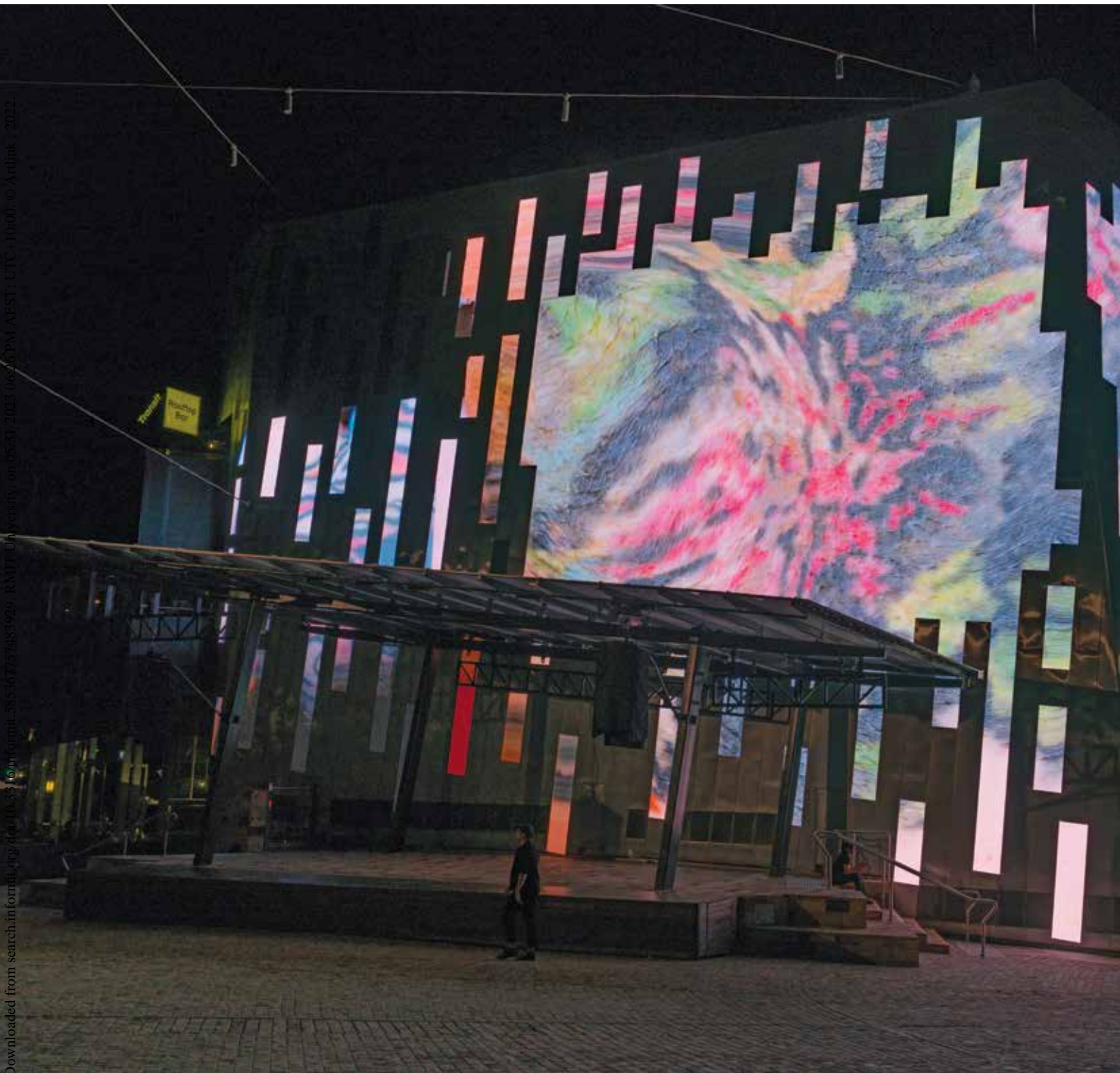


The SubMerge Project

Autistic embodiment and the extended bodymind



Downloaded from search.proquest.com on 06/21/2023 06:27:51 PM AEST, UTC+10:00. © Artlink, 2022.

Alison Bennett

SKIN: neuroqueer entanglement, 2019
digital façade of Federation Square,
commissioned by Melbourne Fringe
Festival, 12–29 September 2019
Photo: Alison Bennett



Dean Walsh and Alison Bennett had never met ‘IRL’ but developed a creative dialogue online over ten years—long before the forced 2020 leap to wide-ranging digital collaborations. Both artists identify as neuroqueer. The following text draws on their conversations between April and June 2022, during development of a speculative project with the working title *SubMerge*.

Bodymind and Waterbody

The term ‘bodymind’ has become increasingly deployed in disability studies since 2011 in recognition of the reciprocal and inextricable co-forming of these experiences.¹ Indeed, ‘bodymind’ is a strategy to step over the false body/mind binary. Bennett and Walsh both highlight their experience of porousness, of a bodymind extending beyond the boundaries of skin; it is a shared feature of both artists’ autism, though it manifests in very different creative practices.

Their exchange began with the observation that they experience a form of autistic joy and sensory integration when immersed under water. While Bennett recalls childhood euphoria obsessively learning to hold their breath and mimic the full-body underwater swim technique of Aquaman, Walsh has developed this trajectory into a playful yet complex choreographic and movement taxonomy he calls PrimeOrderly.

Key to both these underwater adventures is an experience of the

‘waterbody’. Walsh explains 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. Bennett and Walsh speculate that the weight of the water serves to integrate the autistic sensorium, and they position this thinking in relation to foundational theories of ‘neurodiversity’, ‘queer’ and ‘neuroqueer’.

Neurodiversity / Neurodivergence

Neurodiversity, a concept developed by Australian autism advocate Judy Singer in 1998 positions neurological diversity—autism and ADHD for example—as a political identity, similar to disability rights principles which intersect with civil rights movements.² The American writer Steve Silberman

observed that the autism self-advocacy movement has looked to queer activism for strategies.³ Similar to how homosexuality has been removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as a mental disorder and reframed as an identity, neurodiversity activists look to political and cultural reframing. By moving beyond medical and social models of disability, to political identity and cultural consciousness, an integrated elemental empathy can be built.

Queer

Beyond mainstream issues such as marriage equality, queer cultural practices investigate the arbitrary construction of social paradigms. It draws on an intersectional approach, that is, between identity politics and lived experience. Queerness is a slippery field that resists definition. More than an alternative term for gender and sexual diversity, it is a shifting coalition of political and cultural positions and strategies that critique, defy and ignore arbitrary normativity.⁴ Various, 'queerness' has been deployed to interrogate constructions of gender, race and disability. In the 21st century, some queer cultural methodologies, (particularly in academia), are turning to new materialism and posthumanism theories to interrogate the agency of all things, and the hierarchies between objects and subjects. This thinking positions the artist as 'a thing amongst things.'⁵

Neuroqueer

Coined by Nick Walker and Melanie Yergeau around 2010, neuroqueer builds an awareness of the inter-related dimensions of queerness and autism.⁶ Yergeau's book *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (2018) engages queer theory to think through the rhetorical construction of autism. Walker describes *Authoring Autism* as a critique of the pathology paradigm, and an 'exploration of how neurodivergent bodyminds can creatively expand and queer the boundaries of rhetoric, communication, intentionality, and experience.'⁷

However, the intersection of autism and queerness is not simply a rhetorical gesture. Elizabeth Weir et al found that autistic adults are eight times more likely than their neurotypical counterparts to identify as LGBTQI+. Neurodiversity is a queer experience.⁸ Disturbingly, gay conversion therapy and Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) were developed by the same psychologist, Ole Ivar Lovaas.⁹

Both 'therapies' conceive of the gay or autistic subject as non-human, as needing to be 'made human'. In a radical post-human rhetorical flourish, Yergeau concludes with the proposition that autistics side with the object, claiming the space of the non-person, 'a thing amongst things.'

Porous Bodies

Commissioned for Melbourne Fringe in 2019, Bennett explored neuroqueer

sensory perception by wrapping the digital facade of Federation Square with moving images of tattooed skin: 'By literally reskinning the digital facade, I wanted to communicate the neuroqueer experience of entangled embodiment—the sense of the body as part of the physical environment around us. Merging moving images of tattooed skin with the surface of the building was an expression of this entanglement', Bennett explains. 'I am not talking about this in a theoretical or conceptual sense. I am speaking in a neurological and perceptual way. Some autistic people are very clumsy and don't have a sense of where their body is, whereas others may have hyper-proprioception—a precise sense of their body in space. Not only does my sense of self reach into the spaces around me, whilst my mind is flooded with images and connections, my senses are reaching out to the surfaces that surround me.'

Subaquatic-Queer

Such neurodivergent embodiment is also at the core of Walsh's practice. Working with his partner, composer Andrew Batt-Rawden, his creative work encompasses three inter-related realms: choreographic performance works, therapeutic creative workshops, and immersive practices with the Queers of Submersion SCUBA diving group. Each of these tentacles inform his creative investigations into the queered bodymind autistic sensorium: a space for trans-species solidarity and

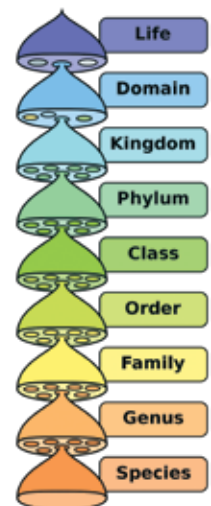
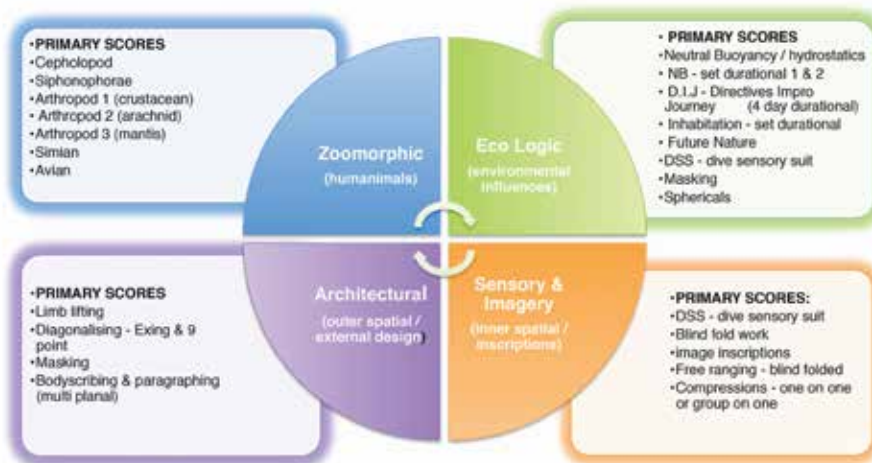
Top:
Dean Walsh points to
PrimeOrderly notes.
Photo: Alison Bennett

Bottom, from left:
Graphical summary of the
four primary domains and
leading scores of Dean Walsh's
PrimeOrderly movement
taxonomy. There are over eighty
subset modalities not shown here.
This graphic was created in 2014.

Peter Halasz
Biological classification
image created for
Wikimediasphere, 2007



PRIME ORDERLY – 4 domains + primary scores





Above:
Alison Bennett
vegetal/digital (waratah), 2022

Opposite:
Dean Walsh
Infinite Item, 2020
performance still
Photo: Heidrun Löhr

inter-environmental justice. As Walsh recalls, ‘I started this work in 2007, [when] it was becoming evident that environmental care is overwhelmingly urgent. In particular, the marine environment spoke to me in ways that opened up my creative research.’

‘The best way for me to communicate is through my body. I can talk for hours, but I verge on panic when I can’t get things out fast enough or include all the layers of detail because of the way my mind thinks in pictures. Embodied expression integrates the flow of information in my mind into the world that is instantaneous. I can respond and connect in ways that bring me [to the] present.’

As a dancer and a choreographer working closely with others, Walsh pursues political imperatives

that wrestle socio-political and environmental content. ‘Integrating my practice with the marine environment was the step I needed to get away from anthropocentric subjectivity into interspecies relationality. I wanted to promote more equitable understandings during in-studio explorations—a more balanced, accessible, and sensitive work ecology—as opposed to only a work ethic, which, in my experience, has often been mistaken for “How professional are you?” How dedicated to making a work for stage, even if it challenges you in ways that are personally damaging?’

Consolidated through an Australia Council Fellowship in 2011–12, Walsh’s PrimeOrderly movement taxonomy is inspired by the empirical classification of life forms, offering an ‘autistic pun’ on the hierarchical taxonomy of biology: on the surface, the method is organised by the same labelling logic, but it points to an expanded, integrated sensorium. As Walsh explains, ‘I first became fascinated with marine environments as a child because they offered me ways to escape domestic violence. So, when I commenced scuba diving in 2008, my autistic brain was compelled to learn everything I could about scuba as a body of knowledge, and about how marine environments were being affected by climate change.’

‘I’m not the kind of “cliché” autistic that gets fixated on mathematical systems or even anything too technologically abstract—I’m very much the spatial, visual and aural



autistic. I'm very much the analogue autistic. But I do love patterns and codes. I love identifying ways that I can transform these patterns and codes into the sensory, somatic and kinetic.'

Bennett responds, 'I also think in pictures, or perhaps more accurately, I think in 3D movies that I have run back and forth, pause and pull apart like an exploded diagram. I also notice the flow of patterns around me that merge people, ideas, environments and resources. What is more, I feel a strong sense of empathy with

everything around me—objects, humans, plants. The perception that autistics lack empathy is incorrect. Many of us experience hyper-empathy and appear disconnected because we are attempting to modulate the overwhelming amount of information that we are sensing.'

The Practice of Relationality

The Queers of Submersion SCUBA diving group meets monthly, weather permitting, to practice submerged

relationality. Walsh leads the process: 'We begin with yoga, breathing exercises and meditation before becoming immersed in the marine environment. We practice diving as an act of empathy, not an act of will or domination.' As Bennett adds, 'scuba diving, which stands for 'Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus', encompasses a range of posthuman realities. It activates a symbiotic relationship with technology, an augmented prosthesis that extends experience, and places the

diver into a position of vulnerability and empathy, of interdependence and wonder.’ Walsh continues ‘at the point of “the squeeze”, when the waterbody equals the water volume around us, I have a profound experience of extended cognition, not only are my senses merged with the environment but I am “sensing” with the environment. For example, at this point of pressure, whale song is literally felt through the water, as if water and body are a single entity. As a neurodivergent dancer attuned to my physicality and proprioception, I was deeply influenced by this experience.’

Crush my Soul back into my Body

In the 1960s, the autistic academic Temple Grandin observed that physical compression assisted her to feel calm and to concentrate.¹⁰ She created a ‘squeeze machine’ based on a cattle crush after observing its calming effect on frightened calves. While Grandin’s work with the cattle industry might seem counter intuitive to trans-species justice, ‘it is the cattle chute that prompts Grandin to move beyond her own human exceptionalism as she considers how animals think and feel, and how their embodied experience might relate to her own.’¹¹ The integrative effect of physical compression on autistic people has led to a proliferation of therapies such as weighted blankets. As Bennett confides, ‘I sometimes direct my shiatsu therapist to crush my soul back into my body’. This parallels with

scuba diving on autistic individuals as immersion therapy.¹² Not only does it facilitate compression through the weight of water and wetsuit, it cuts out excessive sensory distractions and reduces communication channels, replacing them with specific, visually readable and codified hand signals.

SubMerge

In developing the *SubMerge* project, Bennett and Walsh seek to communicate an awareness of merged entanglement and extended sensorium, not only for autistic embodiment but for all waterbodies and bodies of water beyond a therapeutic function.¹³ The experience of ‘merging’ water and body may assist deeper environmental and social conversations between neurotypical and neuro-atypical people, between artist and environmentalist, between neuroqueers and our wider communities. At its heart is a desire to enhance inter-species and inter-environmental relations.

Walsh and Bennett finally met ‘IRL’ in June 2022 in Sydney, coincidentally the closing week of *rīvus*, the 23rd Biennale of Sydney, which centred its curatorial framework on water environments as entities with cultural and political agency, demonstrating the call to action as urgent and shared. *SubMerge* facilitates the embodied awareness that we are inseparable from our environment, and that cognition is diffused beyond the boundaries of

the skin. It is this direct experience of empathy and connectedness that is required in a time of environmental crisis. We are queer-kin, a thing amongst things, water within water.

¹ Margaret Price, “Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life”, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011) ² Micki McGee, “Neurodiversity,” *Contexts* (Berkeley, Calif.) 11, no. 3 (2012): 12–13 ³ Steve Silberman, *Neurotribes: the Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*. (New York: Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2015) ⁴ See Callum McGrath, *QUEER: Stories from the NGV Collection*, Artlink 42.2, (Wirtuti / Spring 2022): 101–107; first published online 30 May 2022 <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4981/queer-stories-from-the-ngv-collection/> ⁵ Alison Bennett, *Queer(y)ing Creative Practice*. CAST e2020 <https://cast.org.au/queer-practices/> ⁶ Nick Walker and Dora M. Raymaker, “Toward a Neuroqueer Future: An Interview with Nick Walker.” *Autism in Adulthood* 3, no. 1 (2021): 5–10; Jessica Rauchberg, “Imagining a Neuroqueer Technoscience,” *Studies in Social Justice*, 16, no. 2 (2022) ⁷ Walker and Raymaker, 8 ⁸ Elizabeth Weir, Carrie Allison, and Simon Baron-Cohen. “The Sexual Health, Orientation, and Activity of Autistic Adolescents and Adults.” *Autism Research* 14, no. 11 (2021): 2342–2354 ⁹ Margaret F Gibson and Patty Douglas, “Disturbing Behaviours: Ole Ivar Lovaas and the Queer History of Autism Science,” *Catalyst* (San Diego, Calif.) 4, no. 2 (2018): 1–28; Daniel E Conine, Sarah C. Campau and Abigail K. Petronelli, “LGBTQ+ Conversion Therapy and Applied Behavior Analysis: A Call to Action,” *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 55, no. 1 (2022): 6–18 ¹⁰ Temple Grandin, “Calming Effects of Deep Touch Pressure in Patients with Autistic Disorder, College Students, and Animals”, *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology*, (Jan 1992): 63–72 ¹¹ Mai Minoura, Iori Tani, Takahiro Ishii and Yukio P. Gunji, “Observing the Transformation of Bodily Self-consciousness in the Squeeze-machine Experiment”, *J. Vis. Exp.* (145), (2019); Maria Almanza, “Temple Grandin’s Squeeze Machine as Prosthesis,” *Journal of modern literature* 39, no. 4 (2016): 162–175 ¹² Karlee Naumann, Jocelyn Kernot, Gaynor Parfitt, and Kade Davison. “Exploring the Physical and Psychosocial Experience of Immersion Therapy for People Living with a Disability [version 1; Peer Review: 1 Approved with Reservations].” *F1000 research* 10 (2021): 135– ¹³ ABC News. ‘How water therapy is helping people with autism | ABC News’, 2 May 2021, https://youtu.be/BhZ95k_MN7s

Alison Bennett is an artist and academic, working as Associate Dean, Photography, at RMIT School of Art in Melbourne.

Dean Walsh is a dancer, choreographer and educator who lives in Sydney. Alongside Andrew Batt-Rawden, he is a Co-Director of WeirdNest.