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Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to performance artist Tiina Kaila for her encouragement and trust to collaborate with me on our live art and site specific piece, "Into the Forest", and musician Dee Fry for her collaboration for "I reach out to the water's edge." I am grateful to my supervisors Prof. Duncan Higgins and Dr Kevin Hunt for their encouragement and guidance. I would also like to thank Alasdair Duncan, my autism support and Sparky Orkisz for a final proof read.

Beauty in the Gothic: Forms of Autistic Aesthetics

Elinor Rowlands

Divergent forms of autistic communication and expression within an artistic context convey an aesthetic that awakens otherworldly realms existing between the physical world and portals of invention. These otherworldly creations are often made manifest through modes of stimming. Many autistic people engage in stimming, which can be defined as repetitive behaviors to help manage emotions or regulate the nervous system. Yet within an artistic context, stimming is also a methodology.

Stimming itself connects beauty or art into the echo of the self, seeking out vibrant colors and wild landscapes such as spread out beaches with rough tides breathing on the sand. The landscape becomes a living figure that many autistic artists relate to. They find common ground with it, whether in ancient woodland and dense forests, or by oceans or bodies of water, the latter is particularly common among autistic female or non-binary artists. For some artists, spirituality creeps in, as does the awakening of ritual, mythology, historical and geographical knowledges, the psychic and sensory, tarot, archetypes, and relics.

This article explores how autistic artists respond to wilderness as a space for authentic, unfiltered, and embodied expression through stimming. It also features my work that exemplifies my relationship to natural spaces. In this work, I collage and layer myself and the landscape through sound and video.

Stimming and Intuition

For autistic artists who use stimming in their artwork, intuition plays a key role. The philosopher Michel Serres states that intuition is a knowledge that is felt and sensed rather than cognitively reasoned (Serres & Latour, 1995, p. 115). Watkin (2020) explains that Serresian intuition is not a concept, but about sensibilities and ways of living in the world. It precedes cognitive thought and analysis, and mirrors aspects of autistic stimming.

Medical and scientific communities often focus on the prevention of stimming, deeming it to be a behavior that is challenging, frightening, anti-social, or otherwise undesirable. Yet when positioned in a different space, stimming could be understood as an alternate way of connecting with the rhythms and sounds of existence from which meaning and language emerges. This perspective recognizes Serres' highly naturalized approach to language as emerging from noise and rhythm (Watkin, 2020, p. 28) and situates autistic experiences and stimming as an approach to language and knowing.

Exploration is the initial way of seeing the world which, for Serres, is inspired by intuition (Watkin, 2020, p. 27). Using this position, it could be said that autistic artists might use stimming to physicalize, because intuition is “essentially corporeal” (Watkin, 2020, p.28). The embodiment of stimming through intuition and autistic ways of knowing is entirely sensorial. As Serres writes in *Variations of the Body* (1999): “Whatever activity you're involved in, the body remains the medium of intuition, memory, knowing, working and above all invention” (p.34). Thus, the autistic aesthetic through stimming is an invitation into new ways of appreciating beauty, and calls upon nature that is alive and communicating, to collaborate.

Intuition needs to be “restored” as it has mostly been gendered and devalued within late neoliberal societies. In this way, intuition has been reduced and minimized into a narrative that renders it passive, private and feminine (Mozelly & McPhillips, 2019). This is perhaps why so many autistic people feel so much shame because they communicate and move differently. Their gestures, language and motions are sequestered into a narrative that reduces their qualities to familiar language.

Within the arts, however, autistic artists' divergent gestures, languages, and motions hold power and can be a key for reparation. The decolonization of the senses is important. In many ways, stimming challenges the hierarchy of the Western five senses model, which tends to rationalize and order the senses, whereas other cultures (and bodies) tend to organize the senses and the relations between them quite differently (Howes, 2023). Suely Rolnik (2018) further emphasizes the need to appreciate “body-knowing” and “eco-ethological knowing” (p.20). Thus, there is an urgent need for alternate ways of being beyond neoliberalism, which are explored in various ways through art (Hunt, 2023).

Gothic Sensibilities

Autistic aesthetics also align with the notion of Gothic sensibilities. In 1923, Longueil argued that in the eighteenth century the term “Gothic” meant “barbarous,” “medieval,” and “supernatural” (as cited by Botting, 2012, p. 13). It was a derogatory word used to describe literature, art, or architecture that failed to conform to the standards set by neoclassical tastes (Rata, 2014). According to Botting (2012), “Gothic signified the lack of reason, morality, and beauty of feudal beliefs, customs, and works” (p. 13).

However, the Gothic was also revolutionary because it questioned not only eighteenth-century aesthetics, but also the status quo at that time: the social order, systems of authority, and existing social problems. During periods of political unrest and religious crises, the Gothic flourished, and with it the fears of change were compounded. The decline of moral, ethical and social traditions were reflected in the Gothic (Rata, 2014, pp. 104-105). According to Botting (2012),

The rejection of feudal barbarity, superstition, and tyranny was necessary to a culture defining itself in diametrically opposed terms: its progress, civilization, and maturity depended on the distance it established between the values of the present and the past. (p. 14)

In autistic aesthetics, many artists, particularly female and non-binary, recognize that the Gothic exists in their work. It might combine mythology, re-enchant a version of the landscape, explore history, mythology and climate emergency; as well as a series of temporary monuments formed of materials from natural environments and sites, ritual and story-telling (Garwood, 2022). Grounded in the fields of mythology, heritage and performance, autistic artists are often concerned with how we relate to, understand and construct our environment and our relationships with each other. The Gothic also links to what Visuri (2020) discovered in her autism research. She found that sensory supernatural experiences occur more frequently in autistic populations than non-autistic. The Gothic, therefore, might be useful, particularly in terms of how visual and sonic representations found in autistic artists’ artwork, complement those in Gothic literature.



Stimming in Artistic Practice

In *The Magician*, I create instruments out of trees, appearing as a silhouette, with my arms being the most visible and light part of the image. There is a vertical blur effect, creating a layered effect on my right arm. *The Magician* is a sound art piece where I used parts of trees to create instruments then reinvented their sounds through stimming and Gothic storytelling. I explored the archetype of the magician and referred it to my lived experience of being autistic, feeling like a shape-shifter.

The Magician (2020). [Audio](#).

In my practice, stimming is a layering. I construct identities or human experiences to escape being forced into the margins and liminal spaces of society. My art moves towards places of darkness and wildness for a sense of safety. Contrastingly, woodland and “into the forest” archetypes describe the forest as an uncontrolled place (Von Franz, 1970; Jung, 1948) with unseen dangers, but for autistic artists, it is often a sanctuary away from the inaccessible systems that reject divergent access needs.

My art videos and sonic audios explore how open, wild landscapes are divergent spaces that allow us to embrace our authentic selves. They offer a space for empowerment and resistance against mainstream norms that seek to ridicule, exclude, and render silent the autistic being. In such spaces I am able to undress my neurodivergent and disabled body and I film myself doing this, inviting other autistic and/or divergent bodies to do the same. I

will often borrow voices, substituting other autistic voices or bodies in place of my own, or layer them with my own. I am always present with the other autistic bodies or voices even if I cannot be seen.

Making soundscapes and/or videos about the act of undressing does not require me to take off my clothes. Instead, it is an act witnessed by my stimming which, when conveyed and expressed within an artistic context, moves beyond repetitive and self-soothing rhythms. Stimming becomes a source of power and magic, revealing ancient languages sourced by embodiment and bodies, historical chants and new geographical worlds. Stimming is often site-specific, and allows me, as an artist, to grapple with my intuition and use it as a form of knowing. It invokes my sense of rationality such as pattern-finding and layering of words, echoing language and text within and between the landscape. The landscape is alive and is in a partnership and relationship with me. This is where stimming holds most power.

Finland and *Into the Forest*

During the summer of 2018, I stayed in Finland with my friend and performance artist Tiina Kaila. I had not seen her since the summer of 2005, when I had a mental health breakdown. That year, I was experiencing a fight or flight response, and much to the disappointment of everyone around me, I chose flight. I left everyone I loved and cared for, including Kaila, my best friend. I was hoping to set up a performance company with Kaila. I left a place by the sea that I really loved, a community center I loved volunteering in, and a partner who I was in love with and who I loved writing and making art with. However, because I was meeting access barriers, and I did not yet have a formal autistic diagnosis, my body had to escape immensely uncomfortable feelings that I could no longer contain because I was frightened of what people would think of me.

I had been crucified all year and had been made to feel that my art had no worth by my performance tutor. Because autistic beings are so often attuned to their art practice as a form of survival, when their art is diminished to feelings of worthlessness, it can deny the autistic being a sense of self. Despite being out of contact with Kaila for so long, I reached out to her because I had a major calling to make work with her after a psychic crisis



A layered image of a woman in a red dress walking down a forest path barefoot, surrounded by greenery. The shots are drenched in saturation. [Video](#).

in Norway. This calling came to me in a dream while I was in Norway. She accepted and we went out into the forest together, where I openly stimed.

From our live art, I produced an art video titled *Into the Forest*. I followed Kaila out into the woods, and I chanted behind her, narrating our surroundings and actions that she would respond to as if through an echo whilst she interacted with the landscape. She used bodily gestures, walking barefoot on the forest floor, hands up to the sky, clicking her fingers, and in states of undress with only the forest and myself as witnesses. I recorded her movement and gestures using my mobile phone.

The texts produced from this site work came through self-soothing, repetitive verbal motions that were recorded into my phone in response to the video. One text was produced at Kaila's home in Finland. After any site-specific work, I usually need a nap. After waking from this nap, I begin to stim verbally, recording these into my phone. I then transcribe the recordings. In these texts, there is an emphasis on whether a word is delivered, spoken, or sung. The texts are anything but "automatic writing" or "streams of consciousness," for there is certainty in how the text is delivered, felt, sensed and explored.

There are natural beats and rhythms. Singing or humming is important to appreciate autistic aesthetics as humming is also a stim. The vibrations within humming are part of queering wild spaces, landscape and place. The texts were produced in response to the echo of the landscape and historical imprinting onto, and held by, these wild landscapes. An energetic flow was felt during the making of and recording of these actions. Nothing is ever planned in advance, the journeying happens fluidly on site.

Norway and *The Forest*

In Norway, I had continuous nightmares of women screaming, layered with the haunting and still Norwegian landscapes. In October 2018, I would research what I was seeing in my night terrors which had become increasingly worse since I had returned home. I typed into a search engine, "Norway, screaming women, wild landscapes" as I was compelled to find out who all these women were as there were thousands of them.

I discovered that only two days before, at the 70th Anniversary of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights, that Erna Solberg, Norway's first female prime minister, officially apologized to Norwegian women who were reprimanded by the Norwegian government during World War Two for having sexual relations with German soldiers. Most were not alive to receive any compensation or to hear the official apology. Instead of protecting these women, the Norwegian government had banished them from the country and "they were victims of undignified treatment" (Solberg, 2018). Between 30,000 to 50,000 Norwegian women, by conservative estimate, were forced into relations with German soldiers ordered by Himmler, in hopes of producing a "pure" child.

The texts produced came out of all the nightmares, night terrors, and my psychic crisis in the summer of 2018 in Norway. After I had made this video, collaging together my filmed experiences in Norway and Finland, along with archive photographs of how these Norwegian women had been treated in the streets, my night terrors finally stopped.

The video, *The Forest*, is a continuation of *Into the Forest*. It was taken in Norway as a response to a breakdown/sensory overload in Norway earlier which I have come to call "Psychic Crisis on Site." The land of where I was standing echoed its history back to me, and I reacted so sensorially that all of my senses become blurred and loud. To a non-autistic being this might look like a panic attack, an overwhelm or challenging behavior. To an autistic who is connected to the landscape, it is an opening into story hearing and storytelling, recounting what nature has to say.

The Finland videos were created live in response to my experiences in Norway, which actually predate my journey to Finland. Reflecting on both, I see they show how stimming can be used as a form of arts practice, a tool, and embodied intuitive knowledges. My art videos resituate autistic identity through a Gothic lens to portray divergent aesthetics via a prism of beauty often unaccepted by the non-autistic eye. What non-autistic people might find creepy, uneasy, dangerous or othering, is often comforting to autistic peers or audiences, oftentimes because the experience is neurodivergent affirming.



The Forest (2020). [Video](#).

This still from the video *The Forest* shows a dark image of a waterfall. Black silhouettes of rocks cut against hazy, bubbling white and greeny grey waters. In the center of the image, a figure in a bright red dress stands on some rocks. Her arms are above her head in the air, outstretched.

Stimming in the Melancholic

The three stills below (p. 48) are from my 2023 art video, *I Reach Out to the Water's Edge*. The underwater figure reflects my lived experience of autism and how difficult it is to exist in a world that is deeply rooted in ableism. The figure wears a white night dress. The image is delivered in a kaleidoscopic mirrored form. Scattered bubbles create patterns in the water. When I stim using my hands, people will often comment on how I am able to perfect the art of symmetrical movement. This is mirrored in the way I portray figures in my videos.

The first still shows a mirrored image of water with murky shades of brown and green. The mirroring creates a subtle symmetrical pattern of reflections.

The second shows a white woman with her eyes closed under water. She is wearing a white dress, its sleeves billow up under the water. Her expression is calm. The third is a mirrored image of an arm with a white short sleeve under water. A tiny glimpse of a figure's chin sits above the surface of the water.

My work is often described as melancholic. Colin Hambrook (2019), the editor of *Disability Arts Online*, has compared my work to a Leonora Carrington psychological landscape, “at one level displaying a consciousness echoing an ancient sensibility, at another expressing something intensely contemporary.” I regularly collaborate to develop new ways of working, experimenting with sound and video. Curator and multidisciplinary artist Gemma Garwood (2018) described my videos as using “dreamy world-building to disseminate timely truths about invisible challenges from an unflinchingly feminine gaze.”

This Gothic imagery in my art videos and audio is ghostly, encapsulating a sexuality that is freeing, tantalizing and tempting. Yet, there is also a sense of “ghosting” where autistic women and non-binary artists must escape all that they know in search of uncodified spaces. They do this to escape their pasts and reconstruct their own histories (Bristow, 1992). They are forced to generate their own space outside the neurotypical and heteronormative lenses.

There is also a sense of the pagan about the work, prised in the narrative of *Magical Women (MW)*, an autistic/ADHD led art project which I founded in 2019, when I found no other space in the arts from which I could make and share my art practice safely. In normative spaces, I often experience persecution and exclusion because they perceive my words or actions to be wrong or too intense. MW allows other autistic/ADHD artists to explore the rituals of stimming as a creative practice. The folklore of archetypal narratives that frequently emerge within the work of MW artists fold the lived experiences of neurodivergent creatives into live and often poetic artistic performances. This magic of intuitive collaboration in real time involves shared knowing and being through rhythm, pattern, and sound as a form of language.

People always misinterpret my facial expressions. I was once described by an art tutor at art school as being like a “car crash” when I spoke. When I tried to



Video.

explain this might be because autism is a different language and my intention was to join in or collaborate, I was told by another tutor, “that everyone was a little bit autistic.” If this were true, then we would not have such high numbers of autistic people dying of suicide, quitting jobs, dropping out of art schools or other educational institutions, many stuck in their bedrooms due to high levels of anxiety. For me, as an autistic person, I have always felt like a haunted house, and need wild open spaces to earth me in order to feel free to use my voice and map out my internal world. Even if this remains firmly in my art, the motion and actioning of being this way is encapsulated by my experience of other, outsider, different, divergent.

Both of my performances were created when I was housebound due to ill health. I had a severe case of glandular fever and live-art performance was my only way to performatively stim an act of resistance to social norms and explore my lived experiences of a ghost wearing a “crip” body. It was making the video for this performance that I discovered that during the process of video-editing, the edit itself is a form of stimming.

Images of The Self

My art represents autistic women and non-binary folk during acts of exploration of their sexual selves. My art-practice is not separated from my identity or being. Just as trees are wonky, develop differently, and grow knobbly and bumpily, so too does the autistic aesthetic which often appreciates the broken, the outsider, the ghost, peering out from within. In this way, the autistic aesthetic is depicted and unveiled as secretive, ghostly, between senses, intersensorially and between worlds.

The top photograph (p. 48) is from a live art piece that was recorded while I was performing in the bath. Sensations and sounds of my feet tapping, and splashes of water along the bathroom’s tiled wall created beats in a sound art track titled *Not Yet Home* (2020). Another live art performance performed on my bed and in the bath titled *Home* (2020) followed and was screened and curated by *Unfamiliar*s which exists as a physical stage, an online art space and a small press in Colchester, Essex, UK.

Underneath are two photographs of me as I look at the camera. The images are identical, except the left one has more contrast. She has brown hair



and green eyes. Behind her is a book shelf. This portrait diptych is from *Breakdown* (a series, 2014-2018) during a few years when I took selfies to remember versions of myself. The face might appear female, feminine and happy, but within I am battling with strong feelings of loneliness holding in questions around my identity as I do not feel I exist well enough.

I identify with feelings of being like a ghost or an imposter in a human body, a continuous feeling of not being able to communicate my feelings or thoughts well, a constant stress, an anxiety, an angst. None of this is seen other than a portrait diptych asking the viewer to look again. Perhaps the most telling of the autistic aesthetic is that it is not afraid to spill over. In this way, autistic

artists will allow themselves to be mixed in with the chaos, or mull in the moment of being broken. This is not the same as the antonym of perfection but rather, there is no fear in going deeper, exploring the darker spaces and lower, flatter or screechier notes.

My video art explores vulnerability and the layers of meaning and sensory skins that hold an autistic being. We are often united in describing the autistic lived experience as being from behind a glass. In this way, the autistic being has become accustomed or attuned to energies that allow for flow, survival or existence to occur in both our artwork and within the world around us. To conclude, autistic aesthetics, far from being problematic, play a crucial role in questioning our current neglect of sensible modes of being. A repositioning of these bodily perspectives will make it possible for new knowledges to resituate autistic identity and find beauty in the Gothic. Thus, the depiction of divergent aesthetics can be valued via a prism of beauty commonly dismissed by normative cultures.

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