

The Autism Show 2017

I'd never been, I was curious and now I know what the Autism Industry looks like in the UK. It isn't pretty. I guess these are the good guys as well, there were no anti-vax or curebie crusaders as far as I could tell, though the Lottery funded(!) Treating Autism had a presence, bleurk.

I'm trying to be generous in my reflections but there was literally nothing about it that was good. The overall impression I got was of craven greed preying on parental fears about disability, all dressed up in primary colours and Comic Sans, and held at a soulless venue that also hosts one of the world's biggest arms fairs.

It was as though the Social Model never happened, that Nothing About Us Without Us was never said, and that pseudo-charitable entrepreneurialism is the only possible way of framing autistic community.

In the whole of the event there was one table by and for autistic people. One! This was undecorated, looked like an afterthought and was sparsely populated. How could this be? It is so shocking!

The rest was made up of: endless fucking squishy balls and sensory toys, truly the icon of the Autism Industry; phenomenally expensive and naff sensory gadgets; private boarding schools aka prisons for kids; surveillance devices; furniture and objects to control and pacify young autistics; creepy use of children as "product ambassadors." Often the stall would be covered in inspirational quotes and testimonies but it was hard to tell what the product being sold actually was. I saw joyless signage 'Clinic: Managing Challenging Behaviour' on a bleak row of cubicles and lots of diagrams of brains during the time I was there. None of the talks appealed. I tried a Virtual Reality thing but it didn't work very well.

The things being sold at Autism Show seemed to imply that it is progressive to control and snoop on young autistic people for their own good, that it is important to be normal and that people should shut up, behave, and stop stimming and flapping. Also, that there is a good living to be made out of this by canny neurotypicals.

I was hoping for a fun roll around in a sensory room but even that was underwhelming and sterile. We left completely demoralised.

Two very nice neurotypical ladies tried to sell me some jam made by autistics on their compound in the country. I like jam and was tempted but then I wondered why the jam-makers weren't there, why they have to work in an isolated compound, if they are free to leave when they want to, if they get paid for their work and what happens to the money they make selling the jam. Then I stopped being tempted.

Three men used their bodies to block me from getting a good look at "Kaspar, the social robot" whilst they 'waved their dicks' around it enthusiastically. The main boffin wants a Kaspar in every school, so that adults can plonk an autistic kid in front of it and they can learn how to do social interaction. I can't imagine any sentient being learning anything from Kaspar apart from how to be profoundly CREEPY OUT by this majorly CREEPY CREEPY CREEPY THING. It is NIGHTMARISH. I was too scared to look at the picture to draw it for the zine, the eyes are much much worse in real life, like a creature buried alive or imprisoned beyond hope, not even uncanny valley but properly terrifying. Also, massively funded and cheaper than actual social care.

Quite a lot of the gadgets and accessories on display look like sex toys. I'm sure there is a lot of crossover and a lot of action goes on behind the scenes. My favourite was this soft, prongy udder thing that changes colours and plays music when you buh-doinngg it with your hands, arms, face and body (boring plinky-plonky crap, I'm sure you could change the soundtrack to something a bit more bump and grind). Imagine riding that mutha!



I'M NOT NAUGHTY,
I'M AUTISTIC



No 7 - GAYLE NEWLAND

Though the actual story is considerably more complex, the media reported this as 'woman jailed for pretending to be a man to have sex with her best friend', with the added prurient interest in the use of a dildo and a blindfold. Later reports indicated that a range of 'mental disorders', including gender dysphoria, eating disorders, OCD, anxiety, depression and Asperger's syndrome, contributed to the case. It's a heartbreaking story, made worse by the fact that she was freed on appeal and granted a re-trial after being sentenced to eight years in

Further AUTISM SHOW thoughts

I have to say I wasn't really into going to this event, but Charlotte said it would be interesting to see it in its grim splendour, so we went. It was a super hot day and as we approached it through the hideous glazed corporate mall that is the ExCel Centre, I was having reservations. My energy drained away, and I had to have a rest even before we found 'Hall 22'. It didn't help that there was another much bigger trade show for surveillance technology on there that day with huge banner ads everywhere. Eventually we found it and it looked shit. We approached it like a jumble sale - have a quick look around first and then go back to look at the interesting things. This approach failed as it was all horrendous, so we just kind of did a circuit, had another rest and then left. One thing I had been looking forward to was the NAS virtual reality autism simulator, Too Much Information! but this too was a let-down. I expected it to be funny. It wasn't.



Simon's illustrated zine *DIFFERENT TIMES* about queer London in the 1990s drag, punk rock and Asperger's is still available from charlottecooper.bigcartel.com alongside other zines and stuff by Charlotte that you should also buy.

Oliver Sacks

I had never really been interested in him, but I read his foreword to Steve Silberman's book *Neurotribes*. I came across his book *An Anthropologist On Mars* recently, and thought I'd give him the benefit of the doubt after a cursory check of the index. It has two chapters about autistic people - the artist Stephen Wiltshire, and Temple Grandin and was published in 1995. The review quotes on the back of the book, from the *Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* (lovely!) emphasise his empathy and how compassionate etc he is/was, but reading him quite closely from an autistic perspective quickly dispels this impression. This isn't to say he was evil, just that he was as bad as any other doctor-researcher in many ways, studying his subjects and judging them coldly, for his own advancement and ultimately financial gain through this book and others.

He becomes obsessed with Wiltshire in 1987 after seeing the proofs of his first book of drawings, and is able to use his contacts in the psycho-medical world to find him and latches onto him. Sacks presents this as a valiant and protracted attempt to 'reach' Stephen and make an NT-level 'connection' with him over several years, but he clearly just wants to use him as a close-up research subject. He repeatedly questions his talents ('can an autistic person truly be considered an artist?' etc.) He undermines him, patronises him, and constantly refers to his "defects". He wants to save Stephen from his autism, apparently without a thought for what Wiltshire himself wants or likes.

In his profile of Temple Grandin his lack of understanding of and prejudice towards autistic people is on full display. Sacks visits her in her capacity as a Professor at Colorado State University, but he does not treat her as a peer. He barely sees her a functioning adult, and admits that he suspected that the self-awareness in her first book was the work of her co-author, because autistic people can't think in those terms. He makes great play of her lacking the social skill of offering him a cup of coffee when he arrives, but he doesn't tell her he is tired or has skipped lunch. How would she know this if he didn't say? Had he not learnt that you have to be straightforward with autistic people, that they can't read minds like NTs? I guess he's used to seeing people in institutional or domestic settings where there are staff/parents/carers around to cater to his needs as a privileged expert. Poor thing! It's actually quite cringey reading his amazement at Grandin's evident ability to run a business, write books, give lectures and get a PhD despite her own obvious defects. He likes that word.

Read Sacks if you must, but read between the lines, with caution, and read the work of autistic people too.

The Inspired Parent

