

Lizzie Lovejoy 0:08

Hello, everybody, welcome to the change of perspective podcast where we look at the world of creativity and art from many different perspectives. I'm your host, Lizzie Lovejoy artists of change for ARC, creating work to celebrate the Northeast. today. Our topic is Neuro Diversity and disability in creativity. And I'll be talking too, Victoria.

Hello, everybody. Welcome back to the change of perspective podcast. I'm Lizzie Lovejoy, and today I will be talking to Victoria. Now. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

Victoria 0:39

I'm Victoria and I moved - I'm originally from the Teesside area. But I've lived away from it for quite a long time and returned back here about three years ago. I'm autistic, sort of like diagnosed about four years ago.

And sort of a big part of my life now is my creativity. I do a lot of textile work. That is how I sort of use, I've used creativity as a way of exploring my identity, my artistic neurodivergent identity. And it's connecting with other people locally as well. What kind of work do you create? It's all hand stitched, mixed media work. It's all very early days. For me. I did a piece a couple of years ago for an emerging artist award, which I went for. And it was called Living with waves. And it was hand stitched. And it also had different textures in it. And it was just a way of me exploring what it was to discover that you're, that I was, autistic.

Lizzie Lovejoy 2:03

So you said you were late diagnosed, can you tell us a bit about your diagnosis process.

Victoria 2:09

I have always suspected that I was very different. I'm not really very good at fitting in with the norm. And I, over a lifetime, have had a lot of mental health struggles and things like that. I studied psychology, I think in some respects, it was a way of trying like a lot of sort of neuro different people a way of trying to understand what's going on. I did that and learned then about autism. But it was very pathologized, it was all about these children dominantly children who were cut off from people, didn't communicate, didn't have empathy. And I didn't relate to any of that I just knew I didn't fit in.

And I remember at the time reading an autobiography, by an autistic author, called Donna Williams. And part of it really connected with me really resonated, and it sort of planted sort of a seed. But when I looked at all the diagnostic criteria, it wasn't me. So I sort of let it go. And continued on my way for about another 30 years, and then went on to have a family. My daughter was beginning to struggle at school and things like that. And I started to sort of look back on the research. And of

course, things have moved on in 30 years, I remember reading work written by autistic women, and what they were saying, related to me.

And it was a bit of a lightbulb moment. So at that point, I thought, right, I need this diagnosis, I need to know one way or the other. I think I've sort of now realize you don't necessarily need that diagnosis, you can just identify. I was diagnosed at age 44. And to me, it was a relief, really big relief, because I could sort of accept myself and understand myself. And through that, I sort of started to connect with the autistic online community.

And it's been a bit of a journey, a positive journey, and sort of, at times very challenging how journey.

Lizzie Lovejoy 4:29

I mean, I think it's interesting what you said about reading authors and then trying to find people that you that you connected with on that level, because I think a lot of us do that we reached her fictional characters, or people in real life, where we see little pieces of us that we can identify with.

Victoria 4:45

Yeah, I also think it's not the diagnosis. I don't really like the term diag- it's almost like a discovery. It's a discovering of who you are as a person. And I think part of that is through read books and podcasts like this. It's, Yeah. It's helping people in that exploration.

Lizzie Lovejoy 5:09

I think, especially when you're talking about how it's how it's viewed and how different characters are viewed. I think now we're having, we're having a change of perspective in the past people with, I don't even want to really use the word condition when referring to it because it's literally just a different brain process. When people think very, it's a natural variation. Yeah, neuro divergence has quite a wide breadth of diagnoseable things. This includes dyslexia, autism, obviously, dyspraxia, ADHD, divergent, mental process, a new and innovative way of thinking. And so different people who've had this just for context for people includes Mozart, Andy Warhol and Steve Jobs. They're all neurodivergent creatives. And so now that we're seeing the shift to see how neuro divergence can actually benefit society and always has done in such brilliant ways. I would like to know a bit more about your views of neuro divergence and your experiences of it.

Victoria 6:09

I think, neuro divergent neuro divergence, yeah, it is very wide, it's all

Sorry, my brain goes blank, sometimes, this is where it comes in processing is one of that is a drawback of mine, some of the negatives are not because of actually being neurodivergent. It is not because of I am autistic. It is because of the way society is structured.

A lot of the time for me, we all do, yes, there are challenges, there are a lot of barriers. Society is not made for me, the barriers are created through as ignorance through not listening to actual neurodivergent people. When you look at diagnosis process, it's on external behaviors that an academic has, or professional has interpreted. It's not how the people themselves would necessarily see it stimming, there have been therapies to get rid of stimming stimming is natural, everybody stems dancing is stimming, everything like that, but when it is pathologized, and people is suppressed.

I don't like that. Because for me, it's natural. For me sewing is almost like a stem, to me is that sensory input, I love that. That's a big part. And that is when creativity, it brings a positive, I'm very detail pattern focused, I suppose I see things, I process things differently. So on one hand, the sensory world I take everything can and that can become overloading. But in another sense, when I'm out in the woods sauce watching this, I can see the patterns in the branches. And that feeds into my work. And that is positive to me.

But there are times when I get overloaded and well gets too much. When the world gets too much. That is what the professionals are the diagnosis process is looking at, it's not seeing you at a point where the diagnosis, it's that it's looking at sort of pathologized way. And I don't see being autistic in any way, like from what you were saying there.

Lizzie Lovejoy 8:40

It's interesting how lockdown will have affected that. Because I don't know about you. in me, it's actually had some positive effects and that there are certain environments I haven't had to encounter. And also over zoom calls. I have various I'm going to call it habits with with my hands and fingers and different things that I do automatically. And so I haven't had to encounter anyone asking about it the same way that they normally would. And so I wonder if you've had anything similar?

Victoria 9:08

Yeah, I felt like lockdown has put everybody on is almost like an equal footing. It's put everybody on mass into the position of having their world almost has been restricted. But for me, zoom is easier because it's not as overwhelming. It slows all the processing and things and I can stem that's important to me. It's made the world more accessible, particularly the creative world. So I've been able to access live music because it's been streamed, I've been able to listen to art history, lectures, things like that. All these things. I have had difficulty accessing because of the sensory overload people don't realize the anxiety,

and how big a role that stops you from actually going to the things you enjoy. Whereas lockdown was brought that into people's homes. And I hope, although it's been devastating, had a devastating impact for everyone, I hope that this leaves a positive legacy that this streaming of live art and music continues what people are not realizing that when everything gets back to normal, which I don't think it ever will, there's still going to be a group of people who this continues, who are marginalized from things. And I think we have shown with technology and different working practices that we can do, it needs not to be forgotten,

Lizzie Lovejoy 10:56

Especially when we saw that there was so many times where people had been told that their job couldn't be done working from home. And this time has specifically proved that most people's jobs can be done from home. And in some cases, it's actually improved things.

Victoria 11:10

There is a balance, and a lot of I have left jobs in the past because I couldn't it wasn't because I couldn't do the actual job. I couldn't take all the traveling and things like that. And we've shown that we can do that it's not I think as people, whether we're neuro neuro divergent or not, we need contact with those people. And I think that is where it is hard. And it has impacted everyone. I just hope it continues really, that those sorts of accommodations continue.

Lizzie Lovejoy 11:46

Well, you've told us a little bit already about how you got started in the world of creativity with an emerging artists project. What led you specifically to the textile side of it

Victoria 11:58

always loved sewing.

It's I was taught it from a very young age. It's something I've always found, Susan, very much. It's all sensory, the different textures and things like that. And a few years ago, sort of just after the diagnosis, I just went into total burnouts, it was just everything got too much. And I started to send sort of attending It was a creative social group. It was there started exploring different mediums like print, and drawing and stuff like that. And I liked a bit of all of them. But at the heart of it, I love sewing. I moved back here to the northeast, about three years ago, I wanted to continue that. So I joined a wellbeing group run by a group called wake up, who I'm now part of, and it was in the woods, in salt them with words. And it was slowly realizing that I could develop this love of sewing and this love of different visual mixed media stuff. And they sort of supported me to apply for this emerging artists thing, which was, I didn't quite realize what it was because I don't know the art world, I have no formal training whatsoever.

It's just something I use to express myself. When I don't have the words, it's something unspoken, it's for me, it's just a way of working through things. At the same time. Some of the things that I produce resonate with other people and other people can relate to. But it's all very early days. I think it's important. And that's why I think these sorts of creative groups are very important. It's getting it's allowing people to tell their stories, in their own way. And for me, creativity and producing work is my way of telling my story. And I believe it's very important.

It gives people a voice. And a voice doesn't have to be spoken. It can be written, it can be on paper.

I think there's often a barrier to creativity that there is this view, I have this view that I had to be trained if you were an artist, you had to be trained. And I thought I couldn't do that, because I didn't have that training. And then by opportunities like creative groups, I realized, no anybody can create. And I think it's important to break down those barriers, because it's giving people a mode of expression.

Lizzie Lovejoy 14:42

Last week, I was talking to Paige and bat who are running an exhibition, which is all about women in creativity. And it's almost like there's a shared goal, women in creativity, neuro divergence and creativity and various other different groups. The goal is always to break a barrier, and let everyone share their voice.

Victoria 15:06

It's to connect. And for me, there's a group of people, I can't process what everybody say, I can't keep up with the conversations know when to speak at the right time, it's all, it's very different when you're with other neurodivergent people, then it's natural. For me, if I'm sat there, and sewing or a group of people are creating something, the focus isn't on the speech. It just slows everything, it makes it more natural. And it means that I can connect and be with a group of people and not necessarily have to speak. I think it's a different way of approaching things. And I think it's really important. Looking into it. There's different movements like the craft of this movement, it's using arts and creativity, and your opinions across as well.

Lizzie Lovejoy 15:59

I love this kind of conversation, I feel like we don't get the opportunity to do this enough. Again, lots of lots of positive things about the way that art can impact everyone and help everyone creativity in general, can help everyone with communicating and trying to understand themselves and understand the world. And I know that you were talking about in conversation, not knowing when it's your turn.

Victoria 16:25

It's like sometimes, it's like watching a dance. It's watching, it's like you, I watched these interactions, I used to work in schools, and the staff room was a nightmare, because you're watching these people, and it's so natural to them. And it's just trying to fathom it out and work it out. And I couldn't. Whereas when I was in the company of other mainly autistic people, it was very different. There was it was all right to it was accepted that you sort of monologue that you went along with what you were interested in, there wasn't all these unspoken unwritten rules that I never really got and constantly broke. And sometimes a lot of the ways of connecting with people.

I can't access. I just it's too much. Yeah, I can. I can mask and almost pretend that I know what's going on. But I don't.

When you look at the art world, sometimes in the way of networking and stuff like that. It's overwhelming. It's just not accessible for me. You want me to create, but at the same time talk with all these people in a way that it's just overwhelming that saps all my energy, so I can't create.

Lizzie Lovejoy 17:54

It's one of those things that I didn't really notice until later on in life that all of the people that I am currently friends with, when we made friends, we weren't necessarily diagnosed with anything. And we didn't necessarily know. But all of us that have chosen to connect together have autism, ADHD, PTSD, different neurological based. Again, I don't want to say the word condition. I'm trying to find a better way to phrase it because I really dislike that word in the context.

Victoria 18:23

I hate it. I hate the word condition. I hate the word disorder. It's just a way of being. Yeah. Just it's a variation and natural variation.

Lizzie Lovejoy 18:37

Yeah. And we all have this natural variation in my in my friend group, and we connected on that level. It's like a magnet. Yeah.

Victoria 18:47

Yeah.

Lizzie Lovejoy 18:47

And what is fascinating is that we're all we're all creative people.

Victoria 18:52

It, for me, it's freedom. It's being in a place where you don't have to apologize so often, I feel have felt in the past, I've had to apologize, my lack of filter or coming across as blunt or whatever. And things have been misread into my actions, which are not meant it's just I'm saying it as it is. So you learn not to be yourself. And then you try to fit in and that is really, really hard and that has a mass effect. But when you start being around other people who are similar that you connect with and it's almost unspoken, it doesn't. It doesn't matter. It's like a magnet you do not it doesn't matter what diagnosis or condition. It's just something unspoken. It's like an energy. Yeah, and it's freedom.

And it's almost I have to go back to my ways of scripting everything I do. And it all feels sometimes very forced.

And I think there is now sort of research coming through that is led by neurodivergent people, and that is explaining things or things like the double empathy problem, and things like that, that are showing that the communication differences, say autistic people communicate better with autistic people, but the barriers and the difficulties come up when it is autistic people communicating with non autistic people, because it is a different culture.

It is a different way of being. And I think there needs to be a move towards seeing neuro divergence.

Lizzie Lovejoy 20:49

So, the the next topic of conversation is about you can whip it up. Yeah. So what do you do with whip it up and what's going on there?

Victoria 21:01

Whippet Up has had to change quite a lot, because a lot of it was in person, I started going along in quite a bleak point in my life, it was just a very gentle place, it was in the woods, there was creative activities and things like that, I started going along. And then they were looking for another director to come on board, I sort of have done that. But I am more in the background, quite quiet. That's accepted. Everybody has a different role. And that's what I like about it. I may be in the background, but everybody still has a voice. That has been a big part of my life.

But it would be good to connect with other neurodivergent creatives as well. Yeah, you've already started reaching out by the looks of it, because obviously, that's how I came across you was through the Facebook group online. Yeah, I had this idea. Because when I was in the southeast of England, I had friends who were four autistic, near divergent and things like that. So I had that. And I missed that input. I missed that. And I struggled quite a lot since coming up here to connect. So I had this idea to bring together as a creatives and put up this web page and this advert, and it's sort of snowballed, took me by surprise, and realize just how many wonderful creatives are out there.

And it's sort of with all the lockdown happening, my brain is just frozen. It's something I'd like to develop. But I just don't feel it's for me to just develop on my own. I think it has to be led by a group of people. It's kind of like an organic process where the entire community as a whole starts to just feed in ideas individually, that then becomes a big thing that everyone's doing. It's happening in pockets.

And the community it's like, online, sort of through lockdown as well as the last year, I've connected with sort of mainly autistic people on a website called Academy that was started up like arts and art section for that community, a small sort of group for people to connect and share their work.

And I think that's quite interesting is seeing what other people are creating and the similar similarities and things like that.

Lizzie Lovejoy 23:32

I'd like to ask a bit about your collaboration with our academy, actually. Because you said in your email before that you were working on setting up like an arts collective group.

Victoria 23:43

Yeah, it's very, very early days. They've had a number, if you go on the website, they've had a number of artists come and talk about their art and their journey and things like that. It's very much that ethos I agree a lot with it's like going from the social model of disability. So it's moving away from this pathologize sort of it's an illness, something to be treated. It's just about people sharing their work and how exploring their identity or identity and things like that. As you said, it's very organic. I don't know how it will go or where it will go.

Lizzie Lovejoy 24:25

I'm looking forward to seeing it though. I think especially around here, you've got the northern School of Art, both the Middlesbrough campus and the Hartlepool campus. And so you've already got this big group of creative people. So many of them, whether diagnosed or diagnosed are neurodivergent because that almost goes hand in hand.

Victoria 24:49

And I don't think people often think oh, no, I haven't got a diagnosis, can I? And it's like, No, you can self identify that is equally as valid. And I think that's it's important, because I think that's one thing that's been an issue in the past is almost this, this judgment is not necessarily like believing each other without a piece of paper that says I am this, and people not feeling valid. Yeah, and almost feeling. It's like fraudulent, that you haven't got a right to be who you are, or to say how you



identify, I think it's finding little pockets of community. It's finding those safe spaces, creating those safe spaces, either online or in person, it doesn't matter.

And I think sometimes there's parallels when you look at people who don't want to call themselves an artist. I'm not an artist, because I haven't done this or done that or being trained this way. It's the same sometimes with be with Austistic neurodivergent. We use, we can't identify as being such because some that you haven't got that piece of paper, and I don't think you need that piece of paper. And it is about acceptance, personal acceptance, and other people accepting I mean, the moment you look at it, it's all they go on about autism awareness. And it's like, no, it's acceptance.

Lizzie Lovejoy 26:18

Is there anything creative that you're working on at the moment?

Victoria 26:22

I'm sort of dabbling at the moment, I don't seem to be able to focus on one thing, I think that's what sort of lockdown has done. I sort of did that big piece to the emerging artists thing. And then I felt this horrendous amount of pressure to produce something else, exploring different mediums, looking at different ways of printing on to class and things like that. And because my brain is just not focusing the moment at all. And I think that's all right.

I think, yeah, I would, I am quite interested in sort of stimming and create that visually, through sort of sewing and different pieces. It's Yeah, there's lots of different ideas in my head, but my head was away with lots of different things. It's sort of focusing it at the moment.

Lizzie Lovejoy 27:19

Sorry that this is off topic, but I just, I just thought of it. Have you heard of SIA's new movie? Uh, that is very controversial.

Victoria 27:29

Massively, yeah. I disagree with it on every level, and absolute atrocity, that it's, in this day and age that was produced. One, they didn't use an autistic actress. And also, her response in the media was very bad. I don't know many people who've managed to actually get through watching it. Yeah. It's just wrong on multiple levels.

It depicts dangerous restraint. It's just wrong. Yeah, I mean, a huge amount of the problem that I've had with it is the literal portrayal. Because I do understand that in in the performing arts industry, you're obviously going to end up with people that aren't exactly the same as their characters. Because, you know, that's how acting goes. In this case, the portrayal that they chose that they

directed towards was so I want to say, grotesquely exaggerated, and, and really a form of bullying in itself. It's just perpetuating the myth of what it is to be autistic.

How long ago was Rain Man. But when that was what were in the 80s. Yeah. And you would hope things had moved on. And this showed it hadn't. It is just going with those stereotypes.

Lizzie Lovejoy 28:49

Sorry, I hadn't intended to talk about it. And then it just came into my head.

Victoria 28:52

I'm glad you did, because it has, I think this is where the voice of neuro neurodivergent people through platform online platforms is beginning to come through and the objections to it and why are beginning to come through. She should have listened. This is when people are feeling whatever they need to listen to the actual community they're trying to portray.

Lizzie Lovejoy 29:20

When you're when someone's saying, Oh, this, this is a mistake, the direction you're going down now. It's the digging in your heels, saying oh, no, I'm not going to change. I know better.

Victoria 29:31

And she was dismissing people. It's just discrimination on every level. Yeah, it was. It was just horrible. Yeah, on every level, it was an opportunity, a very big opportunity. And it could have been done very, very differently. There are neurodivergent autistic directors out there. It's giving, allowing breaking down those barriers and allowing Those people those opportunities.

Lizzie Lovejoy 30:02

Yeah, it's come back full circle. That's what we began this conversation talking about is how this is a means for breaking barriers and letting everyone come together. And I hope we're going in the right direction. I feel like we're going slowly in the right direction.

Victoria 30:17

And I think you've just got to keep chipping away Really? Yeah. And giving people platforms to express their opinions.

Lizzie Lovejoy 30:27

My final question is, what would you say to other neurodivergent creatives, whether diagnosed or not? What advice would you give?

Victoria 30:36

That's really difficult. Do what feels right to you to use whatever medium you like to explore who you are, and to be yourself. Sometimes it takes a long time, and I'm still in that process, age 48 trying to find out who authentically me is, be who you are, and express it in whatever medium feels right for you.

That is rubbish.

Lizzie Lovejoy 31:02

That's not rubbish. That's true.

Victoria 31:06

And it's not about being successful or is anything about that at all.

Lizzie Lovejoy 31:13

Thank you all so much for listening. It's been wonderful to have you on, Victoria. Thank you so much for coming. See you guys next time. Bye.

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