Designing for Diversity

“Neurodivergent thinking enriches practices within the arts.” George

We want to help design a more inclusive & accessible future for creative practitioners, arts organisations & the audiences who love them. We interviewed neurodivergent creative practitioners to explore what changes curators, producers & directors of organisations can make to support neurodivergent (ND) inclusion in the arts & to discover what barriers exist for ND practitioners now.

“Detach your view of neurodiversity from what you see on films & tv.” Jae

‘We’ are ...kruse, an autistic artist & neurodiversity advocate & Louise Latter, Curator at BOM. BOM is dedicated to positive social impact, with a particular interest in neurodiversity & technology. BOM is working with WebWorks, an autistic-led initiative that mentors & supports autistic artists, & develops autism-led projects.

We want to thank neurodivergent artists/creative practitioners Suriya Aisha, Sonia Boué, Tyla Grant, Rhiannon Lloyd-Williams, George Morl, Jess Thom & Jae Tallawah for their invaluable contributions & ongoing advocacy work.

“Having neurodivergent & disabled people in your organisation creates an amazing opportunity for constant innovation and imagination - that benefits everyone.” Suriya
Getting Through The Door

“Many of the adjustments disabled & neurodiverse people ask for make the world better for everyone.” Rhiannon

Neurodivergent brains process sensory input, smells, sights, sounds, etc. differently to typical brains. Physically accessing & working in your building might be an insurmountable barrier to some neurodivergent people.

“The neurodiverse movement is not about telling people they are doing it wrong, there is no wrong, there is just difference.” Rhiannon

It will help hearing impaired & neurodivergent people if you have spaces in your building that are quiet. Make sure these spaces are well signposted & accessible to everyone & think about what your venue could do to lessen sound. Remember that spaces that have an intercom for entry are inaccessible to D/deaf people.

Knowledge is key - Maps, floor plans, information about parking or getting public transport to your venue should be available as standard. Video walkthroughs, a photograph of your entrance & reception area, information about how to identify staff, how to get tickets, where the quiet areas are & whether your building is wheelchair accessible are all useful to audiences & people you are working with.

“If the world was built for me I’d make sure it was built for you too.” Rhiannon
Audience

“1 in 5 people identify as disabled - this is your audience.” Jess

“Disabled bodies & minds change over lifetimes & able bodied people can become disabled.” Jess

Poor access to leisure can affect the community & social life of disabled people, creating a barrier to independence & their enjoyment of leisure activities. Around a third of disabled people experience difficulties related to their impairment in accessing public, commercial & leisure services.

“If you say that you are building communities & connecting people - that can't just be with people who are 'easy' to work with.” Jae

Disability ableism doesn't just affect the individual, it affects families, friends & wider society. Think about intersectionality & don’t make assumptions about who your audience are. As Sonia Boue says, “It’s not a strangeness to be autistic or have ADHD or be dyslexic, they are very, very, normal.”

“If your LGBTQ+ show doesn’t have any disabled or ND artists in it, then you are not representing the full spectrum of Queer experience.” George

“Establish a rapport with local communities & charities that are specific to audiences you are trying to build inclusivity around.” George
Communication

“Make an effort to learn how to communicate with neurodivergent people.”

George

Many neurodivergent people have difficulties around communication, particularly autistic & dyslexic people. Neurodivergent people may have limited resources of energy, time & access support & may take longer than average to reply to emails, texts etc.

“If each time you encounter text that you cannot decode at each stage of every learning process, the impact is eroding your self worth.” Sonia

Often neurodivergent practitioners do not have the support they need to communicate successfully. Be open to alternative approaches to open calls, applications, etc. & don’t be afraid to ask what you can do to make communication easier.

“It’s not the natural order that disabled & neurodivergent people are being excluded - it’s a set of decisions we are all upholding & maintaining.” Jess

Does your organisation have someone who can use Makaton or British Sign Language? Are your important documents also available in Easy Read format? Is your website accessible? Are you giving the neurodivergent practitioners you do work with enough time to respond? This applies to both verbal & written communication!

“Everything is embedded in neurotypical social preference - so for you it’s obvious.” Sonia
Working with neurodivergent artists

“My access needs are not negotiable.” Jae

“Arts organisations are asking practitioners to bring themselves - this has to include all aspects of their experience.” Suriya

A survey by the Centre for Social Justice found only 25% of employers knew what the ‘Access to Work’ programme was & understood the help that they could get from this service - Papworth Trust

“I found that I have been infantilised when I’m disclosing my identity.” Tyla

“What [unseen effort] is required of neurodivergent people to get on in the workplace?” Sonia

Only 45% of employers understand clearly what it means to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people under the Equality Act 2010 - Papworth Trust

“Ask for accessibility documents then read & implement them!” Jae

“Neurodivergent people have a different thought process to the dominant voice in society which means we can offer alternative perspectives.” George

“How much are you engaged with disabled artists, not just using them to educate you?” Suriya
New Audiences - Exploring Digital

“Expand your ideas of what performance is or can be.” Suriya

“We can make changes to benefit diverse bodies & brains - look at the COVID response! COVID is an opportunity to integrate our practices & build a more inclusive world.” Jess

The pandemic has bought audiences an opportunity to access culture within the home. This can be an advantage for neurodivergent practitioners & audiences who might have access issues with physical spaces.

“Digital can be freeing for disabled or neurodivergent practitioners. It offers the possibility for neurodivergent people to be in spaces without physically accessing the space.” Suriya

January to February 2020, 96% of households in Great Britain had internet access - Office for National Statistics. Explore how you might use digital & internet to connect with neurodivergent practitioners & show their work to diverse audiences.

“Go to where the people are - social media is the most accessible platform that disabled, queer & neurodiverse people have to express themselves. It’s accessible to us because there are less barriers for us to overcome.” George

“Fear of the unknown is what causes barriers.” Jess

“People aren't hard to reach, you’re just not looking hard enough.” Jae
Organisational shift

“Be willing to unlearn, re-learn & listen to the neurodiverse people who are in front of you.” Jae

“Think of Accessibility as an ongoing process. As your organisation & spaces develop & change, so will your accessibility requirements. Constantly identify & remove disabling or other exclusionary barriers.” Jess

“Organisations shouldn’t just be flexible for people who have additional needs, they should be flexible for everyone.” Suriya

“People’s energy levels fluctuate - does your organisation support this?” Jess

“Transparency is important - be very clear about things like time, remember that disabled & neurodiverse people may have limited energy resources.” Jae

“Think about intersectionality when identifying barriers - disabled doesn’t mean less-abled.” Jess

“The neurodivergent cause for social justice is really in its infancy.” Sonia

“Many of the adjustments disabled & neurodiverse people ask for make the world better for everyone.” Rhiannon

“Relaxing the rules won’t result in anarchy, it will result in inclusivity. “ Jess
Resources

“Your needs are not a burden, they’re just what you need.” Suriya

Access to Work: https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work
Disability Rights UK: https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/
ACAS: Neurodiversity in the workplace: https://archive.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity
BASE British Association for Supported Employment: https://www.base-uk.org/
Website Accessibility: https://accessibility.campaign.gov.uk/
Resources for Curators & Organisations: https://www.shapearts.org.uk/Pages/News/Category/resources

‘Contracts of Care’ was an idea started by Emily Williams in 2011. Creating a contract of care between organisations and artists invites understanding, respect, & a way to constructively identify and overcome barriers to participation on both sides. Artist Alice Tatten Brown continued this work with her Care & Control exhibition in Bristol 2019.

Artist & Educator Rachel Dobbs has a collection of free resources for artists and educators on her site. This includes a ‘Precarious Workers Self-Care Checklist,’ which might be a useful resource for developing Access Documents with your artists.