



M a s k i n g :
The Constant State of
Seeking and Becoming

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Introduction

My bachelor thesis explores autism and the masking experience. Masking, or camouflaging, is typical for people with neurodiverse conditions, such as autism and ADHD. It is a multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon that manifests itself as a specific behavior in the interaction between neurodiverse and neurotypical people. It has defining behavioral patterns, yet the ways of performative masking depend on the individual, situation, and surrounding cultural norms. At its core, however, is the general desire to adapt and have a sense of belonging. In this thesis, I will be using the term masking, as I find it more approachable.

In this bachelor thesis, I will focus solely on masking from the perspective of autism. I have found masking to be a heavily bodily feeling with distinguished stages that automatically take place. Masking is like a deeply rooted behavioral code that has been ingrained in the core being as a silent condition creating feelings of alienation.

Masking has been researched in the field of psychology, but it is not mentioned much in art education. I hope that my bachelor thesis can act as a part of the discussion on the inclusiveness of teaching environments. In the framework of intersectional critical disability studies, I also explore the possibilities of art education's potential to act as a unifier for neurotypical and neurodiverse students. This means more concrete development of empathic teaching strategies that makes the creation of a safe space possible for diverse students. This research seeks an answer to the following questions:

[What causes masking?](#)

[How to describe and give physical forms to the bodily experiences of autistic masking?](#)

[How to encourage acceptance of autism and hidden disabilities through Art Education?](#)

My research method is autoethnographic and phenomenological Arts-Based Research. In the theoretical part, I will first explain key concepts related to autism and masking. I will tie together concepts, such as representation and Neuroqueerness, aiming to raise questions about the societal attitudes associated with autism. Combining feminist and queer theories with Critical Disability Studies, I seek to re-imagine the place of neurodivergence in Art education. The Arts-Based production part has been divided into three categories. The aim is to give physical forms to the various stages of masking through personal interpretation, trying to capture the essence of each stage of bodily sensations with chosen recycled materials.

The diary-like text material produced during the production section tries to gain insight into the critical thought process behind the physical mask making. It will create a temporal continuum dialogue between past and current thought-process. My thematic approach will revolve around art education, psychology, and sociology.

1. Theory

1.1 Autism

American Psychiatric Association (2022, 7.3) describes autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a complex neurological disorder. Defining key characteristics vary within individuals and can change in different stages of their life span. Common characteristics of ASD are abnormal difficulties in social communication, restricted interests, repetitive behavior or movement, and emotional illiteracy in self and in others. Individuals with ASD are prone to have hypo- or hyperactive responses to sensory stimuli, such as light, noise, sound, textures, touch, and movement in space. A strategy for reducing overwhelming sensory experience is self-soothing stimulatory behavior known as “stimming”, which is used by people with ASD. The main function of stimming is an adaptive mechanism that helps to communicate intense emotions or thoughts (Kapp et. Al, 2019).

Autism was first mentioned in Kanner's (1943) research, where he described the children partaking as having “autistic disturbances of affective contact,”. One year later Asperger (1944), conducted *similar* findings in boys aged 6-11, coining the term “autistic psychopathy” to describe the oddities in displayed behavior, such as one-sidedness,

impairment in nonverbal communication tactics, and motor clumsiness (Hollander & Anagnostou, 2007). The understanding of ASD in the medical field has gone through changes as the research on autism develops further. Asperger's syndrome remained as a subtype of autism in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—5th edition (DSM-5) until 2013 when the diagnosis of autism morphed into one diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (Hodges, et al. 2020).

The diagnostic criteria have expanded from the first mentions of Kanner's autism and Asperger's syndrome to what we understand as autism spectrum disorder today. These two conditions used to be understood as separate diagnoses with cross-over symptoms, varying from "high functioning" to "low functioning", depending on the level of need for assistance (Hollander & Anagnostou, 2007).

There has been a gap in the research and understanding of ASD, as it was commonly believed that only males could be affected by it. Males have a higher ratio of being diagnosed than the assigned female sex at birth (Hull, et al. 2020). There have been multiple research's done, trying to find a solution for the gender differences, and two notable ones have been the theory of female protective effect (FEP theory) and the extreme male brain (EMB theory) linking autistic traits to gene/environmental factors. The results, nevertheless, have been inconsistent with both theories. They propose, that even if genetic factors do lower the risk for autism in the assigned females, it is still more likely that they represent autism differently, outside the norm set up by classical autism. They also argue that the "fundamental issue with the current diagnostic procedure is that behavioral markers used as diagnostic criteria are established based on pre-existing conceptions of what autistic behaviors look like. These criteria have been developed based on the predominantly male populations previously identified as autistic."

Murray (2008) describes Kanner's observation of autistic presence as "classic autism". This idea has fundamentally shaped our understanding and created representations of ASD in media and entertainment. He explains the effect of classic autism as the most generic personification of the condition, where we see the person with autism just as a complex host for the condition. An approach is upholding a voyeuristic view from medical professionals, believing that autism and autistic presence is an invitation to look, to wonder, to study. This type of medical way of looking at autism can be seen inherently as the by-product of an ableist mindset (Murray, 2008).

1.2 Masking

Masking is an extraordinarily complex phenomenon. It is also connected to our cultural and societal interaction norms, having its own specific nuances depending on gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, surrounding culture, and so on. How to navigate according to the non-written and non-verbal rules of social interactions?

Masking is the autistic performance of trying to pretend more *normal*. This means suppressing the autistic characters, whether consciously or unconsciously (Hull, et al. 2020). Performance of normalness includes for example suppressing stimming hand gestures (e.g., hand flapping), imitating facial gestures, mimicking, and scripting responses in conversations. The intensity of masking depends on the varying adaptation to different environments, combined with motivational factors: trying to fit others, avoiding receiving negative treatment, or the desire to form connections. These were felt not to be possible to achieve without actively hiding autistic traits. Hull, et. Al's findings suggest that the need for masking is tied to the hierarchical value understanding of certain actions as normal and certain behavior as abnormal (2020). These rules and definitions are based on thin slice judgments and autistic traits are seen as more negative and off-putting by neurotypical peers (Sasson et. Al, 2017). In their research participants described extended masking causes as emotional and physical fatigue (requiring time alone to recover) and issues around authenticity and identity. Some participants described the identity issues as losing track of who they are.

Hull, et al. (2020) continue to elaborate evidence on how the expression of masking has been reported trough out the autistic population, but it has been noticeably more common in assigned females at birth. The first reported hypothesis of masking in females was done by Lorna Wing (1981), describing masking as the hindering factor for clinical diagnosis of autism in females. Wing's theory accumulated more interest, for example, Kovacs & Devlin (1998) found categorized differences in masking strategies based on gender. They proposed that assigned males at birth were more prone to having externalizing issues (problems like aggression and inability to relate to others) whereas assigned females at birth were more prone to internalizing problems, leading to comorbid mental issues (depression, anxiety, eating disorders, etc.) (Kovacs & Devlin, cited as Hull et al. 2020).

Pearson & Rose (2021) argue that masking should not be left alone as a label solely for “female autism” as it manifests in different ways across the gender spectrum. This type of labeling leaves out a large margin of people, as they would not fit the ideal body of “classic autism.” I would also argue that masked and under-diagnosed autism is more common in populations among people of color. Sasson et. A’s (2017) findings indicate that autistic traits in communication are rated more poorly among the neurotypical population. They propose that the autistic difference is pinpointed based on thin sliced judgments that are found in subtle physical, dynamic, and auditory cues of presentation, such as body posture, gazing patterns, physical appearance, etc. These cues and masked patterns of behavior somehow demonstrate an uncanny social performance that neurotypical observers find to be an indicator of awkward differences in character.

Instead of focusing on what type of autistic people mask and to what degree, we should be raising questions about why people feel like they need to fit in and why some do encourage actions of excluding and hurting others, who are different? (Pearson & Rose, 2021). Crompton et al. (2020) found that it is easier for autistic people to spend time around other autistic people instead of neurotypical friends and family. Autistic people feel the need to mask in order to spend time with neurotypical friends and family, they had to conform to what they (neurotypicals) wanted and were used to. Participants in the research described it as: “Neurotypical people do not get why certain things might be difficult or an issue for someone with autism. You try to explain it but they are constantly seeing it from a neurotypical perspective.”

1.3 Representation and Neuroqueerness

“Even supposedly invisible disabilities always threaten to disclose some stigma, however subtle, that disrupts the social order by its presence and attenuates the bond between equal members of the human community” (Thompson-Garland, cited in Murray, 2008).

Murray (2008) has interesting insights into autism representation. The narratives created about autism and the autistic experience have shaped the way autism is seen through the public eye. The representation of autism in media and entertainment has been polarized

into depictions creating a stereotypical and one-sided image of autism. Movies, such as Rain man (1988), embody the underlining emphasis of the recognition of autistic traits solely in white cis-male bodies. Sturken & Cartwright (2001) explain the politics of looking, acknowledging the power that secondhand representations have and how they contribute to shaping our current reality. They explain how images produce emotional responses, affecting attached meanings, and created semiotic values. Pictures and visual representation shape our collective understanding the same as a spoken language, making it crucial to also analyze the framing of depictions. What is shown? What is left out? Murray (2008) elaborates that the public reacting to autism as a “disease” has sparked a hysteric response to eradicate the causes of autism, creating preventive measures and medical cures. The fight against autism has grown into a multifaceted business favoring preventive treatment measures, like applied behavioral analysis (ABA), even though they are proven to be ineffective, unethical, and even harmful causing heightened rates of masking, depression, and suicidality in autistic people (autisticscienceperson.com, 2022, 16.4.).

“We engage in practices of looking to communicate, to influence, and to be influenced. Even when we choose not to look, or when we look away, these are activities that have meaning within the economy of looking” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

Murray (2008) claims that the contemporary industry around autism discourse stems from the fascination aspect. He explains that the self-claimed invitation to look is directing the way that autism depictions are allowed to exist. To free autism from its current narrative, Murray encourages us to look at the autistic presence. By presence, he implies the idea of seeing the person with autism as an individual, and not just as the abstract idea of the condition itself.

Regarding the politics of looking, the term neuroqueer offers an interesting viewpoint to observe the narratives around autism and other neurological differences. According to Walker (2021), the term neuroqueer is both an adjective and a verb, an identity, and ethos. They explain neuroqueer as a form of social identity, drawing connections between neurodiverse and queer experiences, finding striking similarities in the two. For both these oppressed groups, there is present an idea of societal pressure to simulate required social performances to be seen as a valid members. Walker explains that neuroqueering is a way to liberate oneself from the intertwined combination of societally imposed neuronormativity and heteronormativity (2021).

Neuroqueering can be used as a tool to empower the neurodiverse communities and encourage neuroqueer individuals to actively partake and influence the current discourse.

Attias (2020) described the term as surfacing *rhizomatically from the concept of “queering,” which represents the move to claim “queer” as a political identity category.* According to Attias, the idea is to broaden the discussion of disability by breaking the expectations of normal. Neuroqueer can be seen as the statement of representing intersectional, anti-normal, and counter-hegemonic approaches and broadening the conceptualization of what is and what can be seen as normal.

Murray’s (2008) and Sturken & Cartwright’s (2001) ideas of representation and the politics of looking, highlight the importance of actively deconstructing the given semiotics created by the neuronormative and heteronormative narratives. Neuroqueerness and the act of neuroqueering allow autistic people to take back the narrative that keeps on being produced about their lived experiences. With neuroqueer tools in action, it is possible to re-imagine and seek new forms of expressing autism in a neutral light, by first accepting autism as a valid way of existing and navigating human experience.

1.4 Disability and Art Education

Allen & Smith & Newman-Godfrey (2020) explain Critical Disability Studies (CDS) as the understanding of the oppressive limitations created by society. CDS re-evaluates the definitions of disability, broadening the discussion to include the social complexity of disabled identities. Disabled identities are overlapping multitudes, where the differences in race, sexuality, gender, and socioeconomic status present even further marginalization of people. Kallio-Tavin (2020) introduces the Crip theory alongside CDS. Crip theory merges CDS with queer politics, challenging ableism and heteronormativity in society. Kallio-Tavin explores educators' efforts to ‘crip’ the curriculum in the field of art education by applying CDS and Crip theory as vital forms of knowledge. Educators can gain tools to question existing educational norms and values and the division between able-bodied and disabled students.

Derby (2012) citing Blandy’s (1990) ideas of inclusion, proposes that Art Education *is not limited to physical accommodation of people with disabilities—it is “the accommodation of the cultural expressions of this community”.* Much research has been conducted about assimilating autistic people into neurotypical society but could the neurotypical society adjust to accommodate the autistic experience? This provides an opportunity for reflection,

especially for educators. What norms are silently imposed in class? How to make teaching and learning inclusive for people with disabilities?

Crip theory urges us to challenge the dominant understanding of what it means to be human or “normal” (Martiano & Schormans, 2021). Sasson et. Al (2017) describe misunderstanding as a bidirectional problem, meaning that just as much as individuals with ASD struggle to understand neurotypicals, neurotypicals fail too to understand the autistic social cues. Social presentation styles, such as non-verbal cues, facial expressions, prosody and body posture, were concluded to matter more than the content of speech, leading neurotypicals to avoid interaction with people with ASD. Even though ASD gets categorized as an invisible disability, there still are recognizable differences in behavior that may be difficult to hide even with masking.

Valid representation of disability in schools could act as an advocate for the creation of environments that are accepting of the disabled, neurodivergent and the other experiences that do not fit into existing social categories and binaries. Understanding of disabilities needs to be integrated as a normalized part of education and academia, where acceptance and support are offered. The purpose for educators is *not to mitigate the observable presence of disability in the classroom, but rather to find ways to make the environment more truly inclusive of all forms of diversity, particularly in understanding the ways in which marginalized identities intersect* (Allen & Smith & Newman-Godfrey, 2020)

Allen & Smith & Newman-Godfrey (2020) explores issues of institutionalized ableism in higher education through the lived experiences of educators with disabilities, seeking solutions to recognize and dismantle ableist methods in education. Their ideas of intersecting identities conform to the thought of “Nothing for us without us.”, a slogan used in queer and crip communities, highlighting the importance of representation and involvement of marginalized people in the discussion. It is crucial to see people with disabilities in visible positions to spark a sense of solidarity and belonging. Allen & Smith & Newman-Godfrey recognized, despite having disabilities themselves, that they still were for upholding normative expectations as art practitioners and educators (2020).

Art education today focuses on contemplating sociopolitical and cultural phenomena alongside artistic practices and techniques. Through art, it is possible to make visible the silent, the immaterial, and to give forms to these lived experiences. Derby (2012) sees transdisciplinary Art education's potential to work as an intersection for discussions regarding identity and norms, slowly dissolving the disabling disciplinaries and paradigmatic boundaries. They envision CDS strategies incorporated into Art Education that would

encourage students to find, define, and redefine norms and existing stereotypes through creative expression.

2. Arts-Based Research and Autoethnography

For my research method, I chose autoethnographic arts-based research. Autoethnography makes one's own experience the research focus and the material that you are working with. Haveri & Kiiskinen (2012) describe autoethnography as a tool for looking at these subjective experiences in a wider context, understanding the many ways of gathering knowledge, and seeking understanding from others. They are describing fascination as the key binder in their autoethnographic research. Fascination is what lets you be ingenuous with the world and all the information it has to offer, sensing the surroundings with an open-minded approach.

Arts-based research (ABR) is a relatively new research method used in the field of art education, but it has gained popularity, especially in Europe. Suominen et al. (2017) explain, that the focus of ABR lies in the research interest in diverse sociocultural phenomena where the artist-researcher uses themselves as a vessel to gain understanding, validating ways of knowing outside of traditional academia. It is a methodology and a way of gathering multisensory knowledge. According to Suominen et al. (2017), in ABR the researcher will include their own experiences to examine them while linking their findings to a broader field of discussion. ABR sums the individual knowledge of singular as a part of multitudes. ABR cannot be repeated, as the whole practice highlights experience as a singular. Each research can give a fresh perspective, widen our collective knowledge, and can act as a catalyst for future research in similar fields.

As for my thesis, I found this approach to be the most efficient. The method is at the same time a way of producing data, gathering new ways of understanding my own experiences, but at the same time, making it understandable for a wider audience. The experiment of producing masks is giving forms to something unseen, but very much felt phenomenon. An experience of living that is hard to explain and is something I personally am

struggling with, constantly deconstructing the ideal way of an accepted social being. And yet at the same time seeking like-minded bodies, resonating with this research. Kallio-Tavin (2017) explains that these motivators can be seen as the core factors for most arts-based researchers. The subjective experiences will be transformed into transparent research knowledge while actively taking part in the discourse.

3. Production

In this section, I will go through my artistic process of mask making. There will be a discussion happening with diary text material and current thoughts, explaining the core functions of bodily feelings and internal dialogue I had while making each mask. The process was divided into three core parts that explained the masking phenomenon through the autoethnographic ABR. The parts are *Soft and Passive*, *Spiky*, and *Stratification*. All masks have been made from recycled materials and the materials chosen are trying to represent the bodily feeling that the phase of masking in question.

3.1 Soft and Passive

Soft and passive, fleeting through space and time.

Not as a nobody, but just as a body.

A body full of receptors, receptive, seeking its place, as a mirror for others you can't find solace or refuge. Being a mirror won't satisfy you, especially when you don't fully understand what you are mirroring.



*Human interactions are the hardest for me to navigate around.
These interactions just highlight again the differences I have in performing in social situations.*



*I tried to communicate to the people relying on me that where I'm coming from
And what are my circumstances are, but I failed.
Or moreover, I feel like they failed to register and acknowledge it.
Just a tool. A void to yell into.*

*A void, a body.
Not a nobody, but just a body.*



The Soft phase of masking could be seen as the default masking function that at least I find myself relying on in most interactions. It is a gentle form of masking, working as a protective shell from the outside world. Upkeeping masking is highly energy consuming, despite the mask's cute appearance. The soft mask provides room to observe, and it creates enough distance from oneself in relation to others. This phase usually mimics its surroundings, mirroring and reflecting everything it sees. Trying to fit in by constantly studying how people interact with each other and with their surroundings. Seeking to find the “right” way to act and respond if being spoken to.

The main function of soft masking is to strategically appear as neurotypical as possible and diminish autistic traits to a minimum. Usually, there is also present an underlying fear of being discovered with neurodiverse differences. The barrier this mask creates alienates oneself from what is a natural way of acting, forcing a more easily accepted (neurotypical) way of communication style. These forced factors, such as the duration of eye contact, mannerisms of speech, hand movements, and tempo of conversation (asking questions back and forth, producing subjects to talk about) are all learned and rehearsed. They also need constant updating and need to be adjusted accordingly to every person you interact with, having also layers in the “hierarchy” that the conversing parts have. By conversation hierarchy I mean the acceptable tone, wordings, and level of respect you need to perform for certain people, e.g., talking with a teacher or an employer versus talking to a friend.

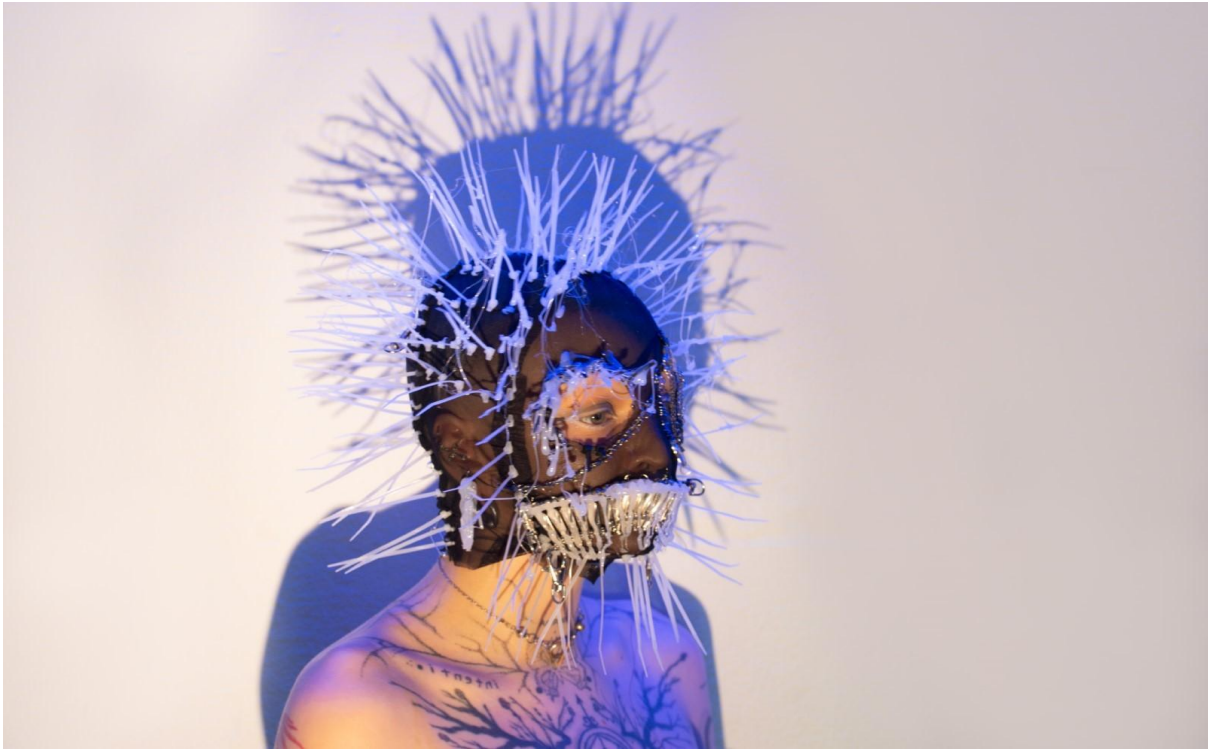
Just like soft yarn knitted together, the soft mask is looking for its form: Netting puzzle pieces together and creating connections between the old and the new. Evolving, spreading and seeking new understandings, like a network of mycelium spores under the ground. Revealing just enough to be able to conceal the rest. I chose to crochet this mask using yarns found at a local recycling center. All the yarns vary from texture to thickness, making the spore-like crochet patterns seam into each other unnoticeably. Connecting to each other and going over, under and in between while stretching to keep all the already existing parts together. Yarn as a material is flexible, which represents the fundamental core of the Soft mask: adjustability. The varied thicknesses give the whole piece a feel of the used material being alive as its own entity, like moss growing in the forest.

3.2 Spiky

*It's not that I don't care,
It's more so, that I am handling more than I can carry.*



*Recently, this type of masking has been the most present. It still is.
I didn't want anyone to touch me, my communication came extremely strict, rigid, and direct
to the point of coming off as rude to others.
And every single stream of irritation, whether it be irregular sound, a source of light, a
person wanting to talk to you,
Just adds to the feeling, constantly rising pressure, that this mask is going to crack at any
given moment.
The scary thought of being exposed.*



But I am not that and sometimes I don't have the capability of processing all the proper sentence structures to make it easily digestible for others to relate to me.

Sometimes I am really blunt, especially when I am overwhelmed.

Sometimes I can't talk at all and my ability to talk doesn't have anything to do with whether I like or don't like the person talking to me.



They say they understand that they want to help when I am easily approachable, mirroring themselves back at them. Being nice and passive. Almost adorable. They feel like they are being nice and supportive, accepting my autism makes them feel good about themselves.

*But as soon as I crack the mask, they feel alienated,
And I become unapproachable, mean, cold and they tell me about how I have changed.*

Something they don't recognize.

Continuous overwhelming situations lead to the Spiky phase of masking. Typically, when reaching this point, there are layers and layers of sensory discomfort present in the body, known or unknown. It can be due to environmental factors, such as noise, smell, lighting conditions, irritations in the physical body like clothes, or the number of people in space, prolonged masking, and social expectations and obligations. I find it to be a way for your body to communicate that it has reached its limits and that it is mandatory to self-soothe the nervous system from all the information it is trying to register and process simultaneously. The being in your body quickly shifts, unexpectedly, creeping in and out, getting harder and harder to contain. The sensation of pressure in your body rises steadily like a ticking bomb in its last counting seconds, ready to explode. The inner world clashes violently with the outer

reality. During this phase, it can seem like you are a mean person, who doesn't care about others and that their feelings are meaningless.

The Spiky phase of masking is where most of the conflict happens. Especially when having a sensory overload, it is impossible to remain calm, considered and composed. Open expressions of discomfort, unexpected changes in character and extremely cold and straightforward notions in conversation can affect peers decreasingly in the level of relatability. With prolonged masking and especially the others around not even knowing someone is hiding their neurodivergence, it can be difficult to navigate these situations. Especially if you don't have any understanding of autistic traits and coping mechanisms.

I also have been pondering whether the level of negative feedback on the Spiky phase behavior also has its roots in patriarchal ways of seeing and giving meaning to certain actions performed in certain types of bodies. Could it have something to do with the born female at birth stereotype and the urge to fit these people in the imposed characteristics of soft and nurturing personalities? As a nonbinary person, I do acknowledge that these expectations of behaviors still keep on being pushed on to certain bodied people, and it can get extremely suffocating.

The first step in building the Spiky mask was sculpting the base. I chose soft mesh fabric as the binding element and added safety tracts to connect the mesh pieces, creating a freaky budding hedgehog shape. Hot glue represents the melting feeling experienced in this particular phase. Imagine you are a candle being lit. As time goes by you start to melt, to lose the original form set out for you. You don't get to choose whether you melt all over the place or if you get blown off and get to stiffen again. It all depends on the surrounding factors.

The mouth part in the Spiky mask has been closed off with hot glue to represent the yearning for silence. There usually is an urgent need to stop talking, as processing and delivering sentences can feel painful. The symbolism can be interpreted as the manifestation of wanting to be shut off to avoid conflict and confrontation.

The Spiky mask is influenced by BDSM culture as well as the popular metal band Slipknot's iconic performance outfits. The spikes try to create a distance to the outside like hedgehogs' aggressive protective method, sheltering the person within from further external stimuli.

3.3 Stratification

Working with the masks has been more eye-opening and brutal, more than I could ever have imagined when starting this process. I have been thinking about my own masking and its relation to how people treat me. Not just in relation to how I see my own position.



It almost feels like people accept my autism and are supportive of it only when I am doing this performance. That just reinforces the existing idea that I am only accepted and worthy of acceptance when I am masking.

*I have been again and again pondering the politics of gaze.
How much power it holds. How you will be perceived.
The power to look, and how it affects the being looked at?
How are we conditioned to see and to look, to observe?*

And even if someone looks at me or if I look at something,

Is it the same as seeing?

At least it is not the same as being seen.



Stratification means the arrangement or classification of something into different groups (Google Translate, 2022, 6.3). The mask is trying to holistically highlight the complexity of the masking phenomenon. It is messy, going from the outer layers back within, seeking and looking for new ways to form. It is an endless web of unidentified and identified social norms, overlapping personalities and mirrors. Every situation and every person has their own appropriate mask formed, ready to be whipped out and activated for action. The process of choosing the right mask is intuitive and intertwined with conditioned social norms. The feeling of masking stratification is the most difficult to give a form.

The diary extraction circles back to the questions of looking and seeing. They are important when considering representations of autism. How are we rating certain behaviors and how do we form judgments of character based on these assumptions? How do the assumptions change the way we interact with people, for example with autism? How do we start seeing

autism in many different bodies? And can we learn how to recognize the similarities between autistics across the gender spectrum, varying nationalities, and different socioeconomic statuses?



I chose metal and plastic as the main materials to work with, based on their opposite qualities. Metal is hard and not easily moldable, whereas rigid plastic tubes could be molded to a certain extent. Hot glue followed from the spiky mask to the Stratification mask, creating a dripping and melting feeling to the surface. I found it important to leave the Stratification mask in an airier form, as the interpretation of this experience is not so rigid. It is looser, hollower. You can see the person behind, trapped in a cage of their own making. The spine behind the neck has an old electrical circuit attached to it, where matrix-like tubes are connected to. It symbolizes the conditioning, “plugin”, that the whole masking experience is tied to. To understand masking, you need to unplug the cultural conditioning of societal norms and behavioral expectations and be able to look at the individual behind the mask. Seeking to understand their needs and struggles while navigating in a world that is widely constructed according to a neurotypical norm.

Reflection and Discussion

Working on this topic has been simultaneously draining and lucrative. At the start I was focusing more on physical mask making, trying to contemplate differing presence within the body, inherently making my disability visible. That process was scary and unarming, as I had to do all the things that have been scaring me the most: to be seen and to communicate my subjective experiences to an audience.

Experimenting with ABR and using transdisciplinary methods to examine masking has offered new perspectives to approach something that felt so personal at first. Crip and queer theories have helped to create distance to my own masking to recognize it as a part of a larger discussion about inclusion, accessibility, representation, narratives, and social justice. I recognize the exponential potential of exploration of disability studies in Art Education. Many questions surfaced during the process that can be used as a base for further research. How to claim neuroqueering as a daily practice? How to expand our understanding of disability outside the existing binaries and cis-heteronormative bodies? How to normalize differences in communication styles, allowing neurodiverse tendencies to exist as a valid form of self-expression?

When examining masking as a word, I find it important to also consider the cultural symbolism that masks contain. Masks have been used in numerous ways in Indigenous cultures from religious ceremonies to protective elements and amulets and as a way to get either closer to the gods or to keep bad spirits away. Indigenous cultures have had masks as an integral part of each community's cultural heritage, especially in the global south. I find the comparison to western culture's take on masks quite interesting. In the Indigenous cultures, masks are usually something sacred, representing and giving forms the divine good or evil, whereas in the West masks represent indications of hiding, disguising, or deceiving. I would have wanted to include in this research perspectives of symbolism and conduct semiotic analysis for the physical masks. I hope to continue research on the topic, as it could offer contrasting perspectives in which autistic masking can be understood.

I acknowledge that this research has been conducted from an extremely western point of view. Kim (2012) observed the differences in cultural understanding of autism and how it has been taken into consideration in personal, medical, and educational fields. The results varied between each country, indicating shameful and neglecting attitudes, whereas some cultures encouraged collective caretaking as a default. Kim concludes that the understanding

of autism reflects the social implications intertwined with cultural expectations and assumptions. They propose instead of promoting biocultural models, stronger emphasis should be placed on the exploration of socio-cultural aspects in autism research, with hopes of striving for acceptance and understanding of individual differences (Kim,2012).

The dialogue around autism and disability research is constantly evolving as more autistic researchers enter the field giving actual insight into the lived autistic experience and autistic differences. I personally don't see autism as a disorder, but more as a different type of operating system for sensing and making sense. Autism has disabling functions and severity depending on individuals and their needs, but it still is not something to be "cured" or necessarily celebrated. Just the differences are simply recognized and taken into consideration. When advocating for inclusion and diversity, it's important to take into consideration that autism representation and narratives guide perception and will determine what opportunities one can envision for themselves. It is important to have openly neurodiverse teachers, that can help to dissolve the stigma around disabilities, especially in academia.

Intersectional identities and experiences will always be present in education, and they should not be cast aside as the "other" opposing the "normal." As a future art educator, I would want crip and neuroqueer tools integrated and active implemented widely in teaching. Citing once more Allen & Smith & Newman-Godfrey (2020) thought that the role of educators is not to seek out observable presences of disability. The focus should be on the creation of a truly inclusive environment that incorporates an understanding of all forms of disability, hidden or visible.

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