gap between the lived knowledges of neurodivergent scholars and that of scientific research. Regardless, alternate modes of attention and focus are clearly significant for neurodivergent experience, as is the experience of 'being in the zone', and the ritual, repetition, special interest, and sensorial stimuli that can enable it. Whether categorised as flow or hyperfocus, **accessing an alternate state of bodymind consciousness through immersion in an activity of the now is clearly a significant factor for neurodivergent experience and wellbeing**. This rationale is central to the artistic investigation of *BFFB*, and the audience experience it seeks to empower.

The Audience Experience of 'Zoning In'

In this space

We let our bodies

Be our bodies

We let our minds

Be our minds

We come as we are

Not as we should

We act with care

To ourselves

And each other

We take it as it comes

Without judgement

To ourselves

Or each other

Through monotropic flow, one can be fully immersed through focused activity in the present moment, giving attention to the now. Through either internal or external motivation, concepts of past and future become irrelevant, accessing a state of being in the now. *BFFB* seeks to create a neurodivergent-centred experience that honours, respects, and enables multiplicitous potentials for focus and attention in a shared space and moment of dance performance. The sensory installation of **The Zone** holds a philosophy for the audience's 'freedom to flow' within the space, and encourages them to find their own interest, curiosity, and mode of engagement to flow with in The Zone. Finding one's own interest is essential for endogenous flow, as reflected in research that reports a lack of autistic flow during tasks set up by researchers (Remington and Fairnie, 2017 in Dwyer, 2021). It seems that **endogenous flow can't be externally motivated** – it must come from the interests of the autistic person themselves. Therefore, creating a site of non-neuronormative engagement that encourages divergent modes of attention and offers multiple possibilities for sensorial interaction may offer audiences' agency with their focus and engagement. Through following their own choice and interests, different potentials of pleasure and enjoyment may be found through their own endogenous flow and may impact positively on their wellbeing.

Within *BFFB*'s sensory environment, **exogenous flow** may also be actuated through external stimulus and **may 'distract' audiences from 'the performance'**. **This is allowed** as audiences are encouraged to follow any flow found through external sensory stimulation in The Zone. For those who need a break from sensorial stimulation, a **'Chill Out Zone' is available** to regulate and rest in. The role of those supporting neurodivergent audience members is important to assist and facilitate a culture that welcomes differing points and modes of focus and attention. *BFFB* frames those roles as **'Flow Attendants'** - offering a dramaturgical location within the world of The Zone, and **an active role that directs the sensibility of support they give within the space.**

A playful re-interpretation of a 'flight attendant' role, they are responsible for supporting the safety, comfort, and enjoyment of their 'passenger' as we 'zone in' to flow. **Flow Attendants do not interrupt the flow of the person** to police and force their direction of focus to most 'important' part of experience, e.g., the performer, **but instead observe and encourage the focus of the individual** wherever that wants to flow. They have a **responsibility to look out for them** but also the **other 'passengers'** in flow too, to **honour the agreements** of the space and **be mindful of others'** wellbeing. Attending to flow in this way decentres the neuronormative expectation of a unified, shared focus to recognise, honour, and encourages other natural modes of cognition, focus and attention in the performance space. When in production, *BFFB* **must be careful, clear, and considerate regarding communications with audiences** to uphold the relaxed performance principles of clear explanation at booking, clear pre-show information for what to expect, and a start of show introduction (Cock et. al, 2019:39).

The Performer's Experience of 'Zoning In'

As a work of stimprovisation, *BFFB* forms a choreography of bodymind consciousness in flow; a 'doing' in the 'now' that seeks to induce an endogenous state through performance. Through sensory-seeking scores, the dancer engages with rhythm, repetition, special interest, and sensorial stimulation that becomes a ritual in and of itself (more on this in the next chapter). This bodymind play enables **a stim-state that merges action and awareness**, as the score offers **clear goals to structure action** and thus create a state for performance as **intrinsically motivating** pleasurable play. The fluidity of structure, yet control over the performance's direction, allows the performer to 'get lost' in the action that may incite a regulatory impact. By creating **a choreographic methodology that empowers and pleases the performer through navigating their own flow**, **anxiety about failure or overwhelm in act of performing may be reduced**, wherein their skills and 'power sources' can be expressed more 'automatically' and 'effortlessly' than if recalled and re-actioned linear, set compositions.

Through 'zoning in' to their own internal landscape and responding through performance, a neuroqueer materiality of bodymind can emerge. Stimprovisation presents **an embodiment of constant change**, a sensorial mode of 'bodily-being-in-the-world' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:89), ever in process and transformation. Shifting between stimsites of movement, voice, and object, **the playing bodymind is polymorphic; adopting divergent forms, shapes, voices, rhythms, and personas** that emerge through dialogue between internal and external landscapes, and therefore, is ever fluid. As an '**embodied mind**' of '**radical presence**', the stimprovising performer occupies a state of becoming. A materiality of neurodivergent corporeality emerges through **the process of a feedback loop**, generated between interoceptive and exteroceptive perceptions to manifest action and expression in the moment of performance.

The Auto-Poietic Feedback Loop

Fischer-Lichte understands performance as what is generated **through an 'auto-poietic feedback loop'** – a process of what flows in the encounter between **spectator and performer** in the live moment. As system of mutual influence, Fischer-Lichte determines a performance event as that which demands a **physical co-presence and interconnectivity in the relationship between performer and audience**, as both parties affect one another through their presence. The spectator's perception – through their gaze and bodily sensation – is central to autopoietic feedback loop, 'affecting all participants **reciprocally**, so that energy begins to **circulate** in the performance space' (2008:59). Space and embodiment present the conditions for perception and thus inform the dynamic of the feedback loop (2008:60).

BFFB experiments with audiences' experience of space and embodiment, as challenge to neuronormative etiquette and convention often common in dance performance. Its **expanded relaxed methodology invites divergent modes of attention** and points of focus, increasing agency for audiences to follow their own flow. This decentres the spectator/performer hierarchy and binary relationship, whilst **activating both the space and audience's embodiment** through invitation to engage with the sensory installation. The Zone – with its tactile textures, infectious rhythms, and glowing lights – **invites multi-sensory perceptions and an increasingly embodied experience**. Fischer-Lichte believes meaning is generated through the act of perception – as that which 'unfolds as a kind of contemplative immersion into that gesture, thing, or melody, in which the perceived elements show themselves to the perceiving subject as what they are: they reveal their intrinsic meaning' (2008:141). Through its 'freedom to flow' philosophy, The

Zone holds abundant potentialities for contemplative immersion and perception across the senses. Such conscious **multisensory perception may incite 'sensual impressions'** for audiences; meaning 'of which [becomes] conscious through specific sensual impressions' that 'can be **equated to states of consciousness but not to linguistic meanings'** (2008:142). Therefore, *BFFB* may incite **a mode of meaning-making** particularly pertinent for neurodivergent audiences **as non-verbal, sensorial stimulations of consciousness** beyond semiotic significations.

BFFB seeks to destabilise binary positions of spectator/performer, decentralise audiences' focus, and turn toward multisensorial modes of attention – all of which raises interesting considerations regarding the auto-poietic feedback loop at play. In such a dynamic space, **audiences generate activity that is perceivable and externally 'sensed' by others, and thus further contributes to the autopoietic feedback loop** (2008:143). This raises questions regarding what circulates between audience and performer, and how that affects the conditions for perception in the space. May audience interactivity distract the stimprovising dancer, interrupting their endogenous flow? Or could such sensorial distraction stimulate a process of exogenous flow for the performer – might they 'tune in' to stimulation from their external environment? What potentialities for interaction and interconnectivity could occur between active participants in The Zone? What level of energy would circulate in the performance space through such divergent activity? And finally, what agreements and/or boundaries need to be in place to ensure the environment isn't overstimulating, stressful and/or unsafe for neurodivergent audiences? Further **practice-research is required to address such questions**, as understanding the impact of the auto-poietic feedback loop at play in such an environment will be crucial before *BFFB* is ready for production.

BFFB as a Neuroqueer Rite of Passage

French ethnographer, Arthur Van Gennep, initially theorised '**rites of passage**' – a term from cultural anthropology regarding a **ceremony or ritual wherein an individual undergoes a significant moment of transition** to 'pass from one defined position to another' (Gennep, 1960:3, cited in Schechner, 2020:144). He proposed this transformative journey through **three distinct stages of ritual process – before, during, and after the *limen***, latin for **threshold**: preliminal (separation), liminal (transition), and postliminal (reincorporation) (Britannica, 2023). Victor Turner expanded Gennep's concept with focus on the liminal phase, whilst Richard Schechner applied the process to the field of performance studies. The notion of such a ritual process is important to concept of *BFFB*, which I articulate as a **neuroqueer rite of passage**.

As 'deliberate, self-conscious 'doing[s]' of highly symbolic actions in public', **performances themselves have a ritual-like nature** as they 'explicitly model the world' through a 'multifaceted sensory experience ... that creates a sense of condensed totality, [with] the ability to shape people's experience and cognitive ordering of the world' (Bell, 1997:159-161, cited in Schechner, 2020:121). ***BFFB* is a transportive journey through a ritualistic act of performance, wherein all passage together through a multisensory realm** that models a world distinctly different to the profane neuronormative world. The process through – also in three stages – forms a ceremonial act of transportation into neuroqueering.

For the **stimpromising performer**, it is a **sacred journey** – a doing of bodymind consciousness that connects with the transcendent force of flow. For me, the project has absolutely been a rite of passage. Discovering stimpromisation through the journey of **making *BFFB* has been transformational** – it has changed me forever. The process offered a practice for **healing dance-trauma**, an accessible

and secure mode of **performing with pleasure**, and an aesthetic that **releases from neuronormative ideals** and **stimulates new potentialities** for form. *BFFB* shares that process of neuroqueering with others through a cultural offer of dance. The Zone's conditions for flow – stimprovisation and the 'freedom to flow' philosophy – supports bodymind transition in the dance performance space. Opening opportunity for all to engage in playful sensorimotor stimming through rhythm, repetition, and sensorial stimulation may lead to phenomenological shifts in the bodymind, with regulatory or stimulating affects that may incite a shift in mood or corporeal sensation. Furthermore, *BFFB's* passage through The Zone – and its alternative rules for engagement – **may transform understandings of what a performance space can be**, emerging new non-neuronormative potentialities for cultural realm of dance spectatorship. How do the rites of passage stages apply to the journey of *BFFB*?

Phase 1: Separation / Entering the Zone

Welcome to The Zone

A dreamspace that warmly welcomes you

Come, make yourselves comfortable

You are welcome to sit, lie down, or stand during your visit – however you prefer

The Zone is a Relaxed Space,

This means you are free to move around, make noise, and respond naturally

There are a lot of sounds in the Zone,

And there are ear defenders for your use if you require them

You can leave this space at any point and visit the Chill Out Zone

It is a calm space that you can go to if you need a moment out

You are welcome to leave and return as many times as you like

*The Zone is a Sensory Space,
Around you there are different textures, surfaces, objects, sounds
Visitors to the Zone are encouraged to explore as much as they like
You can look, touch, feel, listen, move
Feel free to follow your senses, impulses, curiosity
In the Zone, there are no distractions
Follow the flow of your own attention, needs, and wants
Or follow the flow of the person who you may be assisting*

The initial phase of a rite of **passage** separates the initiands from the rest of **society**, and **'demarcates sacred space** and time from profane or secular space and time ... [including] a rite which **changes the quality of *time*** ... or **constructs a cultural realm** which is defined as **'out of time'**" (Turner, 1982:24). As a sensorially stimulating environment that invites corporeal engagement and play, **The Zone presents space and time significantly different from everyday banality**. Entering the space signifies a **separation from the profanity of the neuronormative**, and an emergence into an alternative neurodivergent-centred world. As a site for durational performance inspired by the phenomenon of flow – wherein a **'distortion of temporal experience'** is an integral quality (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, cited in Ashinoff and Abu-Akel, 2019:5) – the **audience enter a realm that is arguably 'out of time'**. A voiceover welcomes them to the space, encouraging exploration of the sensory installation pre-performance. This rite of exploration initiates The Zone's **'freedom to flow'** philosophy, which transcends the profane normative cultural etiquette wherein it is the performer who activates the space. This inverts the normative **'symbolic behaviour'** (Turner, 1982:24) of the audience, detaching them from their traditional role as passive, seated viewers within the dance performance space.

To centre neurodivergent embodiments, modes of focus, and sensorial impulses in such a way is rare in the profane neuronormative world. Yarrow refers to Malekin to state 'the sacred of space is not a question of what the place ... is, but of how people function within it' (2007:185). By centering neurodivergent embodiment in the etiquette and organisation of the performance space, The Zone enables all to 'function' there outside of neuronormative convention – thus neuroqueering it. Therefore, The Zone forms a neurodivergent sacred cultural realm; it demarcates space-time for non-neuronormative modes of being, and thus manifests a consecrated neurodivergent site for dance performance that transcends the profane banality of neuronormative tradition.

Phase 2: Transition / Going 'Back and Forth and Forth and Back' in The Zone

A) A Liminoid Event of Neuroqueering

The secondary transition phase of a rite of passage is one betwixt-and-between; for-the-time-being; on the threshold between distinctions. It is liminal, a term used by Van Gennep in anthropological context in relation to the rites of permanent transformation in traditional societies. Turner turns his attention to the modernistic context and coins 'liminoid' to differentiate events that are 'like liminal but not ... [and are] invented, are new, and occur in the society of modernity' (Schechner, in Routledge Companion Websites, 2012). Liminoid experiences incite momentary transition, are conditional and do not result in a permanent change of status; they are a part of play and are a break from society. The liminoid has characteristics parallel to liminality – but is clearly distinct from ritual processes that emerged through long-standing cultural tradition. As a dance performance in a contemporary context, *BFFB* is a liminoid ritual; as a 'transportation, effecting a temporary change' (Schechner, 2020:150-151) but I

will extrapolate characteristics of liminality to aid my discussion in the liminoid context.

In *BFFB*, the emergent moment of performance instigates **the phase of transition**. For Gennep, traditional 'ritual subjects' in the liminal phase of a rite of passage have been physically separated from society and thus undergo a **'levelling process'**, wherein the **social attributes of their normal reality become 'inverted'**; 'blurring and merging ... distinctions' (Turner, 1982:26). Moving into process of live performance enacts roles of audience and performer, as the artist moves into the space and initiates expressive action. Maintaining the 'freedom to flow' philosophy in the moment of live performance instigates a decentralised ecosystem of attention that **makes ambiguous the normative binary roles of audience/performer, inverting and destabilising said distinctions**, leaving them 'temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure' in the dance performance space (1982:27).

The fluidity of agency and action with these roles assists to form **a new social reality in performance space** that transgresses neuronormative etiquette. In this regard, this 'freedom to flow' grants **a 'special kind of freedom, a sacred power'** (Turner, 1982:26) to audiences. This is not just bestowed to neurodivergent people as an instrument of access but is a 'levelling process' (ibid) **open to all**. Through granting autonomy to choose how they engage in the moment of performance; **all are invited to transgress neuronormative social etiquette** in the dance space, which in turn instigates neuroqueer engagement, regardless of neurodivergent identifications.

Nick Walker articulates neuroqueer as beyond a social identity determined by the 'gender, sexual orientation, or style of neurocognitive functioning [one] may have been born with' (2021:161). Instead, she states engagement in practices of

neuroqueering is essential to categorising who is neuroqueer, in short **'you're neuroqueer if you neuroqueer'** (ibid). Therefore, **audiences of *BFFB* who actively participate in non-neuronormative embodiment arguably 'become' neuroqueer** through their transgression of neuronormativity. In that moment, they *are neuroqueer as they neuroqueer the dance performance space*. Thus, *BFFB* functions as a **ceremonial act of transformation into neuroqueering**.

As a stimprovised performance playing sensory scores, *BFFB* is a **liminoid act** formed of a **'complex sequence of episodes in sacred space-time ... [of] subversive and ludic (or playful) events'** (Turner, 1982:27). The stimprovising bodymind uses rhythm, repetition, and sensorial stimulus, thus disrupting normative aesthetics that primarily centre dance as product for external gaze. **This transposes the 'everyday' neurodivergent cultural process of stimming to heightened and communicative embodiment for an audience to witness**. This transposition **into the expressive realm of performance** adopts an element of neurodivergent culture and recomposes it in numerous ways through a choreographic lens. Thus, recombining stimming **'in terms of possible or fantasied rather than experienced combinations'** (ibid). It does not merely 'reperform' stimming movements for an audience but, through an active bodymind process of stimprovisation, enacts it as **a ritual process that elevates and transcends from an everyday to aesthetic practice**. Thus, evoking a liminal quality that **'play[s] with the elements of familiar and defamiliarise[s] them'** (ibid), and consequently develops **a sacred meaning for the stimming body**. As a performative mode of neurodivergent consciousness, the flow of stimprovisation transcends the bodymind from the profane and **'goes beyond'** into new possibilities as sacred action.

B) Neuroqueer Anti-structure and Communitas

The **'special kind of freedom' and 'sacred power'** (Turner, 1982:26) bestowed in The Zone maintains **one's liberty of embodiment and autonomy as sacrosanct**. This reconfigures the social choreography in the dance performance space and serves to destabilise neuronormative cultural etiquette so that new potentialities for neurodivergent-centred structure can emerge in the dance space. This process is akin to what Turner articulates as **'anti-structure', meaning 'the dissolution of normative social structure'** that occurs through liminality and which **'represents the latent system of potential alternatives ... [and] is the new source of culture'** (1982:28). Therefore, the relaxed, neurodivergent-centred cultural realm of *BFFB* arouses new foundations for a neuroqueer dance culture.

For Turner, anti-structure is defined by concepts of liminality and **'communitas'** (1974:273) – the latter characterising **the 'relationships between those undergoing ritual transition'** (1974:274) who mutually experience liminality together. Anti-structure can mean **'the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc. from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses ... [including] affiliation with some pervasive social category such as class, caste, sex, or age-division'** (Turner, 1982:44). In this regard, **the atmosphere of communitas** created through *BFFB* transcends the social category of neurodivergence, forming a neuroqueer space for dance performance **wherein all are subject to liberate their human capacities from neuronormative constraints**. By centring the needs of a community often most excluded from access to dance culture and bestowing all with **'unprecedented freedoms'** (1982:42), *BFFB* supports divergent ways of being together in the professional dance space.

Furthermore, Turner considers flow within experiences of *communitas*. He understands flow as experienced by the individual; *communitas* by the collective – but that **communitas has a flow-like quality** through what we dialogically share through modes of language and non-verbal communication, e.g. sharing smiles, eye contact (1982:58). Turner finds flow to be ‘one of the ways in which ‘structure’ may be transformed and ‘liquefied’ [sic] into *communitas* again’ (ibid). ***BFFB* encourages individuals to find their own flow** – potentially through ‘repetitive’ and ‘ritualistic’ stimming embodiment – **within a communal space and collective passage of performance**. McDonnell and Milton find that ‘one can find flow states with people on the autistic spectrum ... **by engaging in autistic ‘language’’** (2014:45). Consequently, the non-verbal stimming exchange in *The Zone* forms a *communitas* centred on neurodivergent ‘languages’ of embodiment. Materialising individual and communal flow as an ‘intentional noncompliance with the demands of normative performance’ in the dance space (Walker, 2021:175) could therefore be recognised as a form of **neuroqueer communitas; a communion of sacred stimming in flow**.

Such an atmosphere of neuroqueer *communitas* may present **new modes of togetherness** not centred on a homogeneity of neuronormative behaviour, but instead **‘disorder’ the cultural event of dance** performance to arise new, alternate modes of communality in performance that transgress neuronormative convention. In investigating the continuum of order/disorder in children’s games, Sutton-Smith finds that ‘we may be disorderly ... because **we have an overdose of order** ... or because **we have something to learn by being disorderly**’ (cited in Turner, 1982:28). I believe this true for sites and practice of neuronormative dance performance, wherein I understand the neuronormative order (held as socially sacrosanct) as both a significant barrier for the engagement, inclusion, and access for a divergent spectrum of bodyminds, and an aesthetic limitation for the

potentialities of form and togetherness. I think we have a lot to learn by disordering neuronormativity in the dance space.

Through an atmosphere of neuroqueer *communitas*, inclusive regardless of categorisations of neurodivergence, we can also learn from each other. Through the ritual process, Turner states 'novices are induced to think, and think hard, about cultural experiences they had hitherto taken for granted ... **Beneath the surface structure of custom was a deep structure, whose rules they had to learn'** (1982:42). In this regard, *BFFB* may enable neurotypical novices to cultural exclusion to gain **a new perspective on structural neuronormativity through recognising the liberation in its absence**. By sharing mutual togetherness with those often excluded or stigmatised and witnessing new potentialities for engagement, attention may be brought to the conditions of exclusion neuronormativity creates for all, in relation to one's natural embodiment and self-expression. Through liminality, ***communitas* develops 'a sense of a 'bond uniting ... people over and above any formal social bonds,'** that is, "positive" structure' (Turner, 1974:45). Through the shared experience of '**ritual camaraderie'** (Schechner, 2020: 149) in a neuroqueer space, *BFFB* may foster **a sense of new, positive social connection** between those normatively segregated – namely, normative excluded neurodivergent and mainstream dance-going audiences. Such potential positive bonds evoke Martin Buber's dialogical philosophic concept of 'I-Thou' (1923), pertaining to mutual and reciprocal relations, occurring in the here and now, that recognise the presence of each other's full humanity beyond egoistic individualism.

Phase 3: Incorporation / Leaving the Zone

BFFB forms a ritualistic performance whereby audience and performer take passage through a neuroqueer cultural realm. By radically centring neurodivergent modes of embodiment and cognition in a distinct multi-sensory performance environment, **the dance performance space can become 'disordered' to form a 'levelled' experience** that liberates all from the constraints of neuronormativity. Through mutual transportation and passage through The Zone, **a neuroqueer communitas may be evoked to assist a sense of togetherness**, or sacred communion of flow, that transcends social categorisations of neurodivergent/typical and is rooted in the here and now. Such a process may generate encounters that unify through the presence of an 'authentic human essence' (Turner, 1974:46).

Yet, as a liminoid experience, **these transitions** in social status and generation of communitas **are temporary**. *BFFB* transports those present into a neuroqueer cultural realm, wherein 'one enters into the experience [and] is "moved" or "touched"' (Schechner, 2020:151), and when it ends those temporarily inhabiting The Zone return to the profane normative world, 'dropped off about where [they] entered' (ibid). The performance has a soft close with some time to linger in The Zone, but it will need to end. It is crucial that this transition is facilitated carefully to minimise the disruption from one's flow. **Post-liminoid, the 'play' is over** and departure back into neuronormative society is immanent; the temporary shifts in status bend back on themselves, and social categorisations become relevant again as all return into an 'unlevelled' world. **But what are we left with?**

As a liminoid ritual, I cannot claim *BFFB* as a site for permanent transformation. For neurodivergent audiences with significant experience of exclusion in cultural

spaces, I could imagine zoning into *BFFB* could be potentially profound⁵⁴ – yet such **'lasting transformation depends on each individual case'** (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:179). As the work is in process, yet to be fully practiced, I cannot determine its impact – nor what audiences may experience as they reincorporate into the neuronormative world. All I can do is consider my hopes for what potential post-liminal feelings and thoughts audiences may leave *BFFB* with.

Within performance, 'the ordinary becomes conspicuous, **when dichotomies collapse** and things turn into their opposites, **the spectators perceive the world as 'enchanted''** (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:180). *BFFB* models a neuroqueer world and enchants new possibilities for dance outwith neuronormative performance. I hope the presence of this fantasy continues post-performance. **I hope neurodivergent audiences leave empowered, emboldened and in a positive place of regulation.** I hope the 'sensual impressions' (2008:142), freedom to flow, and neuroqueer communitas experienced in *The Zone* linger in the bodymind, to inform **tangible impressions on reality.** As humans, we are in constant transformation in a fluid world; I wish for any shifts in consciousness and/or perceptions regarding neuronormativity, prompted through *BFFB*, **continue through a process of becoming** towards neuroqueer thinking and being.

⁵⁴ This connects me to a post-show experience following *-ish* at Tramway, Glasgow. After the show, a colleague of mine (Dr Lucy Hollingworth) saw a young woman in the foyer crying alone. Lucy approached her to offer support. The young woman was dyspraxic and was significantly moved by the performance. Seeing her similar experience reflected for the first time was a powerful experience. Lucy took her contact details to connect us both. This audience member and I then met in person, shared our experiences, and made a strong connection. She is now one of my closest friends. We have both grown alongside each other, permanently changing each other through our friendship. I am not saying this will necessarily happen again, but I wish to illustrate how the communion and exchange through a liminoid ritual of performance can incite encounters and consequences that can incite permanent change in people and their lives.

10. Going Back and Forth and Forth and Back: A Neuroqueer Choreography of States of Being in 'The Zone'

Shifting States-of-Being

BFFB is a voyage through a sequence of events in spacetime that take passage through otherworldly realms of neurodivergent consciousness. Over the durational performance, we move **through three distinct 'states of being' in The Zone**, enacting a beginning-middle-end diachronic experience. These dramaturgical sub-worlds emerge through shifts in the space's foundational material landscape, as sound, light, colour, and the energetic presence of the performer transition synchronically to create distinct atmospheres that ebb, flow and carry the audience through the journey. These synchronic shifts form a **fluid space of transition in a fixed physical reality**. The Zone morphs and shifts but does not undergo complete transformation.

Betwixt-and-between the 'states of being', there are **transitional 'states of change'**. They transport us from one state of being to another and are demarcated by a **reoccurring transition ritual** which holds spacetime for the process of physical change in the space. The transition functions as a **liminal realm** in the Zone, a break that invites a clear moment for rest or regulation. Fixed, recurring performative motifs clearly distinguish this shifting state to signal the transition in a consistent manner. In *BFFB2*, this change-state is bracketed by three gentle strikes of a gong. A soundscape is built with loops of vocal melodies and meditative chime, as a text is spoken announcing that we are 'moving on'. Over the state of change, a **soft process of shifts in lighting, sound, costume, and the performer's presence occurs**, emerging into a new state of being in The Zone.

The Atmosphere of The Zone



Figure 11. In The Shadow Zone during BFFB1. Image by Tiu Makkonen

Fischer-Lichte refers to Gernot Bohme and his '**aesthetics of atmosphere**', an aesthetic antithetical to the semiotic, that redirects **attention from 'meaning' to that of physical experience**. For Bohme, atmospheres 'are not bound to a place but nonetheless pour out into, and thus shape, the space' – they neither emanate from the things in space nor the subjects who sense them, but are 'between and in both', of mutual presence in space and time (2008:115). He locates **atmospheres as 'spheres of presence ... spaces insofar as they are tinged by the presence of things, people, or their surrounding constellations, that is, their 'ecstasies'**' (1995:33, cited in *ibid*). Through atmosphere, those entering a space experience it and its forms as 'empathetically present' – they 'penetrate the perceiving subject's body and surround it atmospherically' in the here and now (2008:116). **The Zone is a neuroqueer aesthetic of atmosphere** that forms a multi-sensory sphere of

presence; it mutually flows in the space between its 'things' and those who sense them. It centres one's physical experience and stimulates an atmosphere of ecstasies for perception across the senses to support the presence of the bodymind in the now. The Zone's properties of form, temporality, and tonality pour out and between to stimulate and regulate perceiving bodyminds.

A) Forms



Figure 12. Audience members in The Zone during BFFB1. Image by Tiu Makkonen

Forms transform space and affect their surroundings (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:116). The presence of a thing 'radiates into its environment, takes away the surrounding space's homogeneity, fills it with ... possibilities for motion' (Boehme, 2005:33, cited in *ibid*). This is particularly true for the material forms of The Zone as they possess a dual functionality – to be mutually practical and playful. The myriad options of audience 'seating' are central examples, as they offer physical

support for rest and comfort but also invite possibilities for motion, sensorial curiosity, and tactile play. Chairs upholstered in reversal sequins, a mini-trampoline, and exercise balls **all radiate opportunities for self-stimulation** – tactile, proprioceptive, and vestibular respectively – to assist sensory-seeking neurodivergent audiences in the moment of watching performance. The forms of the Zone demarcate **a distinct environment that encourages stimming** in the performance space.

The Zone's design⁵⁵ utilises reflective materials, textures, and surfaces that shimmer, catch movement, and reflect light, to evoke **a playful space-age aesthetic** base that stimulates yet remains relatively neutral. Metallic materials hang from the ceiling; a proposition for visual or tactile stimming that simultaneously present space to hide or be enveloped. Soft floor tiles demarcate specific audience areas and provide a safe, gentle base to occupy the floor – with a large, tiled area in the centre enacting the clear domain of the performer. Delicate and light marabou feather trim runs the perimeter, moved by passing air that circulates from her action, and stim toys are placed on small tables with glowing lamps, creating a sense of relaxed homeliness. The material forms within The Zone rouse **playful interaction**, whereby mutual relation occurs between the object and the sensing subject. **The thing's 'ecstasy'** – the special way 'it appears present to a perceiver' (2008:116) – **becomes embodied** through acts of stimming and **becomes a reciprocal sensorial encounter**. A playful and pleasurable presence thus emanates that is consequently perceivable to others; a relational ecstasy that, in turn, **effects the autopoietic feedback loop** and the emergence of atmosphere.

⁵⁵ For *BFFB1*, I collaborated with Ewan Sinclair of Soundplay Projects to prototype ideas for The Zone's environment. Soundplay Projects are a Scottish collective who use 'technology, sound, and art to make accessible interactive installations, objects, and events' (Soundplay Projects, 2022)

Ephemeral forms layer atop The Zone's fixed material landscape to **aid the emergence of each 'state of being'**. The **lighting** of each state forms a clear **mood** through the saturation of a singular colour. Moving from yellow, to blue, to pink, we diachronically shift through sub-worlds of warm, cold, and feminine-hot dramaturgical atmosphere – as the natural lighting of the studio becomes incrementally darker, aiding a linear transition from the open brightness of daytime to the sultry intimacy of night over the performance's duration. Shifting tones of **sound** are also crucial to the shifting landscape of The Zone's distinct states of being.



Figure 13. The hot pink After Dark Zone, during BFFB1. Image by Tui Makkonen

B) Tonality

As **sound** 'opens and enters the spectator's bodies ... and **can often trigger physiological and affective reactions'** (2008:119-120), the sonic world of *BFFB* is

particularly pertinent to its neuroqueer aesthetics of atmosphere – with **rhythm a central presence**. Inherent to the systems and the patterns of the bodymind and its movements, **rhythm exists as ‘an organising principle** that presupposes permanent transformation and operates [to] further such change’ (2008:134). **It organises time whilst keeping in transition**, structuring in-the-moment fluidity. As a result, rhythm presents a condition acutely constructive for fulfilling the autopoietic feedback loop. When a performance’s temporality is ‘organised and structured through rhythm, different “rhythm systems” clash’ – **the inner rhythms of spectators strike with the rhythm of the performance**, and when successful, the rhythm systems are brought together **to manifest in the impulses of spectators** (2008:136). The coupling of these rhythm systems ‘moves’ them in a way that becomes perceptible – tapping toes, nodding head, weight shifts back and forth – which **informs the energy circulating in the space** through the autopoietic feedback loop.

As a performance that encourages audiences to connect to their ‘inner rhythms’, *BFFB* utilises **rhythm in its tonal atmosphere to support a favourable environment for the pleasure of stimming**. Through infectious loops of electronic music⁵⁶, there is a **persistent presence of rhythm** in the space; repetitive but unsymmetrical, beats composed to support sensorimotor coupling bring together the sensory and motor processes of spectators. Consequently, this induces an **atmosphere of ‘groove’** that manifests what Janata, Tomic, and Haberman (2012:56) theorise as ‘a pleasurable drive toward action... that aspect of the music that induces a **pleasant sense of wanting to move along**’, encouraging the

⁵⁶ *BFFB* saw a collaboration with Scottish music producer and artist Patricia Panther, who created a soundtrack for the work in process. I loved working with her. However, she composes outside of the studio – meaning her music served to underscore, not run responsively parallel to, my emergent performance. Going forward, I wish to develop and explore the interconnections and responsivity between the rhythms of my bodymind, the spectators, and the rhythms of the score. It is important that the atmosphere of the groove is fluid, responsive and emergent.

sensorimotor impulse of stimming dancing (cited in Camara and Danielsen, 2020:4).

BFFB seeks to mirror the nature of rhythm itself in its musical arrangement, as a **state that 'is and will be in transit'** (Helbling, cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2008:133). Through the live presence of an electronic music producer, rhythmic loops of music emerge through dialogical response to the bodymind rhythms in the performance space. The music emerges as a process in the fluid moment, it is not composed as a 'set' soundtrack to underscore action. Instead, it is created through a **'groove mode'** that is **'not directed toward a goal ... [but that] demands one's presence in the groove's here and now'** (Danielsen 2006:177–179, cited in Schmidt Cãmara and Danielsen, 2020:4). The development of the producer's role and live presence is significant for BFFB's future, as is their relationship and responsivity to the stimprovising performer for whom The Zone is their performative domain. Furthermore, **the performer produces their own sonic presence** through vocalisation and the sounding of objects – I will offer more on this later, when detailing the state of being in the Neuroqueer Sphere.

C) Temporality

As a performance traversing **a minimum duration of three hours**, *BFFB* forms a sacred neuroqueer spacetime not bound by neuronormative timeframes for dance performance. This evokes Truax's notion of durational performance as **'untimely'**, that **'resist[s] the normal temporal structures** placed on aesthetic experience' (2018:V). In this regard, **'untimely bodies'** who perform durationally possess a wider signification to neoliberal systems, as they **resist 'being colonized by structures of time that make human activity predictable, profitable, and efficient'** (ibid). Neurodivergent bodyminds are arguably considered **'untimely'**

under capitalism. ADHDers are categorised as 'time-blind' – unable to sense the passing of time – and are often chronically 'late'. Dyslexic students are given 'extra time' for assessments. Autism is pathologically determined as a 'developmental disorder', signifying a 'delay in development, a detour from the timeline of normative progress' (Kafer, 2013:25). Neurodivergent modes of processing, thinking, and being are at odds with the 'rhythms and vibrations [of] more normative renderings of time' (Truax, 2018:XXII) – they are **untimely bodyminds, non-docile to the neuronormative clock**.

Truax regards durational performance as 'imbued with queerness that cultivates indeterminacy' (2018:XXIII). *BFFB* presents a similar temporality of neuroqueerness, as it **resists the efficient, productive, and linear normative temporality of 'timely' dance performance**. It is not structured by counts of 5, 6, 7, 8, nor does its material unfold as a linear predetermined choreography – **its flow exists in an alternative spacetime**, emerging from the here and now and in the time that it needs. The 'untimely body' evokes 'crip time', as it acts as 'a challenge to normative and normalising expectations of pace and scheduling' (Kafer, 2013:27). As a durational performance, *BFFB* **'bends the clock'** (ibid) to offer expansive spacetime **to flow with one's internal rhythms, unbound by neuronormative external structure**. Arguably, this presents a temporality that is more conducive for relaxed performance, wherein there is more time for leaving, resting, and returning without fear of 'missing' the performance. Furthermore, durational performance may also present more processing time to audiences due to material emerging in a 'slower' rate of change.

BFFB's temporal landscape may be **non-linear, but it is not boundless**. Specific portions of duration are enclosed in **'time brackets'**; apparatuses that offer structure to organise the emergent materiality in spacetime. Determinant of the beginning and end of a moment of action, time brackets create a 'sense of

temporal vacuums or time pockets, each following **its own rhythm, tempo, and intensity**' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:132). This quality assists to build the distinct aesthetic worlds in The Zone, which exist in their own 'time zone' of approximately one hour, with a transition ritual – or state of change – in between. Each state is bracketed by a gong being gently hit three times, signifying the end of one state and the simultaneous transition into the start of another.

Time brackets also contain and **direct the performer's score-based action**. For each temporal pocket, performance scores are gathered in 'pools of possibility' – available for the performer to pick up as they please over the duration. This **non-linear structure resists a fixed dramaturgical or narrative arch** to embrace change and in-the-moment flow, wherein each emergent 'doing' of stimprovisation appears 'at a specific but unpredictable moment in time, stabilizing itself in its **permanent state of transition** before ceasing to exist at an equally unforeseeable moment' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:132). In this regard, the temporality of score-based stimprovisation arises **a nascent materiality, bringing attention to the now that evokes a sense of timelessness**, as 'time [becomes] perceptible in the moment in which something appear[s] and then vanishe[s], absorbing all attention for the duration of its appearance' (ibid). Through this heightened perception of the *now*, a neuroqueer temporality emerges as time flows fluid, unfixed, and synchronised to the inner rhythms of bodyminds, through a process of transformation in durational performance.

The Neuroqueer Sphere: A State of Being in Neurodivergent Joy

Sssssssssssssssssssssss

Iiiiiiiiiiiii

Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii

I am

I am

I am

I am a sssssssensory ssssssseeking body

Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii ammm

A ssssssssensory sseeking body

I am

A ssssssssssensory ssseeking body

I am

A ssssssssssensory ssssseeking body

I

I

I

I

I ammmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

I ammmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

I ammmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

I ammmm mmm mmm mmm

I ammmm mmm mmm mmm

I ammmmmmmmm

Mmmmmmmmmmm

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

In *BFFB*, the first state of being we experience is **The Neuroqueer Sphere**. This opening sub-world initiates us into a neuroqueer realm of performance by establishing its non-neuronormative choreographic aesthetic and relational etiquette. The Neuroqueer Sphere is a **state of being in neurodivergent joy**, which

I model through stimpvised performance across **stimscares**⁵⁷ of voice, movement, and object. By playing sensory-seeking scores that embrace the 'loopy' and fluid qualities of **stimbodiment**⁵⁸, I tune into **a flow of sensorial joy** and seek to lead by example to encourage others to adopt a similar state of play in the space. I also seek to emit **a joyful neuroqueer presence** through a **sensorially-stimulating use of voice, movement, and object**; a corporeal performance of a liberated 'embodied psyche' (Walker, 2021:189).

Voice

As **vocality** 'brings forth corporeality ... [and its] **own sensual materiality**', stimpvised vocal performance produces a distinct sensuality of neurodivergent bodily-being (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:125). In *The Neuroqueer Sphere*, **sonic textures of singing, whistling, breathing, speaking, and mouth percussion materialise** as sensorial experience in the moment. Voice emerges through **a pleasurable process of playing and feeling**, not as a product of communicative content. Vocal stimpvisation conjures the neurodivergent behaviour of **echolalia** – derived from Greek *echo*, 'to repeat' and *laliá*, 'speech' or 'talk' – meaning the repetition of words, phrases or sounds (Fields and Marcuse, 2015:463). The Neuroqueer Sphere's materiality evokes this common form of vocal stimping, as **loops of song, sound, and sentence repeat**, and 'oo's, 'mm's, 'ah's form in rhythmic sequences. This echolalic sensibility includes both **verbal stimping** (involving language) and **non-verbal vocal stimping** (outside of language). Humming is a non-linguistic vocal stim that reoccurs in *BFFB*, resonating as **a vibrational sonic undertone of the body**. Humming activates the vagal nerve to create 'the necessary rhythmic vibrations to generate a calming influence on the nervous

⁵⁷ Landscapes of stimping – sites where stimping can unfold

⁵⁸ Embodiments of stimping

system' – **it is voice that self-regulates** to bring bodymind balance so that joy can be experienced (Malchiodi, 2020).

The voice of the Neuroqueer Sphere uses **minimal and heavily deconstructed verbal language**. Detached from society's dominant use for linguistic communication, the sensual materiality of the stimming voice in play 'no longer transmits language; *it is language in which a bodily-being-in-the-world expresses [itself]* and addresses the audience purely' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:130). It is a neuroqueer language of **unmasked vocality; an experience of self-sounding, sensing, and regulating through vocal play** that resists neuronormative performance. The value is not in communicative 'meaning', but through the presence of a sensorial process that expresses the inside out. As a 'material that exists only in "ecstasy"' (ibid), the ephemeral – yet potent – neuroqueer voice fills the space with their own language, building a bridge between their own bodily-being-in-the-world and those of subjects who perceive it.

With the use of a vocal effects loop pedal (VELP), the live stimprovising voice becomes digitally captured to be reproduced, distorted, amplified, and looped. **By looping, layers of vocal melody, texture, and tone can build and co-occur** alongside non-vocal sounds – such as those of objects – to co-exist in the sonic environment. In the Neuroqueer Sphere, the looping process builds **through self-referential dialogue; a playing-along-with-oneself** wherein a soundscape incrementally emerges that self-sustains in the aural space. Such 'loopy' soundscapes create **a sonic presence that straddles the live and non-live**, the here and then, and enables ephemeral materiality to linger and resonate in space. When rhythm is captured, the loop repeats and sustains the pattern to create a sonic pulse and tonal atmosphere that can **baseline and punctuate the duration of performative action**. Vocal effects empower the character of the performer's

voice to change dramatically – transforming their true vocal resonance and opening fantastical new potentialities for vocal expression. Furthermore, **loops emanate the performer's voice and free them** to occupy other modes of performance simultaneously. This creates a **synchronous corporeal presence**, adopting multiple forms at the same time, co-performing alongside themselves, and thus creating more opportunity for self-referential dialogue through their sensual materiality.

The Neuroqueer Sphere forms a **polyphonic, polymorphic expression of vocal stimulating**. This voice is in process; embodied; ever-changing; arising abundant possibilities for self-expression in its own language. Through play with a VELP, the expression of many voices and many sounds become possible through the singular performer. **Manifold and open to change; loops facilitate self-choruses of multi-layered voice, whilst vocal effects morph their sonic identity**. The transformative, fluid materiality of the performer's vocal presence thus manifests an aural 'liminal space of permanent transitions, passages, and transformations' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:128). **It is a voice of becoming**.

Movement

Stimming embodiment first enters the performative realm in The Neuroqueer Sphere. I flow through physical sensorial impulses, stimulating and regulating the bodymind. **Bodily patterns loop and repeat**, as movement oscillates between poles of **open/close, in/out, back/forth**. These repetitive displays traverse the body, patterning through parallel line, figures-of-eight, spiral and circular rotation. It mainly takes a **base on the floor**, offering support and stability to the bodymind at play. The ground forms a **landscape for stimulation** itself weight pours in and pushes away, slides across and peels out; a dialogue between body

and space that activates proprioceptive interoception. Applying force to the floor, I sense my bodily position and movement, **offering balance and equilibrium**. The ground provides a contained site to traverse my flow and presents a restful place to pause with minimal effort. I do not need to hold myself up or be afraid of falling over. **This is the joy of the floor – it is secure grounding.**

Movement of head-tail connection is another significant facet of this choreographic language. Nelson writes that such dances that activate the spine are:

... one[s] of counterweight. At one end of the spine is the head, a bony mass laden with sensitive organs of perception. At the end is the pelvis, a strong bony construction through which force from the legs translates through the torso. The vertebrae of the spine relate the pelvis to the head and thorax in **a constant balancing act of integrated mobility**: When any one part moves, the whole is affected. **The nature of spinal connectivity is change...** there are many possibilities for how the spine changes shape, and for what shapes the spine might take at any particular moment in time (2013:156)

This spinal snaking is **a process of balance and integration**, found in the space between two ends; **through back-and-forth sensing**. It 'defies any singular directionality', forming a physical relationship where 'bodily movements can be organised around multiple points ... [wherein] disparate systems of movement rhythm, support and initiation' become connected (2013:157). This snake-like mobility is **polycentric**⁵⁹; it is **multidirectional** and **does not have a singular centre** of initiation or support (2013:160). Such spinal motion forms a special stim

⁵⁹ Polycentrism is a quality that emerges from West African dance, where 'movement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centres may operate simultaneously' (Gottschild, 2001:33 cited in Nelson, 2013:157)

for me that feels good. It starts internally and ripples across the whole body, slinking across core and into limbs intuitively. It is not movement mindfully coordinated head-to-toe. It flows; waves of soft simultaneous physical dialogue that centres my awareness in the present. It is **calming and sensual**.

Object

The sensory seeking body is also brought into movement through physical engagement with **objects**. Chosen specifically for **the sensorial joy of their colour, texture, sound, and potentialities for action**, objects such as barbie-pink pom poms, silver glitter curtain and crinkly foil emergency blanket come into play for stimulatory action. Through playing the score, **the object's 'ecstasy' is explored sensorially**. My touch, energy and force breathe life into the inanimate object; activating and energising to merge our bodies together through actions of mutual movement, combining the presence of our bodily beings. **Subject and object entangle** to form sculptural configurations, we become enmeshed as 'one' – **I take on its qualities**, and vice versa. Our co-presence through stimulating action is a process of mutual transfiguration.

Such enmeshment forms **tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive sensorial stimulation for the performer**, but incites further **visual stimulation for spectators**. The reflective and light-weight quality of materials may bolster the visual effect as they catch light and air respectively, allowing their materiality to be manipulated and affected by the environment.



*Figure 14. Performing in The Neuroqueer Sphere with a foil blanket, during BFFB2.
Image by Thom Scullion*

Their ecstasies offer further **sensorial stimulation through non-visual means**. The **sound of activated objects** – such as the rhythmic tapping of pom poms on the floor or the persistent crinkling of a scrunched foil blanket – **offer aural stimulation** and create sonic textures and/or rhythms that **can be amplified, distorted, and/or looped** to contribute to atmosphere and effect spectators. The gentle, sensorial amplification of such sounds may incite an effect like **Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR)** – the experience of ‘a tingling, static-like sensation ... in response to specific triggering audio and visual stimuli... [that is] is widely reported to be accompanied by **feelings of relaxation and well-being**’ (Barratt and Davis, 2015:1). Interestingly, **research equates ASMR to a ‘flow-like mental state’** – suggesting that flow may be crucial to achieving the sensations associated with ASMR. Furthermore, crisp sounds (such as metallic foil)

are reported as a common trigger, activating an ASMR response in 64% of participants (2015:6). Therefore, through the sonic sounding of objects in the Neuroqueer Sphere, a distinctly positive sensorial experience could be triggered in the consciousness of spectators that may have a positive effect on wellbeing.

The Shadow Zone: A State of Being in Neurodivergent Pain

I close my eyes

I close my eyes

I close my eyes and I go inside of myself

I close my eyes and I go inside of myself

Inside

Inside

Inside of myself I am small

Inside of myself I am small

And I am tight

And I am holding it all

Inside

I hold it all inside

I go inside of myself

I go inside of myself

I go inside of myself

I go inside of myself

The second sub-world is **The Shadow Zone**. Oppositional to the Neuroqueer Sphere, it is a place of dark headspace; a state of being emotionally dysregulated. It manifests the internal retreat of being 'in your head' to explore a state ill mental health. Qualities of overthinking, hypervigilance, masking, and

rumination take form through stimprovisation, as I exorcise experiences from my past in the present moment of performance. The Shadow Zone possesses a dark, sometimes disturbing, intensity as I externalise and embody psychological pain. However, it is important that **I remain in a positive, light, and embodied place** when accessing this mode of performance. It is intense play wherein I still access a state of flow, as a positive experience⁶⁰.

The Grotesque Gargiryle

The Shadow Zone is the realm of **the emotional neurodivergent woman**. Often perceived as a 'drama queen', a 'cry baby', an 'attention seeker' who is making a 'scene' and in a 'state'. **She is too much** with excessive feeling and behaviour. She *overreacts*, *overshares* and is *overemotional*. Unable to contain herself, she bubbles over and **crosses normative social thresholds** with an intensity that can be uncomfortable, disturbing, or despicable. She is deemed **hysterical**. I am familiar with this state of being emotionally dysregulated and the critical, dismissive manner in that neuronormative patriarchy perceives it. During meltdowns when in need of compassionate care, my feelings have frequently been invalidated and shunned. *Eyeroll, 'Aby's crying again, cue the music'*. Consequently, I internalised this shame; subsequently suppressing my feelings through masking to protect myself from criticism. Yet, **repressing feelings exacerbates the situation**, it further disconnects one from interoceptive connection and the ability to self-regulate the bodymind into balance. This consequently amplifies the need to mask, maintaining a state of emotional instability and a harmful cycle of pain. The social order of patriarchal

⁶⁰ In *BFFB2*, this was surprisingly the most fun section to play – it felt satisfying to take up so much space with my expression of emotions. The frame of a persona gave me permission to unleash extremes and be silly with it, which was darkly playful and incredibly cathartic. After being persistently stigmatised for being 'intense' and 'too much' with my feelings, it was very empowering to lean into it and resist making myself smaller to be palatable.

neuronormativity recognises crying as a signal of crisis, problem, or weakness, and disregards it as a natural, important act of self-regulation. **Crying is a bodymind in process seeking emotional equilibrium, denying it maintains a state of being dysregulated.**

This is the state of **the Gargiryle**, who dwells in the Shadow Zone. As a performance persona who is **'making a spectacle of herself ... [with] a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries'**, she embodies Russo's notion of **the female grotesque** (1994:53). An ugly 'unbecoming' creature, **she exposes herself**, oversteps the patriarchal and neuronormative social codes that demand she 'contain herself'. If the female grotesque is an 'open, protruding, extending, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change' (1994:62-63), the neurodivergent Gargiryle becomes that of **grotesque feminine consciousness and social performance**, a state of emotional processing that opposes the 'monumental, static, closed, and sleek' classical standard (ibid). She is exposed, instable, rough; messily secreting tears and snot; protruding a wobbly bottom lip with a shaky quality of voice. She is quick to trust and spill her innards, impulsive and naïve, in search for acceptance and connection. **Boundary-less and unhinged**, the disorderly Gargiryle becomes **the monstrous-feminine**, 'what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (Creed, 1986). Cast off from societal morals and norms, Kristeva's concept of **the object** refers to 'that which does not "respect borders, positions, rules ... [and] disturbs identity, system, order"' (cited in Creed, 1986:45). The Shadow Zone is Gargiryle's lair of abjection – a space that she fills with a performance of melodramatic inflated emotional intensity, extending the 'drama queen' into disturbing, unsettling darkness.

Gargiryle: Dysregulation, Rumination, Intrusive Thoughts

Her face stretches, contorts, and is **cartoonishly expressive**, as an outpouring of sustained wails, cries, and shrieks emit from her gaping mouth. Oscillating between piercing high pitches and low, gravelly groans, **she sounds a spiky resonance**; an intimate relationship between body and voice that pierces the spectators' bodies; a 'process of embodiment' with distinct dysregulated ups and downs (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:125). **Negative thought loops of rumination materialise** using a loop pedal and run-on repeat, enclosing all in a claustrophobic sound world. *'I go inside of myself'* sings and quakes over and over, **producing a 'loopy' inner consciousness** that underscores Gargiryle's presence and action. Over this state, she adopts a sing-songy tone, possessed by **patronising voices of dismissal**, cooing statements suchlike: *'Are you a little baby? Aww... it's nothing to cry about now, is it? Who's a drama queen? Who's a good crier?'* Through her performance, **Gargiryle exorcises the internalised shame around her emotions and speaks back**, demonstrating the ugliness of such indifference by performing it herself. She has **intrusive thoughts** but doesn't speak their words; they manifest in a corporeality of tight body and ticcing sounds⁶¹. **A loop of percussive tutting tics repeats**, forming a sharp rhythmic base that drives the body. She is tense, her fists clenched, shoulders to ears, eyes tight

⁶¹ Over the pandemic, at a time when I was mentally unwell, I developed some tics for the first time. Away from unsafe neuronormative world when unmasking in my home, physical and verbal tics developed subconsciously as a mode of responding to intrusive thoughts. As my mind wandered to dark thought spirals of self-hatred or critique, my bodymind began to respond with a sudden sharp sound and/or movement. This works to take me back to the present moment and exorcise the thought. Tics emerged of finger clicking, one syllable words like 'fuck' and 'wow', alongside other vocal sounds such as a whistle or, more commonly, a tut - a soft click of the tongue. The latter also emerged in repetition as a 'thinking noise', a vocal stim to assist cognition. The awareness of such vocal stimulating entered my performance practice and expanded my investigation into choreographic stimulating to consider the voice. From here, I became increasingly interested in the sensorial experience of singing, whistling, speaking, humming, breathing and other vocal sounds, and their self-regulatory, stimulating and/or soothing effects.

and head down. She jerks in time, her body beating to the metronomic tics, as she makes herself **small and closed**, not taking up space.



Figure 15. Playing as Gargiryle in The Shadow Zone, during BFFB2. Image by Thom Scullion

Gargiryle: Masking

From her tightness, a rhythm of nodding and 'mmhm'ing emerges. These social signals of agreement and understanding then morph to form the opposite, as an upside-down mouth and quivering cry-like moan change the colour of her state. With strain and force, she then returns to nodding and mmhm-ing, to consequently break down again. Gargiryle **oscillates between these two paradoxical performances of self**, transmuting between masks of a stretched smile with bright vocal pitch and a gaping frown with groaning hum – the former

maintained through force, the latter bubbling through in release. She swings between, the tight smile becoming **increasingly potent, pained**, and difficult to maintain, until she decides she has finally had enough and stops the ticcing loop. Gargiryle slowly releases her facial tension to reveal **a blank gaze**, staring in one direction. **She releases her mask**, the adopted face of neuronormativity; **an internalised force that suppresses feeling** to maintain a docile, placid, false social performance. The unsettling intensity of this embodied process of performance exhibits the energy, tension, discomfort in that way of being, and asks an audience to bear witness.

Gargiryle: Vulnerable People Pleasing

For Gargiryle's final act, **she meets the audience's gaze to perform for them**. Voice digitally doubled and distorted; she sings the chorus to Britney's Slave 4 U. *I'm a slave for you, I cannot hold it, I cannot control it baby. I can't deny it, I'm not trying to fight it baby.* She takes them in with the 'creaking, growling affectation' of **vocal fry** that Ms. Spears is infamous for (Thompson, 2016:1). This quality is **both materially and socially noisy** (ibid) – it prompts the 'material dimension of communication; and ... [the] long history of **feminine noises that are heard as unwanted, trivial and unattractive**' (2016:5). Yet, it can also stir intimacy, tenderness and evoke feminine sexual pleasure (2016:8). Unwanted and unappealing to the patriarchal order, whilst simultaneously evoking lust, **Gargiryle's playful use of vocal fry stirs an abject corporeality** that 'solicits, disturbs, fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced' (Kristeva and Lechte, 1982:125). It is **sensual material to entice but is not for her pleasure**.

Against this haunting loop, **Gargiryle subtly solicits herself**, seeking to please through her performance. She faces away from the audience and **lets them take her in from behind**. Moving slowly to present her ass, jiggle her rump, snake her hips. Gargiryle makes herself **a sexually suggestive spectacle**, inadvertently revealing her vulnerability and lack of boundaries. Situated betwixt subject and object positions, her hauntingly seductive self-presentation is abject; **she crosses thresholds of private and public**. For the male gaze, she performs **as both an object of desire and a subject of female immorality**. Gargiryle splays herself across the back wall, a backdrop to press against, rest, cower, and hide. Here, her energy shifts. She turns inwards and hides her face, lightly striking the wall with her forehead and fists – **energies of fear, frustration, and shame** emerge through her sexualised performance.

Gargiryle has people-pleasing tendencies. She lowers her thresholds to meet the desires of others as a bid to be accepted. This is **a reported characteristic of ADHD women**, who are perceived as **'good little girls' who 'work very hard to please'**, desperate to be compliant to fit in (Taylor and Keltner, 2002:70-71). Women and girls with ADHD also **demonstrate impulsive and risk-taking behaviour** and are more likely to engage in substances and sex at an early age (2002:70). Moreover, their **inability to perceive risk** could further **expose them to situations of harm**, which may be bolstered by their **inattentive appearance signalling them as vulnerable targets** for offenders (Snyder, 2015). These points culminate in research findings that evidence women with ADHD experience **'sexual victimization at significantly higher rates than women without ADHD'** (2015:1376). This parallels female autistic experience, as research finds **9 out of 10 autistic women have been victims of sexual violence**, potentially due to a myriad of factors that include **'experiencing difficulties in social communication**, such as decoding hidden intentions and emotions of others, understanding implicit communication and elements of context' (Cazalis, et.al 2022:3). I recognise these

factors in my own lived experience which becomes cathartically exorcised through Gargiryle's grotesque performance in The Shadow Zone.

The After Dark Zone: A State of Being in Neurodivergent Pleasure

Mmmmmmah

Aaaaaaaaaah

Aaaaaaaaaah

Aaaaaaaaaah

Aaaaaaaaaah

Aaaaaaaaaah

Aaaaaaaaaah

Aaaaaaaaaah love to love you babyyyy

Aaaaaaaaaah love to love you babyyyy

Aaaaaaaaaah love to love you babyyyy

Haaaaaaaaah love to love you babyy

Aaaaaaaaaah love to love you babyyyy

The After Dark Zone (ADZ) forms the final phase of *BFFB's* diachronic journey. The Gargiryle is left in the shadows, but her sexual energy lingers and takes a shift in intention; **now the performer pleases herself**. As a climax, this state of being accumulates the joy of the Neuroqueer Sphere and the pain of the Shadow Zone into a state of neurodivergent pleasure. The ADZ seeks the 'feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment' through sensorial performance (brown, 2019:13), as an act of Pleasure Activism. The ADZ is **a world of sensory self-satisfaction**, reclaiming embodied sensuality outside of neuronormative and patriarchal conditions. It is a state of performance that evokes the **sensual, stimulating,**

titillating, arousing, and shifts the Zone's atmosphere into one more distinctly 'adult'.

As lighting of hot pink saturates the space, an atmosphere is formed for playful, sultry, and fiercely feminine pleasure-oriented stimpromisation. The ADZ stirs an energy of what occurs after nightfall, what happens when the lights go down – on the dancefloor or in the bedroom. It is a state inspired by nightclubs, as dopamine inducing places fuelled by collective dancing and the allure of intimate encounters – an adult playground to let loose and arouse play, excitement, and pleasure. The ADZ stimulates a world of 'eros', the ancient Greek concept of sensual love; an energy in which Plato recognises as a route for transforming consciousness and being in union with the Divine (Mineo, 2005:102). From 'eros', the 'erotic' emerges.



Figure 16. Performing in The After Dark Zone, during BFFB1. Image by Tui Makkonen

The Erotic

Audre Lorde articulates **the power of the erotic**. For her, it is a **'resource within'**; a life force of women, a creative energy of true knowledge and feminine power (cited in Brown, 2019:27). Deeply female and spiritual, the erotic is **not about our actions but rather 'how acutely and fully we feel in the doing'** (2019:29). Such feelings of true fulfilment thus manifest the erotic as a 'nurturer of all our deepest knowledge' (2019:31), opening to a **self-truth** whereby we can understand **our capacity for joy**. This connects us deeply inwards to ourselves, inciting an experience of fullness which is transformational, as once one experiences 'this depth of feeling' and recognises 'its power in honour and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves' (2019:28-29).

For Lorde, **the erotic empowers transgression of the suppressive forces of oppressive systems**, extending one's desire for life beyond the 'distortions we may find within ourselves [that keep] us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined' (2019:32). **It reveals and empowers oneself**, unlocks one's own definition and knowingness of self, and works to reclaim one's capacity for joy by resisting the conformity that denies one's truth. In this regard, the erotic – as that 'firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognised feeling' (2019:27) – becomes **a powerful tool for neurodivergent unmasking**.

Embracing the erotic enables a reconnection with one's self-knowledge and capacity for feeling in defiance of neuronormative conformity and expands sensorial and expressive modes of mind-bodily being outside of the distortions of masking. Through this lens, **stimming emerges as an erotic self-practice**; a state of being that leads to a depth of self-feeling, truth, and joy outside of

neuronormative performance. It is a life force, a creative energy that connects us inwards with how we 'feel in the doing', towards desire for an unrestrained fullness and aliveness in our being. The ADZ embraces the powerful force of the erotic through sensuous stimpovisation, enabling a site for pleasurable neuroqueer bodily being in performance.

Erotic Dance

The choreographic language of the ADZ is fomented by **my recreational training in pole dance and erotic floorwork**. With its origins in sex work⁶², the choreographic language of such erotic dance is inherently sexually provocative, rooted in consumption for the objectifying male gaze. However, despite its patriarchal and capitalist underpinnings, the phenomenon of pole culture has expanded into a site of **empowerment, solidarity, and community**. I resonate with the claim of the pole studio as 'the most loving, feminine, supportive environment that I have ever come across' (Holland, 2010:60). I find pole to be **the most**

⁶²As pole dancing progressively moves into the mainstream, it becomes increasingly ethically important to acknowledge its origins as a practice of sex work. As a recreational pole dancer, I stand in solidarity with sex workers and thank the legacy of professional dancers who have borne pole as an art form. I acknowledge my privilege as someone who practices pole but doesn't experience the social power dynamics present for those dancing professionally in strip clubs and lap dancing establishments. When drawing from such sex work practices in my work, I have a responsibility to use my voice as an ally to bring attention to issues that affect the lives of sex workers today.

Currently, sex workers in the UK are at significant risk from the potential implementation of the Nordic (or Swedish) Model of Sex Work. In theory, this legal model 'criminalises the purchase of sexual services and the clients of sex workers' (Swarm Collective, 2020). Yet, research shows that the model is more harmful for sex workers where it is implemented. Reports find no change with the number of people entering sex work, whilst levels of danger and experiences of crime rise, with worsening behaviour from clients (Sex Workers Alliance Ireland, ND:6). Sex workers are instead calling for full decriminalisation of sex work. I advise you to read further on this issue, as further detail here extends beyond the discourse of this research. I recommend organisations SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement) and Decrim Now, both of which have excellent resources to learn more and take action to support greater safety for sex workers currently practicing in the UK.

accessible class environment for me as a neurodivergent dancer, which has gifted me with my first long-term 'technical' training practice. This journey has been **transformative – physically and emotionally**. In just over a year, I am significantly physically stronger with increased levels of flexibility, control, bodily awareness, and capacity to pick up material.

Pole has offered **a safe space for me as a learner**, kindling joy in a class environment that has increased my self-acceptance and confidence in my ability as a dancer. This is all largely to do with the solidarity of my fellow polers – instead of being competitive and individualistic, **the atmosphere is of collective support**. We mutually celebrate success and persistently help one another. My pole peers are loving and patient, we repetitively mark sequences together and they offer physical touch, carefully wo-manhandling me into the right shape. We always meet challenge with humour and there is an energy of acceptance – even when normative social codes are broken, such as emotional wobbles or unfortunate wardrobe malfunctions. **Pole class is a fiercely feminine place of joy** that offers me enough **emotional safety** to learn, be challenged, and grow in a collective dance environment.

Furthermore, the physical language of erotic dance is pleasurable for me as a neurodivergent dancer. **At pole, I am *feeling myself*** – quite literally as it often involves sensual self-touch. It empowers and reconnects me with **feminine movement – fluid, soft, wavy, slinky**. I recognise **pole dancing as stimulating**. As a highly sensual practice, it is very much about ***feeling*** – with touch, proprioceptive, and vestibular sensing prominent. The pole and/or floor present **a grounded, secure landscape** for a stimulating and playful relationship between bodymind and environment, inner and outer sensing. Plus, unsurprisingly, **spinning around and being upside down on a pole is highly stimulating!** This brings me into

balance. Pole is often a lifeline for my emotional regulation – providing physical and social stimulation that brings bodymind equilibrium.

Pole is also risky, and it is sexy. Research shows **ADHDers significantly demonstrate more hypersexual behaviour and sexual risk-taking** than non-ADHDers (Hertz et. al, 2022). I have observed a significant neurodivergent presence at the studio I attend, and thus sense pole may be particularly attractive to that demographic as **a positive, creative, and safe outlet for hypersexual and risk-taking behaviour.** The ADZ channels my recreational erotic dancing into professional practice, presenting a performance of titillating embodiment open to voyeurs but connected to my own pleasure, empowerment, and fun.

Stimming as an Erotic Act

Biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber argues a thesis of **erotic ecology**, wherein the **erotic is a fundamental natural force and principle of reality** intrinsically connected to love, which he recognises as an ecological phenomenon. Weber understands love as a 'practice of enlivenment' (2017:5) across the vast biosphere of natural life; a principle wherein two poles come into contact and are mutually transformed through relationship, in the search for greater aliveness. **Love is a 'principle of a fulfilling equilibrium between the individual and whole', wherein the erotic 'manifests as that force that causes beings to inexhaustibly seek this equilibrium'** – it is the charge that attracts poles and desires them into contact (2017:7). Weber understands the erotic as vital to aliveness, he writes:

...being in the world is primarily an erotic encounter, an encounter of meaning through contact, an encounter of being oneself through the significance of others... we experience the fundamental erotics of being

touched by the world, and of touching it in return, as **a life-bestowing power...** we long to connect with another... in order to become ourselves (2017:xiii-xiv)

Thus, living in the world is inherently erotic. Through encounters of mutual contact, we are transformed; we find our being through relationship between self and other. As a neurodivergent mode of bodily-being in the world, **I argue stimming as an erotic act.** As sensorial encounters between the self and environment, **stimming forms an interaction that seeks to fulfil equilibrium between the individual and the whole,** bringing balance between internal and external realities. As non-verbal, physical encounters of meaning-making through contact, **stimming is an embodied process(ing) and fluid state of becoming;** a practice of enlivenment in the here and now, that can enact a life-bestowing power in neuronormative society. The ADZ embodies the notion of stimming as an erotic act within a performative ecosystem of erotic stimprovisation. Through sensorial encounters with the network of things, people, and atmosphere of the space, **the neuroqueer bodymind becomes themselves through non-neuronormative contact.**

Erotic Stimprovisation

A) As Play and Self-Love

Stimprovisation is neurodivergent play in performance, as a bodymind plays sensory scores as a form of 'living joy' (2017:134). Weber argues **play as an essential facet of his thesis of erotic ecology,** which he understands as an integral part of life. Having fun is the 'model for existence that is not subjected to functionalism but boldly carries forth the natural history of freedom and

expresses individuality' (2017:135) – **play is nature's mode of being that resists productive actuality**, it is not a task of practical use; it is for living. Nonetheless, Weber determines play as highly valuable as **it creates relationships from which we can comprehend our own aliveness**. It is the 'sculptural work with the raw materials of that "pure aliveness" that [forms] the deepest core of our experience' (2017:135-136); play is a mode of being that 'reveals itself as a practice of loving the world' (2017:136). I extrapolate this to recognise **playful stimming as a practice of loving oneself**. Through stimming, **an erotic charge of sensorial curiosity**, impulse and/or pleasure – *Oh, I want to touch it! Oh, that feels nice!* – **brings self and other into mutual contact towards equilibrium and aliveness, as an act of love**.

In capitalistic, neuronormative western society, whereby neuroqueer embodiments are deemed 'worthless' due to their inability to produce a product of 'meaningful value', **playful stimming reveals itself as a self-loving act of resistance**; a mode of being outside of neuronormative constraints, for the benefit of one's own living. For Weber, this love is 'not just a pleasant feeling' but is a practice of 'creative enlivenment' (2017:9) to become transformed, in pursuit of more life. Stimpvised play is a performative practice of neuroqueer creative enlivenment. Through sensorial encounters in the here and now, playing scores frees the bodymind through their individual bodily expression, and forms an embodied process(ing) that manifests their aliveness and exudes that presence for spectators. **Stimprovisation discovers a playful practice of neuroqueer self-love**, a mode of unmasking in a performative realm that empowers the sensorial joy, freedom, and pleasure of the performer, whilst resisting neuronormative, capitalist standards as **a necessary act of self-care and preservation**.

B) As Encounter and Becoming

Through sensorially seeking erotic exchanges between bodymind, object, sound, and space, the ADZ forms a **choreography of self-stimulation and pleasure**. In such encounters, **relationships are formed whereby object and performing subject come into contact through physical touch and play**. Their ecstasies merge through interaction as their bodily beings entangle and are mutually perceived in moment of performance. The significance of their bodies shifts for spectators, combining in contact to arise new meanings and sensorial impressions, as both become physically transformed through contact that breathes aliveness. Objects become animated and are bestowed agency through interaction. In return, the objects present a life-giving experience of **sensorial joy and pleasure that enlivens the stimprovising performer**. Through contacts of stimulating, they are **stimulated, soothed, regulated; becoming more of themselves**, and further empowered as they transgress neuronormativity by basking openly in their own sensorial pleasure. Thus, revealing an unmasked neuroqueer bodily-being that manifests a fullness of self in the moment of performance, counter to neuronormative, capitalist choreographic aesthetic values. As a sensorial dialogue of reciprocal encounter, **erotic stimprovisation forms a mutual becoming of subject and object**.

C) As Erotic Touch

Transformative encounters of stimprovisation are interactions of **'erotic touch'**, following Weber's principle that **'two sides always enter into relationship such that both come away changed'** (2017:22). Such choreographies of erotic touch are **'the outcome of creative exchange... alteration[s] with meaningful results'** (2017:22-23). Yet, such touch is not just solely achieved through the skin. Weber states that

when considering the 'sense functions that enable perception, we find that **the erotic phenomenon of contact** ... is in effect here as well' – in fact, **all perception is touch** (2017:29). Therefore, as stimpromisation embodies multisensory perception, it can be recognised as a mode of **polysensorial erotic touch**. It is a performance of contact **across multiple modes of perception**.

Let's take auditory stimpromisation, for example. It has no physical materiality, yet sensory perceptions of both making and perceiving sound are encounters of touch. Objects activated through performance become heard as sound waves travel and are channelled through cartilage of outer ear, they then touch the inner hairs of the cochlear to be sensorially perceived by the brain. With vocal self-sounding, air passes into contact with the body, muscles around the vocal folds and diaphragm activate, and the vibrations of sound waves resonate in the cavities of the head. The sound is felt, it touches and is sensed by the body, forming meaningful and creative results. **Through sensory perception, contact is made between the bodymind and something other**, the internal and the external. Stimpromisation is a doing of sensory perception, **a process of erotic touch** in the moment of performance that **manifests creative exchange and transformation**.

Although not bound to contact with the skin, **doings of physical erotic touch** are prominent in the ADZ. In this state of being, stimpromisation becomes heightened sensorially as **an interrelated 'three-way' between bodymind, object and environment**, a triangular dialogue of physical touch. Objects have been chosen specifically for their erotic charge, such as a marabou feather boa and black PVC gloves⁶³. Through impulse and curiosity, **I am drawn into contact with them; I**

⁶³In my future vision for *BFFB*, I envision the use of a pole in the ADZ. I wish to incorporate the choreographic language of erotic dancing, but also utilise the large object more broadly for its sensual qualities; smooth, slidey, shiny, sturdy, and spinny. I am in talks with a neurodivergent electronic music producer, Liina Turtonen (who also happens to be a recreational poler) to amplify its surface and create algorithms that respond to my touch with sound. The pole then further

'love' how they feel, look, sound, and move, alluring sensorial pleasure through play. Through encounters of erotic touch with such objects, **the skin forms a vital landscape for sensorial perception of both self and other**; the physical boundary where one ends and the other begins. Weber considers touch and its impact on reality.

He refers to phenomenological thinker Merleau-Ponty and his concept of **the 'flesh of the world'**, which understands that **'all experiences in reality [are] reciprocal...** [forming] a communication web made up of the experiences of individuals' (Weber, 2017:126). This web of worldly flesh is neither matter, mind, nor substance but is rather **an 'element of being'** (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:139), wherein **'everything we perceive is connected with us such that it also perceives us'** (Weber, 2017:126). For Weber, this mutual perception forms an **'erotic connection to reality'**, wherein **through feeling the world, one feels themselves and vice versa – from touch, reality emerges**. The erotic touch of stimpromisation is **'flesh of the world'**, a reciprocal experience between the boundary of object and skin of the sensing subject; contact that unfolds reality through the moment of performance. Through the sensorial significance of another, **the performer *feels* and becomes themselves**, unfolding an element of being, an erotic reality in the here and now.

The playful erotic touch of stimpromisation in the ADZ takes us **into a more 'adult' context**. **Sexual themes emerge** through sensorial encounters between bodymind, object, environment, and atmosphere, stirring the conventional meaning of erotic as that **'arousing or satisfying sexual desire'** (Dictionary.com, 2023).

becomes an instrument to sensorially play in performance. I am excited for these further developments.

Performing Erotic Touch in The After Dark Zone

Action in the here and now. Eyes closed; she encounters the microphone. Grasping it in her palm, she brings its tip gently to her lips and breathes onto, into it. As warm air releases from her open mouth, the tool captures and loops her aspirant intimacy, amplifying her sonic sensuous corporeality. On top, she layers live voice; tension through the outbreath breaks her smooth exhale, as her vocal folds vibrate together to produce a growling vocal fry. She is now touching herself. Fingers caress bare legs and work their way up, across her shape; gently tracing her own edges and bodily boundary. She flips herself over, face turned to the side and resting on the floor. Her hips rise and gyrate in circular rotation, groaning lightly as she grinds in and away. On all fours now, she snakes her spine, waves through her body to land knees and forearms to the floor. She twerks, her ass bounces and so does the quality of her breath, rhythmically beating into the phallus of microphone that she holds in front of her face. She gazes just above it and pulses back and forth on her knees, then switches position; she dangles it by the cord to hang from above, looking down on her. It makes soft contact with her face, an encounter of gentle friction between its end and her nose, lips, cheek. She feels it, it feels her. She is here, here it is. Now, like this. Like this, now. It feels nice.

She moves on to find a new playmate. Lying on her back, legs spread and hips high, she meets a length of fluffy, light marabou feather. It stretches between her hands; one overhead, one at her pubis; its soft body spans her soft body, which thrusts to meet it in smooth waves, rippling from torso to toe. Desire buries her face in feather; she moans a soft hum as it tenderly drapes across her eyes. Vision obscured by its fluff, her hands rise to cup it against her face; peach skin sandwiches white feather, as their surfaces meet in mutual embrace. Soft sensual strokes across the sensitive landscape of a face. She feels it, it feels her. She is here, here it is. Now, like this. Like this, now. It feels nice.

Mouth agape, she penetrates the opening of the object; five warm fleshy fingers slide in with ease. Stretching her handspan, she rolls her fingers, stimulating the insides of the black glove. A ménage à trois of feather, skin, and PVC. The boa, wrapped delicately around her neck, forms a leash from above that she holds with her gloved hand. Now, the other PVC twin joins the party. Careful not to drop the leash, she places the limp glove's fingertips between her teeth. Gaze upward towards the hand that leads her, her touch traces the smooth blackness to find the glove's orifice. Softly, she enters, plunging elbow deep. Yet, she requires assistance to fully fill the cavity with her flesh; she needs to use her mouth. Her bite grips the glove downwards as she slides further inside, she wiggles her fingers, filling it out. Smooth feather scissors between shiny PVC fingers, slipping softly again and again through the crevice. She feels it, it feels her. She is here, here it is. Now, like this. Like this, now. It feels nice.

She is inside of them; the gloves forming a protective barrier to the outside world. Yet, she can still make pleasurable contact. Arm outstretched; she slowly drags her open palm across the surface underneath her. The friction between floor and glove sounds a frisson, as squeaks and creaks tightly crackle through their mutual contact. She enjoys the sounds of her impact. She further stirs sonic pleasure through motions that rub, stroke, knead, and grind the players together. Atop the squeaky soundscape, she begins to smoothly vocalise, 'aaaaaaaah, love to love you baby'. As she sings, she writhes. Her touch, ever hungry; hands of glossy PVC fondle themselves, the floor, bare thigh, and land upon soft face; stroking downwards. Touch that traverses the landscape of her features. They find her open mouth and cross her threshold. Outside touches in, inside protrudes out; her eager tongue licks its width, spreading spit across the gloves' sliding surface. Slightly muffling her song, the oral stimulation continues; saliva-covered hands repeat their strokes of contact, smearing her face with her own wetness.

She feels it all, it all feels her. She senses herself here, here it all senses her. Now, like this; she is alive. She is alive; like this, now. A network of connected sensorial perceptions, to be sensorially perceived by a network in connection. All unfolding in the present moment; in the here and now, all are becoming. Mmmmmmmmmmm, yes. It feels nice!



Figure 17. Copy image for BFFB that evokes the quality of stimming as erotic touch. Image taken during BFFB1, by Tui Makkonen.

Erotic Voyeurism

She performs intimate sensuous **encounters to benefit herself**, but she is not in privacy. The erotic stimpromisation of the ADZ **makes public such sensuousness**. The erotic charge and sexual suggestiveness of the performance's materiality incites a shift, whereby **spectator becomes voyeur**. From the French to mean 'one who views or inspects' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2023:C), the audience of voyeurs watch her intimate performance and become **stimulated through visual means**. However, this is not a doing of sexual voyeurism. Unlike that 'paraphilic' practice, the subject is consenting and aware to being perceived. The acts performed are not explicitly sexual either, although are highly sensual **which may be arousing**. As physical encounters of erotic touch, **erotic stimpromisation forms an erotic performance by a bodymind emanating an erotic presence**. In the moment of performance, voyeurs encounter such eroticism, forming an exchange which too is erotic. **The erotic charge of the performer's aura brings the voyeur into contact** whereby, without crossing physical boundaries of touch, both poles come into mutual perception. Through their gaze they feel one another in the performance playspace, inciting an aliveness that stimulates an element of being in connection.

This process is true for all stimpromised performance, however as the ADZ's materiality is increasingly intimate, sensorial, and stimulating with sexual undertones, this has **a specific effect on the autopoietic feedback loop** and the energy that circulates in the space. Tonal shifts in what is perceived through the performance's materiality change how audience receive it⁶⁴, subsequently

⁶⁴ I noticed this with *BFFB2*. Staff members of the venue popped into my performance experiment at two different times over its duration. In the Neuroqueer Sphere, their gaze is fixed on me and my action. Whereas, in the ADZ, their gaze is much more tentative. They often look away from or just

affecting what they emanate into the space which changes the atmosphere. As the ADZ is arguably **neuroqueer erotica**, a non-neuronormative erotic corporeal matter, it presents **a more risqué state of being** in The Zone; an ether of sensorial excitement and heightened perception that may stimulate arousal.

Erotic Performance for Neurodivergent Audiences

Bringing an **erotic performance specifically to neurodivergent audiences is radical**. Yet, associations of relaxed performance as 'family friendly' environments may produce assumptions that they cannot **comprise 'adult' material**. Furthermore, neurodivergent learning-disabled adults can often be treated as children, with a common example of such infantilisation being 'the **disbelief that a person with a developmental disability can experience sexual desire**' (Irvine, 2019:11). They are often regarded as asexual, with sexuality and erotic experience deemed not appropriate. Joanna Grace writes about **the importance of erotic experience for 'sensory beings'** – a term she uses for those who experience the world sensorially, rather than 'linguistic beings' who navigate the world through their acquisition of language. She states:

Erotic touch is a sensory experience ... valued very, very highly in life. Having a disability should not mean a person is prevented from exploring this experience. To forbid access to sexuality is to forbid someone from a fundamental part of being human (2018:104)

The ADZ challenges neuronormative beliefs that exclude sensory beings from accessing both radical dance work and encounters with the erotic. Following the

past me, one picks up a book of mine and thumbs through it. I sense some discomfort from them, an awkwardness in their body language.

sharing of *BFFB1*, I chatted with a **young autistic man** (in his early-mid 20s) who offered feedback. Smiling, he excitedly said *'it was like my first trip to a strip club!'*. Visiting such an establishment can be a sexual rite of passage – a site for one's first erotic encounter or the last evening of 'freedom' before marriage. Parallel to the rest of the sex industry, strip clubs are rooted in cis-heterosexual patriarchy; dominated and controlled by men. However, cultural shifts are opening opportunity for people of all genders and sexual orientations to engage in such erotic experiences. Reportedly, **the consumer base of strip clubs is changing**, with an increased number of women patrons seeking same-sex erotic dances (Wosick-Correa and Joseph, 2008). However, **the same cannot be reported for disabled customers** as barriers to equitable access persist, maintaining exclusion from such avenues to explore erotic experience safely and appropriately.

Seemingly for one young autistic person, *BFFB1* supported a sense of **involvement in a cultural rite of passage normatively disallowed** for him, which was thrilling. There is potential for *BFFB* to offer an experience of **gentle, creative erotica for those most forbidden access**. Distinctly alternative to a strip club environment, the ADZ can form a gentle erotic experience **through the neurodivergent cultural language of stimming** and hold it in a **playful bubble of fantasy**. However, such an erotic exchange for neurodivergent audiences is highly experimental, in the sense **that it is radical but also that it is untested** and, at present, solely hypothetical.

There is a lot at risk with exploring intimate, erotic, and potentially vulnerable, material for such complex audience demographic. In future developments of *BFFB*, that risk **will need to be carefully navigated and researched**, with appropriate consultation from experts alongside procedural trials prior to premiere. Just as physical touch is not permitted in clubs of erotic dancing, it will be a matter of safety to enact the same boundary for all in the ADZ. **Agreements**

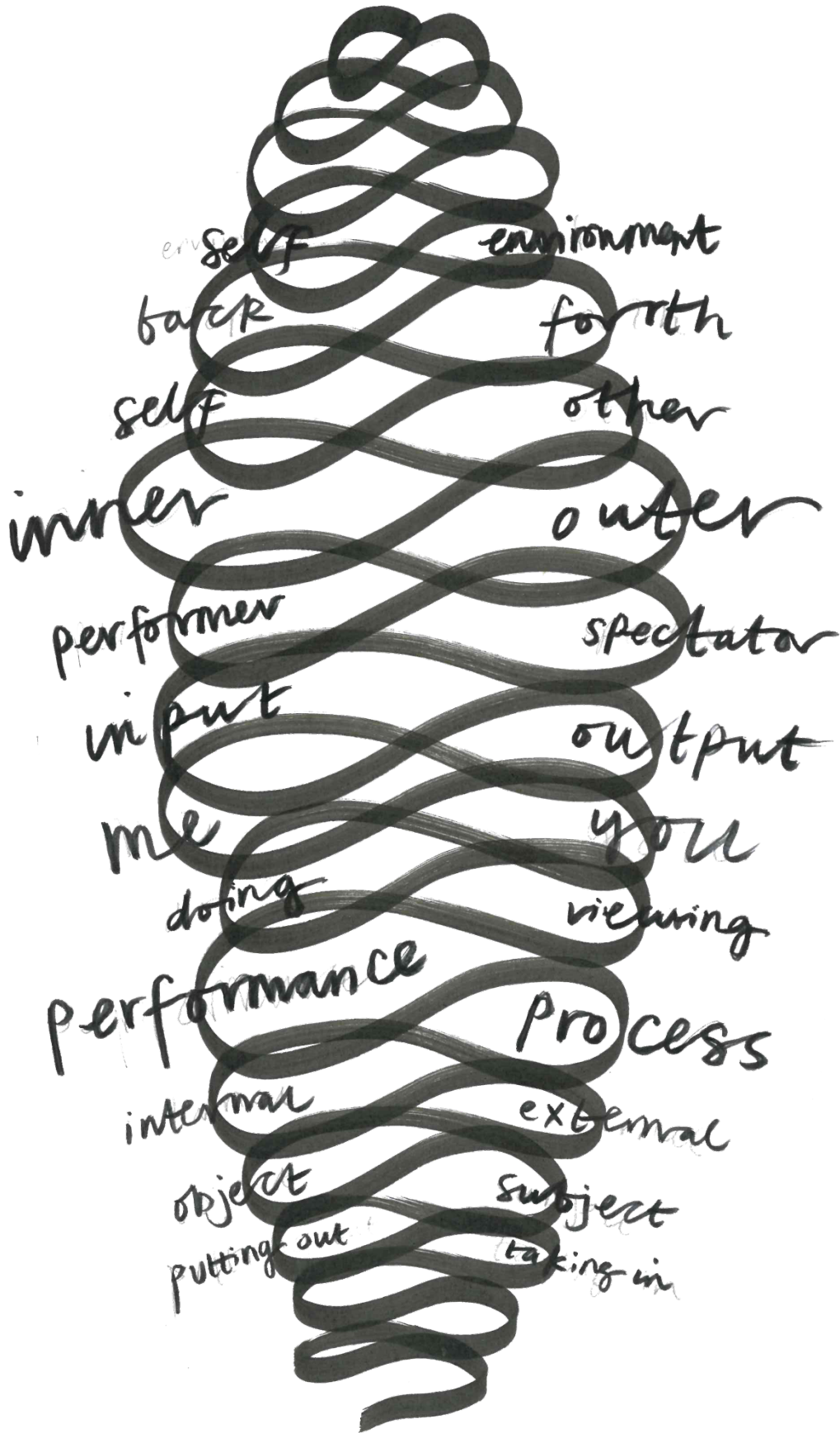
around consent, personal privacy, and appropriateness – alongside practical methods to uphold them in the performance space – **will be incredibly important to develop and communicate clearly to audiences** in accessible means. Furthermore, in the spirit of consent, it is important to remember that experiencing **the ADZ is not obligatory**. A strength of the durational relaxed model of *BFFB* is that **audiences can choose what states of being they zone in to**. If the erotic nature of the ADZ feels unsafe or uncomfortable, then they need not be there. Clear communication outlining what to expect ahead of the event will be essential, so people can consent with their presence.

11. Conclusion

At the end. In the here and the now.

Through a process of 'disordering' dance, my practice and identity as a neuroqueer choreographer emerges. More broadly, a mode of choreography is proposed that honours natural human neurodiversity and seeks modes of creating, performing, and experiencing dance that encourages and enlivens neurodivergent embodiments and consciousnesses. Neuroqueer choreography destabilises the pervasive neuronormativity of Western dance tradition to create environments to liberate neurodivergent (mind)bodily-being through dance. Such practice nurtures collective togetherness; multisensorial engagement; bodymind equilibrium; neurodivergent joy; zoning into flow; and dialogue between one's internal and external realities, in the here and the now.

Neuroqueer choreography is multiplicitous, expansive, and polymorphic; the potentialities for form are abundant; transformative potentials abound. 'Disordering Dance' articulates one distinct doing of neuroqueering a choreographic practice. As a contribution to knowledge, it wishes for the instigation of an ongoing feedback loop. Wherein, what it 'puts out' can then become 'taken in', processed and 'put out' again: a process of dialogue that spirals into new and unforeseen potentialities, the loop progressing further onwards and outwards. This research seeks to impact the dance sector, supporting expansion beyond the neuronormative status quo into modes of practice toward the equitable inclusion of (and innovative potentialities for) neurodiversity in dance culture. Personally, I hope my research has positive impact on other neurodivergent dancers seeking alternative modes of choreographic practice. Wherever you are in your journey, I see you; I feel you. 'Your true potential is unknown and is yours to explore' (Walker, 2021:28).



env self

environment

back

forth

self

other

inner

outer

performer

spectator

input

output

me

you

doing

viewing

performance

process

internal

external

object

subject

putting out

taking in

expansion

From singular focus into multiplicity
From limitation to abundance
From one aspect of identity (dyspraxia) to intersectional neurodivergence
From one aspect of choreography (dance) to expanded choreography
Expanding beyond neuronormative limitations
Expanding dualistic binaries into abundant multitudes

entanglement

Between my sense of self and my work
Between my past experiences and the present moment
In loops of shame and hiding
In behaviours of masking
Between my core sense of self, feelings about my neurodivergence, and my relationship to dance
All unravelling through process of untying
Critically interrogating exclusive neuronormative dance environments
The impact of the external environment on one's inner consciousness

environment

Constructing a 'niche' environment of choreographic practice
Dance forming an environment for neuroqueer liberation
Stimulating as dialogue between inner and outer environment
Stimulating as a process(ing) of in-flux environments
Relaxed and multisensory environments
The dance space as an environment for finding flow
Of self and practice beyond neuronormative limitation and conformity

evolution

From self-harm to self-care
From shame to self-love
From dissonance to equilibrium
From trauma to pleasure
From exclusion to acceptance
From individualism to collectivity
From pathology to neurodiversity
From masking to unmasking
From fixed, rigid structure to fluid, flexible responsivity

Neuroqueering as a Decolonial Practice

I wish to end this manuscript by firmly asserting the need for **neuroqueering as a decolonial practice**. As an emergent field for scholarly research and creative practice - as well as a rapidly growing topic within cultural and societal discourse - **there is significant risk of preceding cultural biases and societal inequities seeping into the emerging foundations of neuroqueering**. From my own observations as a white neurodivergent woman in the field, I acknowledge that **neurodiversity is often white-centric and situated within a specific cultural frame centred on whiteness**. As a field, **neurodiversity must be intersectional**, but furthermore all studies and doings of **neuroqueering** - that which critically recognises the impact of dominant social power relations and processes of normalisation - **must be decolonial**.

All systems of oppression are connected, interconnected, and intertwined with one another, with this dominance affecting different communities and lived experiences. In seeking to simultaneously subvert, disrupt, and liberate from both neuronormativity and heteronormativity (Walker, 2021:160), **neuroqueering fundamentally recognises the interconnectivity of such oppressive social systems**, yet it is crucial that the conscious un-doing of such dominant powers doesn't start and end there. In a field where whiteness remains the dominant lens, it is integral that **systems of support, collaboration, and allyship should also come together in solidarity, through greater connection with people of the Global Majority**.

Both neuroqueering and choreography are relational practices; neuroqueering acts towards liberation and freedom. **Neuroqueering is built on the foundations of Lorde's declaration that 'the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house'** (2017:19). As white people in neuroqueering, **our relationship to liberation;**

the tools we pick up; the houses we seek to dismantle cannot be driven to only serve ourselves. That isn't liberation at all, that's perpetuating racial dominance through our own privilege. Cherry picked freedom is not so sweet, it is consequentially oppressive. As white people in neuroqueering, the conscious organisation (and/or disordering) of our work must challenge the white-centric 'blindspot' of the field, whilst using our power where possible to subvert, disrupt, and liberate from colonialism and white supremacy more broadly⁶⁵.

⁶⁵ I wish to acknowledge how during the last year of this PhD process, the world witnessed – and currently continues to witness – a genocide being committed in Palestine. A footnote at the very end of a thesis cannot achieve much to liberate the Palestinian people or disrupt the white supremacy of the state of Israel that has murdered over 40,000 innocent lives (AJ Labs, 2024) under false pretences. Yet, it feels wrong to not acknowledge and condemn the brutality and loss of life. **Free Palestine.**

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13. Appendices

Appendix. 1

Practices of honouring needs during a relaxed process may look like:

Sharing access riders:

- Documents sent to the lead artist and/or project producer that **detail information on one's access requirements**, perhaps with practical strategies needed to support that person in their work. The exchange of this information in advance of the project allows the team to tailor the process to meet the needs of the company as best as possible.

Inclusive communication:

- Discourse on the **preferred modes of communication** exchange over the project. This can include accessible means of communication, i.e. email, voice note, zoom call, and specific practices within said forms of exchange, i.e. information required in easy-read format, or key information highlighted on emails **like this**.
- Neurodivergent behaviours that can present in communication, e.g., **tangents or passionate monologues**, can be **transparently acknowledged with sensitivity** and specific actions can be built in to **handle them with compassion**.
- For example, it may be agreed upon that a 'tangent button' is introduced (either real or imaginary) that can be 'pressed' when someone recognises the dialogue has gone off-piste from the intended discussion, offering opportunity to collectively get back on track.

Disclosing access requirements:

- Additional to the access requirements sent to the lead artist and/or producer, **offering invitation to disclose access needs** in the shared working space is important so the team know how to mutually respect and care for each other.
- Framing this sharing as **an invitation** gives individuals agency to their disclosure with what they do, or do not, wish to share.

Providing a chill out space:

- **A space separate to the rehearsal studio** where rest and solitude can happen when needed. Offering soft surfaces and furnishings for comfortable rest is important, potentially alongside things useful for self-regulation – e.g., stim toys, weighted blanket, or tissues (in cases of tears).
- It is useful to **mutually agree on terms for using and respecting this space** with how folk may need to use it.

A clear, yet malleable, plan:

- This is essential for neurodivergent people **to understand what to expect during the process**. It is useful to provide clear detail on the nature of the space and the work planned, alongside other **information they may benefit from understanding in advance**.
- A **plan for the activity** across the overall process is important to ensure the aimed milestones and outcomes can be achieved safely. However, this plan may best be approached as **a malleable guideline with space for change**,

able to be adapted in response to the needs of the team and/or the creative work itself.

- Sharing **the plan at the start of each day** is also important, clearly detailing the breakdown of activity ahead, including breaks.
- It is useful to provide this information in both **spoken and visual format**, through discussion and written means – placed somewhere easily accessible in the space.

Tailoring scheduling:

- A relaxed process endeavours to **pace the project's schedule of activity to meet the needs of the people** involved.
- It is mindful that **time may be needed to rest and process** during intensive processes. Specific days of rest may be scheduled in a block of activity, or the project may interchange between 'blocks' of work and rest, e.g., 'on' and 'off' weeks.
- There may be factors which limit freedom with scheduling, e.g. the availability of the team or working space, which need to be considered and compromises may be required.

Awareness of sensory sensitivity:

- Checking comfort levels with **levels of light and sound in the working space**.
- Making costume and materials choices **informed by sensory preferences** of those using them.
- In moments of sharing food, e.g. celebratory meals or collective snacks, **discussing and honouring dietary requirements** (including sensory sensitives).