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Abstract

This writing is about Live Art and neurodiversity. I introduce and attempt to define my term ‘neurotransgression’ and argue that all Live Art is neurotransgressive. The writing includes an ‘Easy Read’ and an ‘Access Rider’. It works to maintain a fidelity to my own neurotransgressive mode of being and doing. I am diagnosed as dyspraxic with an executive planning dysfunction.

Keywords: Neurodiversity; live art; dyspraxia; neurotransgressive

Easy Read

- This writing is about Live Art and neurodiversity.
- In it, I am kind of saying that all proper Live Art is neurodivergent but not really. That’s the main thing I am saying.
- I am using phrases like ‘but not really’ and being a bit flaky and non-committal like that throughout the writing because that’s how my brain works – bold thoughts and statements followed by insecurity, ambiguity and complexity. I think that’s to do with me being dyspraxic and my executive planning dysfunction.
- I want to be true to that insecurity, ambiguity and complexity rather than trying to sort it all out because I want those kinds of dysfunctions to be embraced more in academia. This is so that neurodivergent Live Art people like me can be embraced more in academia (there should be more embracing all around in academia). This is one of the other main things I am saying in the writing.

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- I think that Live Art is all about embracing those dysfunctions and those people like me and there is already lots of embracing in Live Art but if you don't like embracing then people will respect that. If those dysfunctions aren't being consensually embraced then it isn't Live Art. This is another one of the main things that I want to be saying in the writing.
- One way of ensuring everyone has a better relationship with these dysfunctions is to have an access rider. An access rider is a document that you can give to institutions, organisers, collaborators, curators, and other people involved in putting on your work. You put in all the things you need to ensure you are able to do the work in a way that is safe, kind, and healthy for you. I first came across the idea of access riders when I asked the artist and activist James Leadbitter to give a talk at an event I organized in 2016. He calls his a disability awareness document and you can find it here: http://www.thevacuumcleaner.co.uk/Disability_awareness_document_17.pdf. I include my own insecure, ambiguous, complex version of an access rider below.
- Instead of just using the word neurodivergent I use my own word neurotransgression. The main thing I want to achieve in this writing is that everyone starts saying 'Yeah, I think that's basically what Daniel Oliver calls neurotransgression' or 'Yeah, I prefer to use Daniel Oliver's word neurotransgression' or 'that's well neurotransgressive (Daniel Oliver, 2023)'.
- When I say transgressive I basically just mean being a bit naughty or mucking about in a way that might mean some people say 'stop mucking about'.
- I mention 'transgressive cinema' in my writing. The term 'transgressive cinema' was coined by American underground film-maker Nick Zedd in 1985 in a manifesto.¹ It refers to very low-budget, DIY, punky, trashy, shocking films made by and with New York-based artists including Lydia Lunch, Kembra Pfahler, Tommy Turner, and David Wojnarowicz in the late 1970s and 80s. I had a VHS collection of these films as a teenager and it was one of my first experiences of really connecting with a particular aesthetic, style, and tone.
- I use the word neurotransgressive instead of neurodiverse partly because I don't want people to think they have to have a diagnosis of neurodivergency to be able to be a proper Live Artist.
- It is also because I am writing about actively doing something ('transgressing/being naughty/mucking about ...') rather than passively being something ('divergent/dyspraxic/autistic ...').
- I guess I could have just said neuronauthtiness or neuromuckingabout but I didn't. I do use the word neuro-obedient to describe the opposite of neurotransgression. I guess I could have just said neurosensible or neuroboring but I didn't.
- I try to explain that you don't have to do neurotransgression on purpose. It's ok to do it by accident.
- I try to explain that it's even better if you don't know if it is on purpose or by accident because that aligns with my experience of being neurodivergent – where me and other people sometimes aren't sure if I am doing something on purpose or by an accident.

1. Jack Sargeant, *Death Tripping: The Extreme Underground* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2008).

- I prefer trying to explain rather than just explaining because explaining is hard when you have an executive dysfunction. You can get in a muddle or a flap.
- I am not sure I am successful at explaining what neurotransgression is and how it connects with Live Art, but I am successful at getting in a muddle and a flap and I hope I am successful at showing that neurotransgression and neurotransgressive Live Art definitely has something to do with getting in a muddle and a flap.
- I'm not actually sure I am doing any of these things in the writing which is fine because I have done them here in the easy read.

Daniel Oliver's Access Rider

- (1) **Access.** Daniel hopes this access rider provides some useful ways of accessing his article.
- (2) **Disorganised thoughts.** It's possible this access rider makes Daniel's access requirements less clear than just talking about them, or worse, this access rider might appear to undermine access riders and their importance in getting institutions to foreground and formalize access. Access riders are hard, especially when organising thoughts is hard (see point 8 below: 'Clarity'). There are some great templates, such as the one made by dancer, choreographer and writer Alexandrina Hemsley which you can find at <http://alexandrinahemsley.com/resources/access-rider-open-template/>. Daniel wishes he'd used that one, but maybe you or your organisation can use it to organize some of Daniel's thoughts here. The important thing to say is that Daniel really means it. By which he means, really, he really means it with disorganised thoughts and really meaning it helps him organise his thoughts, whether he actually really means it or not.
- (3) **Good panic bad panic.** Daniel needs to have a good panic (which is not really a panic but more of a thrill) to do good things. But a bad panic (which is not really a bad panic but just a bit of a stress) might mean he does bad things. A few years ago Daniel was getting prepared to perform at an event in Leeds. Daniel had thought it was gonna be just for grown-ups but there were loads of kids there so he had to change lots of what he was about to do. He was in this space of panic thinking that, for him, is usually the best space for making work in. He was doing well in this space of panic thinking when he noticed that he needed a wee. So he went to the loos but kept making the changes to the show in his head doing the panic thinking and then halfway through having his wee he realised he was weeing in a sink and not in a urinal. He had no idea or memory of how he had ended up in that situation. Luckily, he was on his own but the good panic thought of performance making shifted to the bad panic thought of what if someone came in now and saw this. How could he explain this situation. He couldn't just say 'sorry I'm making a show and that's why I'm weeing in a sink'.

- (4) **Anecdotes.** Anecdotes help Daniel organise his thoughts and relax him. This one means something like if Daniel is weeing in the sink it's because he is making his show – but it's only happened once so probably don't worry about it.
- (5) **Communication.** Daniel's answers are sometimes out of the window.
- (6) **Formatting.** The formatting of the numbers in this access rider has gone wrong. It's gone right again now even though Daniel needed it to be wrong to make his point. This is what it is often like. Here's another anecdote: once when Daniel was doing his PhD he was at a reading group reading a hard book. When he was asked what he thought he looked out of the window and the person running the reading group said 'you won't find the answers out of the window'
- (7) **Anxiety.** Don't worry because everything is gonna be really good and actually Daniel might do something different instead (see point 3 above: 'Good panic bad panic').
- (8) **Clarity.** Daniel understands the urgent need for a shift to plain and easily understandable communication. That's why he did an easy read. However, sometimes when you are doing plain and easily understandable communication Daniel will find it very plain but he will not find it very easily understandable. This will create the problem of Daniel both not understanding and also feeling stupid and anxious about not understanding because the delivery and tone is clearly so clear. In this situation please try communicating in a way that is not plain and not easily understandable. The result will be that Daniel will probably still not understand but he will feel fine about it because it will be clear that what you are saying is hard to understand therefore it's not his fault. Feel free to ask Daniel to try to use plain and easy to understand language but also acknowledge that he is already trying to use plain and easy to understand language and this is what is coming out.
- (9) **3 XLR cables.** This was meant to go on the tech rider. Actually, he might need four. This is a joke. Actually he might not need any XLR cables anymore. Please understand that Daniel's access rider and Daniel's tech rider are not the end of the conversation, they are the beginning. This is still part of the joke. No one needs XLR cables for a journal article but maybe journals would be better if some people did.
- (10) **3 Assistants.** Daniel would like three assistants per person in his team. That includes all three of the assistants in my team and on and on until infinity. He doesn't have a team. This is hard like a hard book but you can find the answers out of the window.
- (11) **Caring responsibilities.** Daniel would like to request that you don't throw out the baby with the bath water. As a dad of a neurodivergent son who once came along to a festival of durational performance and was found describing each piece to the curator and then saying 'which was a bit boring' except for Kira O'Reilly's piece which was described very enthusiastically and then the son made up a piece called 'I'm going down the stairs backwards' which involved going down the stairs backwards Daniel would like to request that you don't throw out the baby with the bath water. In this analogy the baby is probably

being hard to understand and the bath water is rich neuro-annoying people who can just afford to never have to explain themselves properly even though they could if they could be bothered – or the ‘rather clichéd masculinist, edgy, can’t-pin-me-down vision of the unintelligible artist’ that Shannon Jackson suggests is sometimes unquestionably celebrated in contemporary art and who almost definitely don’t have any caring responsibilities. They also probably don’t have access riders. They just have old-fashioned riders with champagne on and an extra hotel room for their personal assistant.²

2. Shannon Jackson, ‘Social Practice’, *Performance Research* 11, no. 3 (2006): 113–8 (116).

Neurotransgression and Live Art

All live art is neurotransgressive. All neurotransgressive performance is live art. I really mean that. I really mean all of it. By which I mean, maybe, that I’m affirmed by what artist, writer, and activist Hamja Ahsan says when he says ‘Maybe Valerie Solanas or Huey P. Newton didn’t know how much they meant it? Or maybe oppressive power structures or those in power couldn’t really tell’.³

3. Hamja Ahsan, Nwando Ebizie, and Daniel Oliver, ‘Neurodiversity, Fantasy, Revolution: A Conversation between Hamja Ahsan, Nwando Ebizie and Daniel Oliver’, in *Awkwoods: Daniel Oliver’s Dyspraxic Adventures in Participatory Performance*, ed. Daniel Oliver (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2019), 116–32 (124).

The neurotransgressive performance maker who is always a Live Artist always probably doesn’t know how much they really mean it. Or maybe neuro-obedient audiences can’t tell. Perhaps no-one can tell but neuro-obedient audiences get cross about it. My friend, the artist and writer Matthew de Kersaint Gireadau once advised me to overcome the anxiety around the weight and certainty and formality of writing academically by starting off each sentence with the words ‘what I reckon is . . .’ and then going back and deleting those words afterwards.

What I reckon is, is that all Live Art is neurotransgressive and all neurotransgressive performance is Live Art. What I reckon is, is that if you are not being neurotransgressive then you are not being a Live Artist. All Live Art says ‘what I reckon is, is that this way of doing things or being things could also be option’. ‘What I reckon is’ is about not insisting that it is an option, or at least not necessarily a good one and not not insisting it’s an option out of politeness or liberal openness to all the options and the opinions but as a fidelity to that anxiety around the weight and certainty and formality of insistence and the low self-esteem that comes up in so many lists of neurodivergent experience.

I am a neurotransgressive Live Artist and identity is important. It’s not even about you. It’s about me. But being a neurotransgressive Live Artist does not necessarily mean being neurodivergent but I made it up and I am dyspraxic. I am clumsy, my co-ordination is off-kilter, and I am dysfunctional when it comes to strategizing, organising, and other things related to executive planning that I can’t remember. I’ve already got myself in a muddle writing this. It’s months after the deadline and I am only here. This is good, because a big part of my own practice of neurotransgressive Live Art is trying to hold a fidelity to all this dysfunction (whilst still trying to be interesting). What emerges might end up being experimental or even avant garde or even risky or even actually

quite clever when you think about it afterwards but it also might end up being rubbish. And that's complicated because sometimes I have to give people who have made performances a grade for their performance and sometimes those people I gave a grade to might come to my performances.

To get a good grade at doing neurotransgressive Live Art you do not necessarily have to be neurodivergent. All sorts of identities can get you a good grade at being neurotransgressive and getting a diagnosis is hard anyway. The important thing is at no point in the assessment criteria does it say that neurotransgression is any kind of strategy or style or technique or something like that. The criteria says it's more something accidental that you pretended was on purpose, or something you force out now because it's not happening but it does happen often and you want everyone to see it. Like a rash that forms the basis for a tattoo, or a rash that you draw on because you have to go to the doctor about your rash but it seems to have died down but you know it will be back tomorrow. A good rash that you want to keep. More tickly than itchy. That's what you tell the doctor, hoping she'll give you some tips about how to celebrate the rash instead of telling you that it's not that bad because Daniel Radcliffe also has a rash, or that there is evidence, actually, that actually Einstein had a rash. In this bit the rash is a metaphor for dyspraxia.

Speaking of rashes, I'd like to connect the ethos and aesthetics of all neurotransgressive Live Art to that bit of neurotransgressive Live Art that had that old cinema of transgression on a VHS style – not definitely black and white, but almost certainly stretchy around the edges. Or that neurotransgressive Live Art piece where I said 'remember that old cinema of transgression on VHS style of performance that I found in that low little cupboard that went really far back, more like a tunnel than a cupboard once you are in it, and if you went right to the back you ended up under the big bed with the old pornographic magazine which had that picture of that transgressive performance artist before they were a transgressive performance artist in it smiling with a beer bottle inside them'. In 'The Cinema of Transgression Manifesto' Nick Zedd says 'We refuse to take their easy approach to cinematic creativity' and he says:

We propose that all film schools be blown up and all boring films never be made again. We propose that a sense of humour is an essential element discarded by the doddering academics and further, that any film that doesn't shock isn't worth looking at.⁴

4. Nick Zedd, 'The Cinema of Transgression Manifesto', in *Death Tripping: The Extreme Underground*, ed. Jack Sargeant (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2008), 83–24.

I'd like to connect the methods and ethos and aesthetics of all neurotransgressive Live Art to that style and approach and humour and explosion that Zedd mentions. But that's not in the criteria because I don't want to police the methods and ethos and aesthetics of all neurotransgressive Live Art too tightly.

What I reckon is, is that the aesthetics of neurotransgressive Live Art is doing one thing for a long time or a short time, not doing anything for a long time or a short time, only doing somethings for a long time or

a short time but not the things that neuro-not-getting-it people say are the important things, nipping in and out of things instead of staying or getting into the nitty gritty of the details and refusing to get out again, making a mess, being a mess, being a bit awkward with your body or your words, not getting it, getting it too much, having bad hair, and having ideas that don't need to actually be realised but realising them anyway.

In this neurotransgressive Live Art piece I am in a small plastic coated room explaining what dyspraxic time travel is for hours whilst wearing a crinkly silver safety blanket like a sort of nappy and the audience also wear crinkly safety blankets and they are allowed to come and go but one of them gets quite faint because they stayed too long and the crinkly blankets make you really hot and because I wasn't clear enough about the fact they can come and go or the crinkling of the crinkly blankets was too loud so they couldn't hear me properly and there is a drip drip drip of green liquid from a hosepipe taped to the ceiling which years later someone who wasn't even there falsely said was urine and there is a bit when I tell the audience that the next bit is clothing optional. Neurotransgressive Live Art is bad at transitions. It's more just doing this thing for a bit and then doing something else for a bit. Or just doing the first thing for the whole time. That's why it's not theatre and that's why it is neurotransgressive. My neurodivergent family life coach said we have to be extra kind when we want a neurodivergent person to change from doing one thing to doing another thing. She was referring more to *Minecraft* than Live Art but it still applies here.

Neurotransgression is a word I made up. What I reckon is, is that that's what all neurotransgressive Live Artist's do, we make stuff up. They ask me at school drop off/pick up, 'so what is it you do again Daniel, is it sort of stand-up comedy? And I say, no, it's like that but it's more just something I made up'. We make up what it is we do and we do that sometimes because we don't trust the barometers of success and quality that comes with the things that other people have made up – things like theatre and dance and cabaret and being-in-a-band and installation art and drag shows and poetry. It's like those things, the Live Art things we do, but more just something we made up. I remember at my school in a small town in the countryside this farmer's son was getting stick because he said something incorrect in maths and he just shouted 'yeah well you are all shit at farming'. Neurotransgressive Live Art is like that, but it's a really niche type of farming that I just made up so I can get good at it and then tell other people that they are shit at it when they shout at me for being shit at something that I didn't make up.

I outlined a less agricultural-adjacent definition of Live Art with a similar gist in a piece on neurodivergent-led teaching that I wrote with autistic performer and writer Sumita Majumdar:

For Daniel, the formal unusualness and interdisciplinarity associated with Live Art practices does not arise from high-brow, connoisseurial or heavily conceptual approaches to experimentation with form or from an overly

displayed expertise in histories of art, performance and the avant-garde. What, for Daniel, differentiates his practice and Live Art more generally from the kinds of clever deconstructions of forms or the explorations of radical or unusual material in, say, experimental theatre or conceptual art, is the way the emergence of these new forms and experiences are visibly entwined and inseparable from the identity of the performance maker.⁵

5. Sumita Majumdar and Daniel Oliver, 'Dyspraxic Approaches to Teaching Live Art in the "Neurodivergent"/"Normodivergent" Classroom', in *Inclusivity and Equality in Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Neuro and Physical Diversity*, ed. Petronilla Whitfield (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), 217–31.

In this neurotransgressive Live Art piece I am in a neuro-average theatre doing the warm up for a more successful cabaret act and it's a bit where I am handing out carrots which I call sausages and they are to be put gently in the mouth but not eaten in order to avoid something I call inaudible lisp syndrome and also I am holding a hammer wrapped in tin foil which I invite an audience member to hold with me for fun ('not fun for everyone, and that's ok') but I explain that it doesn't need to be turned on because it's not about switching something on it's about switching something off: 'that little neurotypical fucker that lives in your head and stops you just going for it max dyspraxia'. Afterwards some young people that I assume to be drama students tell me that I am very brave because I don't have a hook. Neurotransgressive Live Art does not have a hook, that's why it's not cabaret. Unless the hook is identity, which is important, but, to reiterate, being a neurotransgressive Live Artist does not necessarily mean being neurodivergent but, to reiterate, I made it up and I am dyspraxic.

The 'neuro' bit of neurotransgression is the identity bit. The hook. This 'neuro' identity bit is not meant to indulge a patronising or dismissive neurological determinism.⁶ It is identity as in queer identity as in somewhat anti-identity and something we do as much as or more than something we are.⁷ Nick Walker's word 'neuroqueer' is a big influence for me here.⁸ Walker says that neuroqueer was initially 'conceived of as a verb', and defines neuroqueering as 'the practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously'.⁹ But it also works as an adjective – 'a label of social identity':

6. Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of Uselessness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020).
7. Meg John Barker and Julia Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History* (London: Icon Books, 2016).
8. Nick Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities* (Texas: Autonomous Press, 2021).
9. Ibid., Kindle location 1953.
10. Ibid., Kindle location 1968.
11. Ibid., Kindle location 415.

A neuroqueer individual is any individual whose identity, selfhood, gender performance, and/or neurocognitive style have in some way been shaped by their engagement in practices of neuroqueering, regardless of what gender, sexual orientation, or style of neurocognitive functioning they may have been born with.¹⁰

What I reckon is that neurotransgressive is a kind of co/subcategory of neuroqueer, where the focus is tightened onto creative practice and the relationship to sexuality is not necessarily foregrounded (though it probably often is). The 'neuro' identity bit situates my practice and the Live Art practices I am drawn to as practices that *do things* that align with the ideals of the neurodiversity movement: the 'social justice movement that seeks civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for the neurodivergent'.¹¹ Although this movement has its roots in the self-advocacy of autistic people 'who were challenging the dominant

12. Damian E. M. Milton, 'Neurodiversity Past and Present – An Introduction to the Neurodiversity Reader', in *The Neurodiversity Reader: Exploring Concepts, Lived Experience and Implications for Practice*, ed. Damian Milton (Shorcham-by-Sea: Pavilion, 2020), 3–7 (4).
13. Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 5
14. Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004).
15. *Ibid.*, 2.
16. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
17. For more on this see, Oliver, *Awkwoods*, 20–24.
18. Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 2.

ways in which autism had been classified',¹² Erin Manning describes it more broadly 'as a platform for political change that fundamentally alters how life is defined, and valued'.¹³

What I also reckon is, is that this 'neuro' identity bit of neurotransgression aligns with what might problematically be referred to as idiocy, or being an idiot. I say problematically because of the word's historical usage in reference to learning disabilities.¹⁴ In *Images of Idiocy* Martin Halliwell observes that 'clashes between scientific and cultural discourses are nearly always present in narratives involving an idiot figure, as if the idiot's image cannot be contained in a singular frame of reference'.¹⁵ He goes on to explain that 'idiocy exists both as a legitimate label of medical classification and social dysfunction, but also as a general way of describing idiosyncratic, bizarre or outlandish behavior that defies strict categorization'.¹⁶ Following this, what I reckon is, is that idiotic identity (as in bizarre, outlandish, category-defying identity aligned with perceived dysfunction) is important in neurotransgressive Live Art in terms of the ways that the Live Art we do tells a story about who we are and what we do – and those stories are not quite rooted in the ways we are not quite defined by science and not quite defined by culture.

We implicitly or explicitly reference brains and nervous systems in our Live Art and the writing that surrounds it in order to allude to our openness to the idea that our transgressive acts and approaches might be and might not be contingent on, or determined by, our neurologies, it's hard to tell and we will tell you nonetheless and it might be awkward when we do. Neurotransgressive Live Art is always awkward ... boldly awkward and affirmative of the awkwardness of the things and actions and people present. When things get awkward in performance we might question the intention, capability, desire, agency, control ...¹⁷ of the person or people supposedly in charge of our experience and they might tell us through just telling us or through the way they do things that it's ok because they are doing it on purpose or it's ok because they can't help it ... but that telling might also have an air of the awkward and the ambiguity around intention, capability, desire, agency, control ... and then we will know things are getting neurotransgressive. That's the neuro' bit of neurotransgression and it's also the transgressive bit – this embracing of ambiguity and ambivalence around what Manning calls the 'volition-intentionality-agency triad' – and its connection, in neurotypical ideology, to defining humanness.¹⁸ It aims, in part, to offer agency over how we neurodivergent people are judged in terms of our agency over things, our desiring of things and whether we really mean it or whether we really meant to do it. Neurotransgressive Live Art, which all Live Art is, is trying to really mean it or trying not to really mean it in order to actually really mean it when we don't know if we really mean it or not.

To summarise, neurotransgressive Live Art is not good at summaries because it does not have a hook, but it is all about identity – ideally neurotransgressive identity. It is not good at transitions and it is good at not being good at them – mainly because it is kind with them, but that kindness is not necessarily rooted in clarity because

clarity is hard like a bad panic (which is not really a panic, just a bit of a stress). It is naughty like a black and white film on VHS from New York in the 1980s that is aligned with the blowing up of film schools or like pissing in a sink because you just found out that there are kids around. It is like a rash that you have to draw on because right now it is not showing up in the way you thought it would and you need people to know you have a rash but you don't want to go on about it. It is heavily reliant on anecdotes and metaphors, but it really means it, even if really meaning it gets awkward. It is awkward but it doesn't mean to make people feel awkward about it being awkward. And it is a niche type of farming that neuro-not-transgressive people are shit at.

Notes on contributor

Dr Daniel Oliver is a dyspraxic live artist. His practice and research is focused on contemporary performance and live art, audience participation, neurodiversity, and awkwardness. He is currently a teaching fellow on the Experimental Art and Performance degree at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.