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Cover Page Footnote

With thanks to Matt Fratson, 87 Gallery for their work filming at the Humber Estuary. With thanks to Dr. Ros Gray for their support in validating stimming as a concern for contemporary thinking around ecology and artistic practice.

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Sam Metz

Through an exploration of porous autistic bodies in the arts and the environment, I reposition the common neurodivergent behavior of stimming as a form of languaging and interpretation that not only frames worldly relations in ways that are productively different from neuronormative approaches, but also offers new possibilities for critical approaches to human exceptionalism. My claim is that stimming has a richness, affect, and communicative potential that make it a suitable praxis for paying dedicated attention to space and place. In problematizing sterotypy of stimming as deficit behavior, I describe new and complex relationships with art and ecology. I relate ideas of stimming being a metabolic interchange (Yuill, 2021) with the world—a reciprocal interchange of highly sensorially stimulated neurodivergent bodies (which I describe as porous bodies) and environments that form processes and are themselves in flux.

Site Visit: The Humber Estuary

In the follows paragraphs, I narrate my experience at the Humber Estuary in Hull, UK, to explain how stimming is more expansive than the often limited neurotypical observations drawn from analysis of autistic people in distress. My description includes the challenges of a disabled body and also the joy of a neurodivergent propensity towards attending to many voices in an ever-changing environment.

I walk through the Marina reaching the edges of the estuary. I sense the hiss of tinnitus as I approach the estuary as I move further from the traffic and people. The exertion of the walk builds up in my body, and I feel my pulse in my head and the sound of the ringing in my ears. I remember to take my headphones off—this simple tool to reduce the external noise of the city becomes a hindrance in nature, amplifying the internal sickness of my body. And the estuary often brings me aural delight, the expansiveness of the aural field making me want to lean

forward even as my crip body requires rest. I bear the weight of my spine as it deviates from the curve; I feel the coolness of the barriers pushing back on my arms as I lean out towards the estuary below. I can hear birdsong and traffic from the bridge; a fly is attracted to my yellow hat; the ebbing of the tidal flow of the estuary tickles my ears. All this is wonderful and I am grateful for it.

The sky has expansive cloud striations that anchor my peripheral understanding of my body. Like many autistic people, I have difficulty knowing where my body is in space. My specialist used to say that I didn't know where my body ended and the world began, but actually it is that today, my body is a happening thing, happening in relation to the estuary, not a full stop.

I sit down to rest. My view is shuttered off by the railings—I can see the movement of water between them. As I am observing and sensing, I panic about processing everything today in written form, worrying that I am in too much pain. I stand up to look before I go. I am aware of the thudding at the base of my skull and neck as the change in posture creates an audible rhythm in my body as my heart rate rises too quickly. I notice the difference in tempo and the interrelation with the wind and the moving water. This time, I feel the resistance of the bar as I push up against it, and my heart starts to settle. I realize that I can stay longer. The fly flies directly past my face, and this time, I realize it is a bee.

I feel ecstatic. Standing up and looking outwards across the estuary today, I can view the light and the clouds and reflections without head pain. The quality of light is even, meaning the glare doesn't hurt me. I can sense the movement in the clouds and the water, as well as the interrelationships of their rhythm and mine. I hear the sound of church bells. I hear the sound of the water hitting the lock. The greys, blues, and yellows are not distorted in my vision today. I don't have the legacy of the color in my eyes. Looking at the light with the muted cloud cover while the wind blows makes me happy.

Language isn't an adequate tool for describing stimming. It falls short of the act itself because it creates a gap between experience and thought and

stimming brings them closer. I offer, therefore, as an adjunct, a short excerpt of footage, filmed by Matt Fratson, of me pushing back and forth (stimming) on the railings that surround the estuary of the same site I write about. This version feels closer to the experience than text.

My site description above does not mention stimming explicitly, but instead tries to describe the context that stimming happens through a porous body in conversation with the multiple processes of the Humber estuary. Stimming does not have to result in movement or sounds, but can extend into perception and patterning the environment. Stimming as a dynamic communicative tool closes the gap between experience and the thought created by more typical written language and verbal communication. In my view, porous, stimming bodies have the potential to engender more horizontal ecological relations because neurodivergent bodies are often highly sensitized to interrelationships and environmental processes. I use the term *porous* to define the autistic hypersensitized body in constant interchange with the shifting, sounds, textures, sights and tastes of their situated environment.

Stimming and Attention

Stimming is behavior often seen in autistic or neurodivergent children and adults that can include repetitive actions such as rocking, hand-flapping or making noises. For many autistic people, stimming enables a broad attending to their situated environment. Often stimming is viewed negatively because it manifests when an autistic individual is overwhelmed by sensory information. But, importantly, it can also be positive and part of a sensory-seeking journey. The most articulate description of sensory seeking stimming I have found is by autistic advocate Mel Baggs (2007), who suggests that stimming “is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment, reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings.” Baggs describes stimming as a type of attending that sits outside of normative, human-centric expectations, thereby undermining the stereotypy of stimming as without purpose.

In her writing on autistic environmental perception, Erin Manning (2014) introduces the term *texture* to describe the non-hierarchical approach to attention that many autistic people have. Texture is both wider than



Still from *Stimming at the Estuary*. [Video](#) by Matt Fratson (2024).

purely human interest and as varied as “organic and inorganic, color, sound, smell, and rhythm, perception and emotion” (p. 5). In validating autistic experience, she suggests that “to experience the texture of the world without discrimination” is not indifference (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 11).

For many, stimming is therefore an expansive activity that is, ironically, often conceptualized by outsiders in narrow terms. It is as much about viewing the patterning in the clouds and sensing the movement of the tides as it is about the stereotypical back-and-forth rocking movements of the body shown in my film of the Hull Estuary. I include both because together, they demonstrate a grammar of stimming that will help to define neuroqueer possibilities for situated responses most readily. The text description of my visit includes the entanglement of my disabled body, with its inability to attend to singular objects. The video shows how my body is in interchange with the site. Both are needed to explain what Simon Yuill (2021) means in labeling stimming as a *metabolic* activity. Stimming is metabolic in that it achieves two aims: first, it reinstates my body in connection to the railings and the estuary through haptic feedback, helping me to know where my body is in space, separate from the environment—a challenge for autistic people with proprioception issues. It is also “simultaneously integrating

into it” (Rijssenbeek, 2022) by attending to multiple sensory cues from the environment itself.

While autistic sensory seeking may become a problem in a capitalist framework (and its resulting ableism), it is a benefit when one is trying to engage creatively with an environment. In their work on the ecology of experience, Manning and Massumi (2014) suggest that autistic people have a heightened awareness of processes of the environment, or at least may be predisposed against reducing the bandwidth of attention to discrete objects within the environment. This explanation helps to describe how non-autistic people, less sensorially led and less embodied than autistic people, might also be more conditioned through capitalism to view objects as discrete—and more readily compartmentalized for their use value. Manning and Massumi give the example of a flower, which according to its use value, is understood as something to be picked or smelled. This does not mean that autistics are unable to smell or pick the flower, or differentiate it from the shadows and the wider field, but that autistic individuals have a tendency “to immediately perceive the relational quality of a welling environment that dynamically appears in a jointness of experience” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 10).

By contrast, the medical model of autistic attention relies on the concept of joint attention, considered a key developmental milestone for children and proven to be a challenge for many autistic children (Morton et al., 2008). Joint attention might involve, for example, a child being able to respond to an adult who is pointing at something in a way that indicates recognition or understanding. Joint attention requires eye contact, something I and other autistic people can find invasive and painful. Failure of joint attention is pathologized as a lack of empathy, an unawareness of what is happening in another human’s mind. But failure of joint attention could also be a difference in culturally constructed forms of attending, especially because dominant models are inherently biased towards capitalistic productivity that itself depends upon discrete, purposeful attending—and not the non-hierarchical, textured, autistic attending that Manning describes. This version of attention may also be seen as a failure or aberration in behavioral studies that address theory of mind deficit (Baron-Cohen, et al., 1985).

Morton et al. (2008) describe autistic attentions as *atypical parallel perception*, whereby autistic people tend to view things (such as pattern

recognition tests) like a constellation or array, rather than as singular objects. Autistic people, who are routinely judged as lacking empathy and social understanding through failure of joint attention, may demonstrate atypical perception that enkindles a sense of intertwining and jointness of experience beyond social and cultural norms, beyond the body, and beyond resonance with purely human interlocutors. Not making eye contact does not always signal an autistic person is not attending. They may in fact be attending to an array of sensory and situated cues unrecognizable and unexpected to the observer fixated on social cues.

Stimming as Anti-Capitalist Critique

Thus far, I have theorized that stimming, with its sympathies for interrelating processes, has the potential to create horizontal relationship between the autistic body and the environment, a relationship that produces entanglements rather than surface interactions. As Yuill (2021) suggests, “When allowed to develop positively, stimming is not directed towards blocking the exterior world but rather towards a creative engagement with it.” This understanding is akin to Mel Baggs’ description of being in conversation with everything around her. In this sense, stimming has the capacity to problematize the categorization of materials as surfaces and artifacts in ways that might be useful for extractivist critique. The natural world already defies such categorizations, as archaeologist Christopher Gosden attests: “Does rain belong to the material world, or only the puddles that it leaves in ditches and pot-holes?” (as cited by Ingold, 2011, p. 21).

Stimming is not just something that is done with an intention to impact chemical relations in the body. It also entangles the liveness of the surrounding environment. Stimming as a metabolic relationship incorporates recognition of the material flows of the environment, such as the sounds of church bells or the patterns of clouds in my visit to the marina. My sensory body is not distinct from these processes, but as I rock back and forth, I am both separate from and highly attuned to the layering of sensory information. Anthropologist Tim Ingold, who is also working against surface views of materials inherent in capitalist societies, suggests “. . . materials substance of the world presents itself to humanity as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa* for the inscription of ideational forms” (2011, p. 21). He argues that this kind of human exceptionalism stems from a polarization of mind and matter,

one that we can see enacted in industrialist and post-industrialist societies, where it is economically expedient to cleave the care of the land from the desire for expansion. Karl Marx (1863/1981) in his description of this rift, claims that “the actual causes of the exhaustion of the land . . . were unknown to any of the economists who wrote about differential rent, on account of the state of agricultural chemistry in their time (pp. 915–916). It is a dangerous logic that views the environment as a material substrate from which we can extract and not replenish, as in much of destructive modern agriculture.

The moving back and forth of stimming has more somatic resonance with the natural world and its entanglements than the dominant disjunctive bodily and, importantly, goal-orientated relationship to the environment. Henri Lefebvre (2007) takes up a Marxist approach to urban spatiality, arguing that the complex social structuring of urban space impacts an individual’s negotiation like a form of language that is shaped by social practice. This negotiation creates “cohesion “ (p. 37) that an individual user adheres to, resulting in a performative dimension of the public arena. Stimming sits outside of performative and capitalist norms. In other words, it is not regulated by capitalistic forces, although it is externally oppressed and managed by neuronormative aims. Nor does it cohere with human-centric production of space: it does not have to be goal-orientated or time-bound.

Ingold further critiques the analogy of the tabula rasa as an anthropocentric worldview arising from Western Scientism. The environmental ethicist Robert Atfield (1983) sees Christian logic as undergirding modern attitudes toward the environment—a “despotic and anthropocentric” position which “views everything that exists in creation as being created for the sake of humankind, and that no moral constraints on the dealings of humankind with nonhuman nature exist” (p. 1). Alfred North Whitehead (1938), in his attempt to subvert the bifurcation of nature, asks that instead of seeing abstracting surfaces as discrete entities, that we view them as interrelating processes. He notes that “the consideration of that final mode of unity in virtue of which there exists stability of aim amid the multiple forms of potentiality, and in virtue of which there exists importance beyond the finite importance for the finite actuality“ (p. 120).

For a consideration of porous neurodivergent bodies, a “stability” of aim for me is a *moving* body, because a moving body recognizes a dynamic moving

environment with a range of potentials. Stimming with, alongside, and within materials does not attempt to reduce them to a singular analysis, which would lift them from an environment in flux. Stimming engenders a deeper engagement within the environment and impels a moving and roving relationship with it.

As a neurodivergent individual, I see an inherent logic in the back-and-forth motion of stimming, with its communicative potentiality, yielding a sympathetic reading of most environments. As I sit writing in this library, for instance, the flag at the top of a pole shakes with a vibratory joy that my body senses and wants to reciprocate. I cannot view the flag as a static thing: I move because it moves. The movement of stimming helps me to perceive and think, and it is responsive to the environment I occupy. Whitehead (1938) observes that “we experience more than we can analyze” (p.121). When we are wholly reliant on singular analysis and goal-orientated observations of our space in order to meet some teleological aim—an aim often framed by capitalist needs—we are forced to recede many things about the environment into abeyance, like the moving clouds on my walk to the Marina in Hull. This artificial stillness and denial of the interrelating potentialities of our environments is productively useful, enabling us to get things done, but it cannot always account for the needs and care of our surrounding, non-human world.

Stimming and the Natural Environment

The medical model of autistic bodies sees stimming as an attempt to reach homeostasis, to counter environmental overwhelm and to return unaffected to sitting still like neurotypical people do—an outburst of bad behavior before returning to a more palatable social body. It is underscored with normative social expectations of what a public body should be and do. But this individualistic interpretation of stimming is drawn from *observing* behaviors, not *living* them, like so much literature about neurodivergent behavior, written by neurotypical people who observe difference and pathologize it. The medical understanding of stimming denies the environmental relationality that supports and exchanges with the body, as well as the impact of stimming has. Again, it focuses on surfaces.

If the medical model of autism aligns with a pathology paradigm that sees stimming only in terms of deficit (Walker, 2021), then Yuill's notion of stimming as *metabolic* might seem to support this model because it describes the chemical processes in the brain during stimming happens. However, the concept of metabolic stimming also posits that it is more than a single pathologized body, but a body in conversation with the natural environment, in constant negotiation and relation. In fact, the autistic body's propensity for movement in relation to the natural world recognizes the metabolic relationship as both forming and formed, standing apart from the environment and extending into it. Jerome Gibson (2014) offers a theory of ecological perception that can also be applied to autistic stimming. Gibson uses the term *affordances* to characterize the relationships between the abilities of animals and the features of their environment. According to Gibson, an affordance is

. . . neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer. (pp. 39-41)

Expanding on Gibson, we can surmise that the environment affords action, and we might theorize that a highly sensitive body attentive to many things at once should be a moving body, because a bodymind that perceives many interrelating processes is *afforded* the results of not just the chemical reactions in the brain, but also an understanding of their relationship to multiple potentialities for action in the environment.

The movement of stimming and its neurodivergent languaging has a generosity that is wider than the body, where action exists in the environment. Returning to Manning, we can draw on her concept of *preacceleration*, or the germ of movement that happens before actual movement, occurring “. . . before a displacement happens, emphasizing that movement happens less in an individual body than in the intervals proposed by movements inherent relationality” (2013, p. 133) Stimming forms relationships with objects and things through shifting proxemic (spatial relationships). It reaffirms bodily relationships and also undermines

them, producing spatial relationships in a process rather than through fixed somatic placement.

In their 2007 YouTube video, the autistic advocate Mel Baggs captures their continuous flow of sounds, movements and reverberations within their domestic space, and their body's entanglement with them. Titled *In My Language*, the video shows Baggs stimming: playing with water, rocking, humming, and exploring their environment. Viewers can see the potential for displacement and change of materials within the space. The language of the title is conversational and dialectical: the water Baggs touches is moved by their hand, their body is in dialogue with the space, receiving and giving information. This stimming is much more than the deficit model, non-autistic reading of stimming as a heightened reaction to sensory aversion. This is about conversation. Stimming is a reciprocal exchange: when I activate an object, it also activates me. Metabolic stimming affords reciprocity of the exchange, an exchange that recognizes the liveness and agency of objects and the flows of potentiality of the body that is both able to change the object and change itself in the encounter with it. This is true even when the object seems immense or immutable, such as the large stones that bank the Humber Estuary. Jerome Cohen (2015) describes how touch might have the ability to disclose "queer vivacity, and a perilous tender of mineral amity" (p. 6). Cohen describes the complex richness of apprehension of stone. While stone may be dense and talk of deep time that is unknowable, stone also lets us know that the earth has never been still.

Touch and Proprioception

The sensory modality of touch is important for many autistic individuals as a way of knowing and interpreting. Repetitive touch is often a component of stimming; it is a form of interpretation as important as reading text. Haptic engagement through stimming enables communication with the world through materials. Materials give feedback that is activated through touch, and we learn about their properties in a feedback loop. Repetitively touching objects with back-and-forth movements allows learning to be a continual process, one that recognizes flow, an ongoing dialogue between the body and the world. Occularcentrism, or reducing the world to interpretation weighted

towards sight and the written word (Pallasmaa, 2009) thins existence and limits the scope of relational possibilities proffered through the body.

Touching and stimming helps to reinstate the body and its location in relation to other things, which helps to consider proprioception and vestibular movement. The term *proprioception* was coined by Charles Sherrington in his Silliman Lectures (Levine, 2007), to denote the sense that enables you to understand where your body is in space. My own autism diagnosis explicitly referenced my difficulties with knowing where my “body ends.” Sherrington theorized that proprioceptors have an important function, “to induce and maintain tonic reactions in the skeletal musculature” (Levine, 2007, p. 3). Tonic muscles are slow-contracting muscles such as the ones that maintain posture. Autistic people often have differences in muscle tone and poor muscle tone and posture (Paquet, et al., 2017). Stimming with movement can be seen as a rhythm of contracting and relaxing muscles, reminding the body of its extents. In my stimming near the estuary, I am touching the metal bars of the walkways around the estuary, I am both reminded of being embodied and I am reaching out into the environment to react to the sensory stimulation of the environment, the coolness of the bars and the way they vibrate when they are touched.

Proprioception could be deemed an *aesthetic* sense, as Barbara Montero argues, namely because of the discovery that our mirror neurons are activated when we see someone else move (Montero, 2006). In the case of stimming in the environment, a myriad of other human and non-human actors might activate our mirror neurons. The ability to activate objects thus has great potential for art-making, but through mirror neurons we are also able to *appreciate* others activating objects.

When I touch an object, I understand its potential for movement, its weight and texture, its warmth or coolness—but it also talks back to me and the capacity of my body. My interaction becomes heuristic through the trial and error of repetitively touching as stimming. I might learn if the object can bear my weight, if pushing it creates ripples of exertion through my arm, if my grasp can compress the object, and how that extension of my grasp would bring me into my body and out again. Architect and philosopher Juhani Pallasmaa (2009) helps us to consider the experiential approach to learning and the extended possibilities of this kind of tacit learning, suggesting that

“learning a skill is not primarily founded on verbal teaching but rather on the transference of the skills from the muscles of the teacher directly to the muscles of the apprentice through the act of sensory perception and bodily mimesis” (p. 15).

The mimetic impulse of the body enlivened with stimming reminds us that so few spaces are still. Even as I sit here writing, the wind has died down, and the flag outside no longer vibrates, but I can hear the oscillation of the electric current moving through the lamp. It seems obvious to me that a sympathetic body moves because the mimetic power of an autistic body reaches out into the environment.

Activating objects through touch also gives them “affective force” (Bennett, 2010, p. 50), a method for refuting the reductive ways of thinking about materials purely in terms of their use value. Stimming makes Bennett’s “vibrant materialism” visible, in some part, by giving an object a diffuse agency, a range of possibilities beyond material wealth. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett describes a kind of nominalism where placing adjectival descriptions of objects limits them as only knowable from a human perspective. I see stimming as having the capacity to disrupt this deferential naming relationship that we have with materials and objects, in which the named descriptions come from a history of human-centered knowing and imply an expected use. I see this in autistic artist and researcher Dagmar Bosma’s description of their stimming with small steel balls that they carry with them as a kind of talisman. Their use value would place them in fabrication, for example, to rotate a joint as bearings. Instead Bosma embraces the balls as “auratic knick-knacks” (2023) that entertain a range of senses. I can imagine the sounds the steel balls make as they are touched and rotated, and how they would press into the body. For me, the common neurotypical assumptions about the bearings’ use value are inadequate because they deny the purpose of embodied communication.. Allowing objects to sit outside their use value and appeal to the senses is useful, not only for making art, but also for non-verbal learning. As long as this practice was safe, I used this in community settings working with people with dementia and autistic young people, and it is seen in wide-ranging socially engaged practice such as the Sensory Atelier work of Attenborough Art Centre in Leicester, UK.

Neuroqueering Stimming

If Western tradition establishes hierarchies of knowing, placing interpretation through language at the top and relegating sensory understanding as a suffix of experience, then neuroqueering offers ways of mapping experience that are productively different from neurotypical understanding of bodymind-to-world connections. It is important to note the existence of many other indigenous ways of knowing that differ dramatically from Western tradition and its roots in Enlightenment thinking. As an artist trying to situate stimming in ecological relationality, I repeat the caveat given by Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan (2021), who remind us,

Art-as-we-know-it is an invention. Manufactured by the white European colonial metropolises, it is only a little over 200 years old. It arose hand-in-hand with the beginnings of industrial capitalism, it rested on the same philosophical myths that enabled extractivism everywhere: the toxic dualisms between nature and culture, mind and body, individual and common, art and life. (p. 19)

Stimming as a project and creative praxis helps subvert these toxic dualisms. In *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities* (2021), Nick Walker defines and celebrates neuroqueer culture. Her work helps me to contextualize the joy of engaging with materials through stimming. In her descriptions of neuronormativity, Walker points to the limitations of purpose and the reduction of embodied play prevalent in society organized by and for neurotypical people. My own experiences as a student, worker, and consumer, have taught me that civic spaces, work spaces, and places of study are organized, defined, and regulated by the needs of neurotypical people. Neurodivergent people, unfortunately, are designed out ergonomically of many institutions. But they are also socially “managed” by the wider operation of neuronormativity (Walker, p. 56). I know, again from experience, that stimming is often stigmatized. It is also often infantilized and can result in “social rejection” (Walker, p. 65). Judgment and ostracization of autistic people who stim in public can result in self-policing (masking), societal repression, and carer-mandated behavioral changes.

However, joyful play with materials through sensitive stimming offers creative possibilities for artists interested in queering relationships to objects and materials. One example is provided by the filmmakers Alison Bennett and Dean Walsh, who collaborated digitally on the underwater video *SubMerge*, which approaches water and water bodies with a consideration of neurodivergent bodyminds and notions of entanglement. They explain that when submerged,

. . . the pressure of the surrounding water volume compresses the air spaces within the body to the point that the water volume of our bodies, which cannot be compressed, meets the massive water volume that fully surrounds us. At this point, the sense of the body as separate from the environment gives way to a sensory “morphing” between (human and elemental) water bodies.

This description argues, as I have above, that the autistic body is “porous” and not delimited by its physical boundaries. It is a uniquely neuroqueer perspective that sees how the “weight of the water serves to integrate the autistic sensorium” (Bennett & Walsh, 2022).

The idea of integrating the autistic sensorium with the properties of water suggests more than the creation of artwork attuned to the different access requirements neurodivergent people have. Instead, the artists are considering how the autistic sensorium is entangled with the work, both as producer and audience. In this sense skin seems to be an example of a neuroqueer praxis—suggesting, much like the work of Mel Baggs, a different way of having conversations with the world through stimming.

Autistic-led practice is particularly important when neuronormative ways of receiving and producing artwork prevail, despite many artists being neurodivergent. It is therefore important that the subjects within the film identify as neurodivergent. Doing so highlights the common propensity of autistic people to extend their understanding of their bodies beyond the “borders of skin” (Bennett & Walsh, 2022) and to mesh with the spaces they occupy. Instead of stimming being depicted as a temporary state to be masked, it is integrated into the art and celebrated as a valid way of understanding.

Another work of art that examines stimming in the environment is *Illuminating the Wilderness* (2018) by Project Art Works “Explorers Project.” The film follows Project Art Works’ artists Kate Adams and Tim Corrigan, artists Ben Rivers and Margaret Salmon, and additional artists and makers involved in the Explorers project, as they investigate Glen Affric in the the remote Scottish Highlands. According to Tate Liverpool, the subjects of the documentary are “people who are highly sensitive to the sensory stimuli of the world around them” (2018). As they investigate Glen Affric in the Scottish Highlands, *Illuminating the Wilderness* “charts the pleasures and challenges of neurodiverse responses to the landscape.”

The film gives us long fixed camera position static shots of the Scottish Highlands, interspersed with the self-led filming of neurodivergent participants that is often shaky and sometimes orientated in unusual ways. Their more erratic filming seems linked to the stimming movements of the participants walking. The juxtaposition of the two filming styles seems to be a celebration of stimming as a way of perceiving the idyllic setting. I see autistic people walking in unstable ways on their toes, demonstrating the difficulties with tonic muscles mentioned earlier. One subtitle reads “George happy noises.” I see blowing on hands and flicking of lips, flapping and many joyful ways of being in the landscape. It is not all joyful, of course, and I hear a person named Ellen shout, “leave me alone,” reminding me of the realities of community work. As I watch this work I see so many ways of intertwining with and reacting against the landscape in stimming movement, one participant, Sam, is repeatedly tapping his lips and clapping and reaching out into the view with his hands, I hear him make sounds from the back of his throat as he pushes out the sound with his tongue, “me-ah.”

Illuminating the Wilderness was nominated for the Jarman Award. In his 2020 review of the film for *The Guardian*, Adrian Searle uses the single word “problematic” as a summary of the stimming. But what does Searle find problematic? I can only assume it is the unpalatable representation of neurodivergent people. They are shown traversing the landscape, not bound by the social conventions of shared civic space that might call their support workers or carers to quieten them, or to edit the way they move to conform to more normative ways of moving and being in public. In questioning the “happy blowing and rocking,” it is this that he finds problematic, because it is precisely this behavior that is usually policed by people in the civic realm?

Conclusion

As it considers stimming as an interpretive tool for artistic integration with landscape, neuroqueer ecology recognizes approaches to materialism that interrogate hierarchies and come to terms with nonhuman agency. As Bennett (2010) explains, the “vibrancy of matter” contains “edibles, commodities, storms, and metals act as quasi agents, with their own trajectories, potentialities, and tendencies. Such things are lively, with a vitality of their own” (Bennett, p. viii). This is because, as Manning and Walker suggest, so many neurodivergent people are naturally predisposed to an understanding of materials that recognizes their liveliness and agency,

Interaction with materials as an extension of the body can and often does become a way of communicating, as Baggs (2007) attests. It is a form of languaging— and, for many of us, a primary one. Just as the weight of water in *SubMerge* becomes an integration with the autistic sensorium, not an addition like water on a substrate, but an entanglement with a porous body not on (Bennett & Walsh, 2022). However, although Bennett advocates for a “naive realism” (p. 129), a position that suggests our senses guide us towards what things really are— the usage of “naïve” underscores a neuronormative position that creates a hierarchy of experience dictating that non-verbal humans, or autistic people who consider speech to be a second language (myself included), form the base of pre-understanding from which the more elevated speaking person has grown or developed.

In contrast, I feel stimming has incredible power to manifest the world of nonhuman vitality that Bennett describes. Being-as-stimming narrows the gap between thought and experience in ways that may be helpful for setting up new moralities in metabolic relationship with landscape. There is still very little writing about autistic experience and interpreting the world that does not seem infantilizing. There is something about the immediacy of movement and embodiment as a response that, perhaps, makes it seem like it cannot be clever or nuanced in the same way as spoken language. This is because it is viewed as stereotypy, unmediated and without reflection, whereas there is great potential for stimming as praxis in the arts. Stimming and creative practice could constitute attenuating the gap between a hyper-individualized neuronormative world that describes and accounts for being in the world in

terms of its use value and extractive possibilities and could, as Bennett's work does, offer new routes into thinking about the bodymind creatively.

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