

## A Neurodiversity Art Movement? – Summary Report – Introduction

This report outlines the results of the survey circulated by artist Jess Starns as part of the British Art Network Emerging Curators Group (BANECEG). This group “a supportive forum for the next generation of curators in the UK, enabling peers to come together and share experiences and thinking around curating British art.” Find out more here:

<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/british-art-network>.

This report has been prepared by Jess Starns’ project support worker, funded by the BANECEG; Louise McAward-White.

The aim of this research was to gather views about whether neurodiversity should be considered an art movement, like the Disability Arts Movement. The survey opened in late February and closed in mid-April. The survey was publicised through social media; Arts Council England Arts News and various newsletters and news digests aimed at artists.

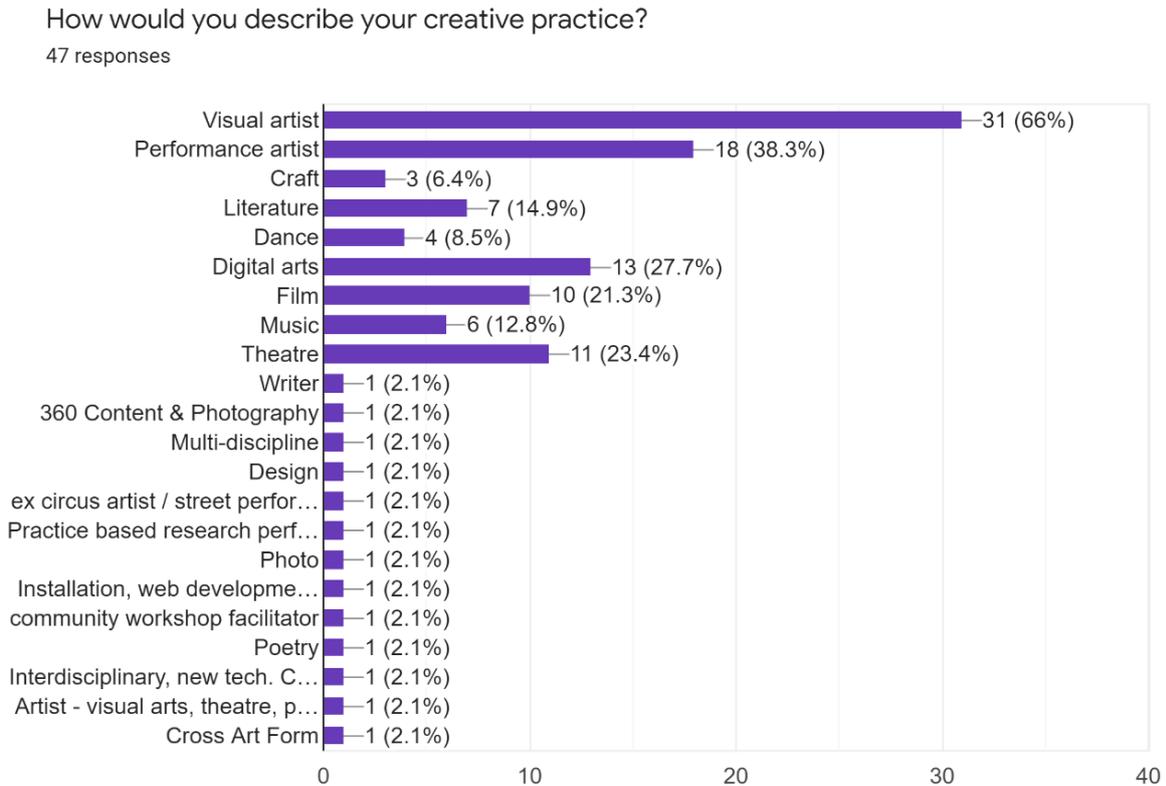
In total 47 people responded to the survey (one of the initial responses was a duplicated submission).

This report is in 2 parts:

1. Who replied to the survey?
2. What were their views on the research questions?

## 1. Who replied to the survey?

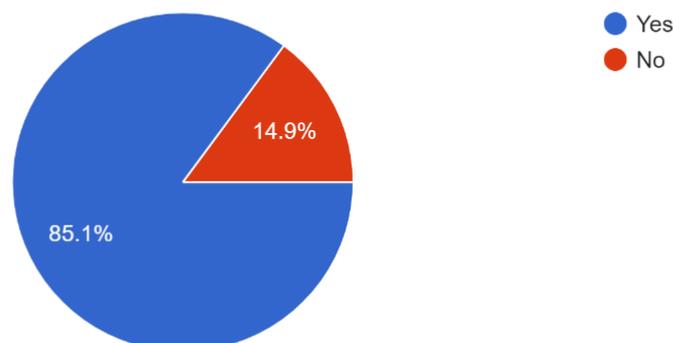
Of the 47 replies, 64% described their creative practice as covering multiple art forms. As per the graph below, Visual artist was the most frequently cited response (66% of respondents).



Due to this research being supported by the BANECEG, respondents were asked if they identify as being a British artist: 85% said yes, 15% said no. In the free text responses, 2 artists who self-identified as not a British artist noted issues with being asked to define themselves in this way.

Do you identify as being a British artist?

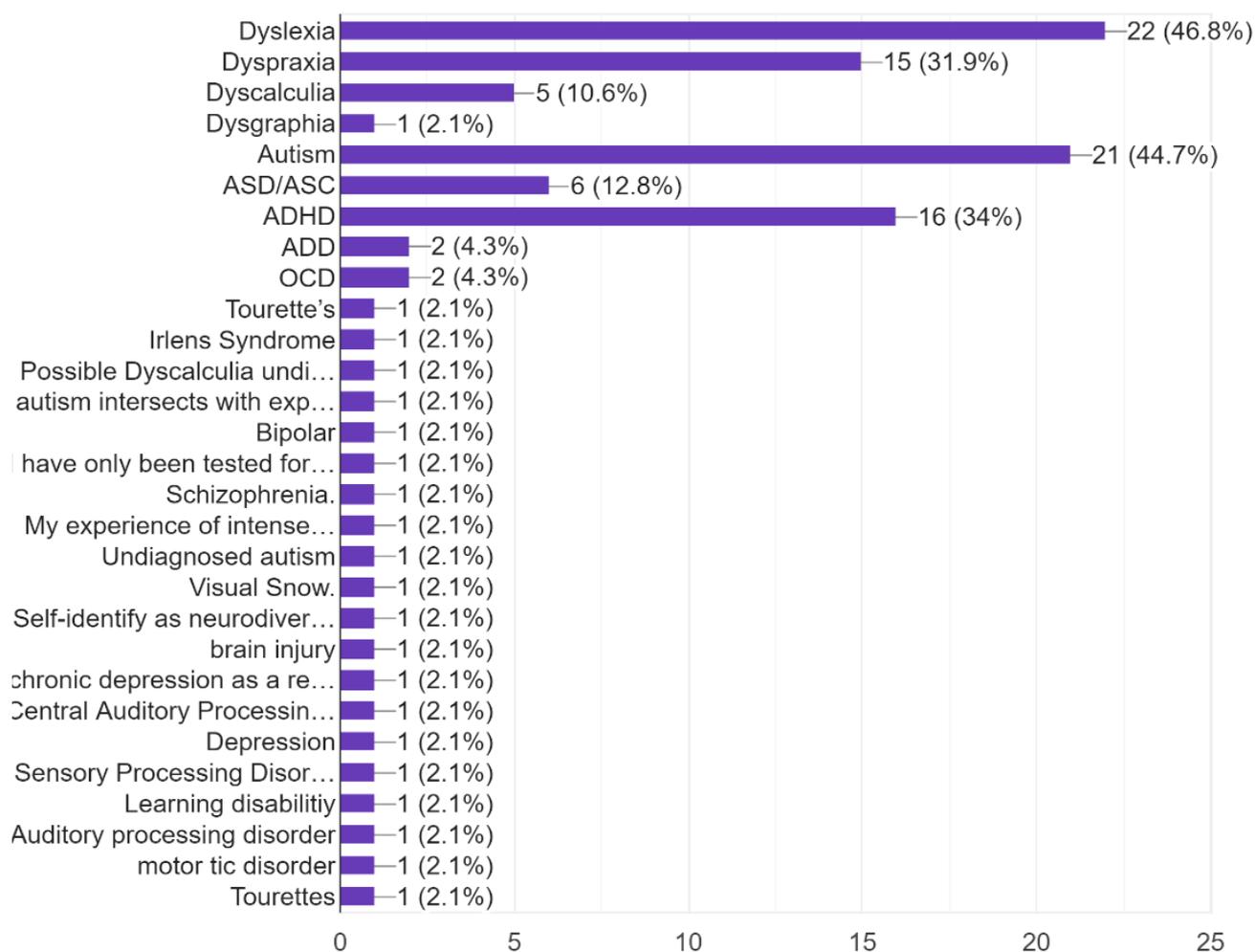
47 responses



All respondents to the survey identified as neurodiverse/neurodivergent in some form. 68% selected multiple categories when asked to describe this. The most frequently cited description was Dyslexia (47%), closely followed by Autism (45%). 13% of respondents described their neurodiversity experience as either having an element of, or entirely relating to their mental health.

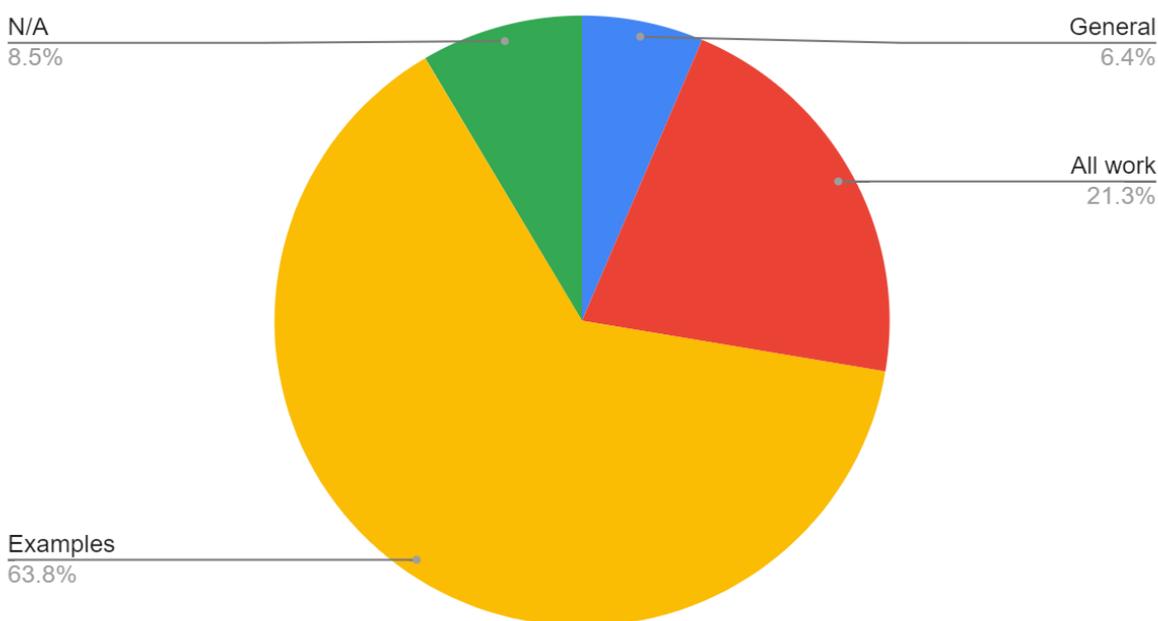
### How would you describe your experience of neurodiversity?

47 responses



Respondents were also asked to describe or share any of their artworks focusing on neurodiversity. The majority (64%) of respondents gave at least one example fitting this description. A fifth (21%) of respondents stated that this describes all their work; with a further 6% saying their work is generally influenced by their experiences of being neurodivergent in various ways. 9% of the respondents did not report having work that fits this description.

Description of neurodiversity focused work



This report also gathered information on whether respondents would be willing to take further part in this research project. 96% said they would be willing to be interviewed about their work; and another 96% were willing to contribute their work to a potential digital exhibition.

## 2. Views on the research questions

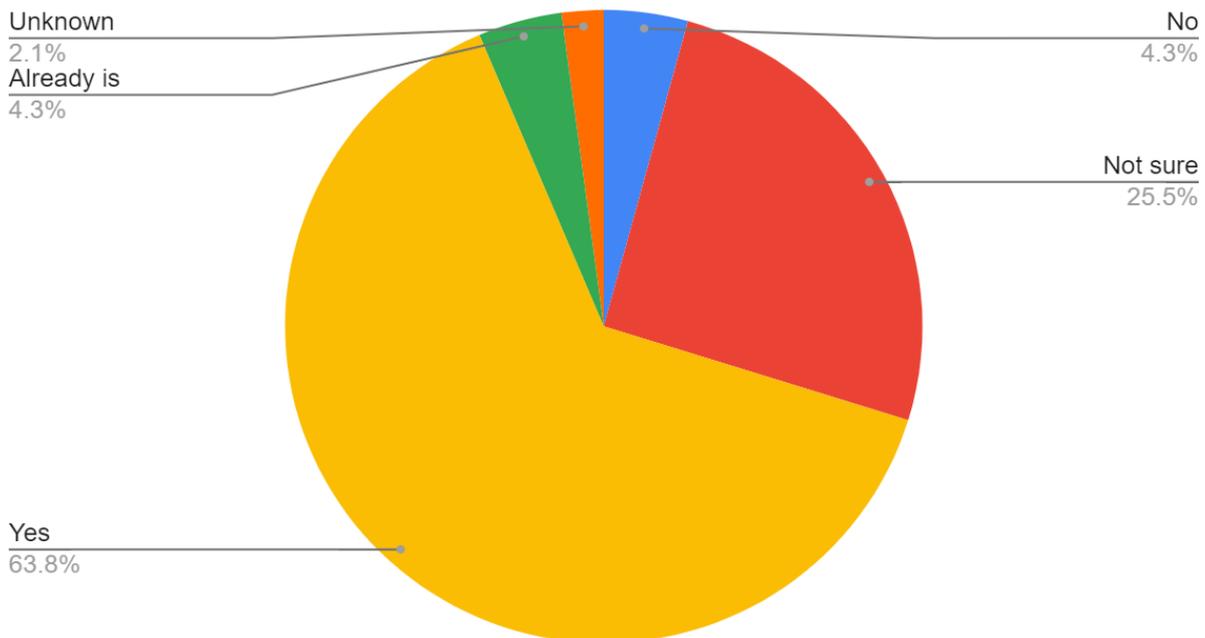
Two open-ended questions were asked in the survey to understand whether respondents think neurodiversity should be considered an art movement:

1. Do you think there should be a Neurodiversity Art Movement? And why?
2. Do you think there seems to be more artists creating work with a focus on neurodiversity in recent years? And why?

Both questions were answered by all respondents to varying degrees. This section quantifies the tone of the answers; and reports on the themes of the answers.

In considering whether there should be a neurodiversity art movement, most respondents thought it either should be or already is (68% of replies). A quarter (25%) were not sure; and 4% stated that it shouldn't.

### Should there be a neurodiversity art movement?



Those stating they either weren't sure or that there should be a neurodiversity art movement suggested the following types of reasons for their view:

- The existing neurodiversity art movement is hidden
  - “There is one and it's just hidden. But projects like yours and the other work our community is doing is raising awareness.”
- Neurodivergent art already fits under the disability arts umbrella
  - “...while I believe it would be beautiful to showcase neurodivergent artists and their work in this way, I wonder whether we all belong to the wider disability arts movement? Perhaps our strength will come from unity rather than separate.”
  - “I feel that is an interesting discussion yet i feel under disability arts umberella...”
- Personal preference to not have their work labelled in that way
  - “I don't like labels; I am an artist... who has all these medical challenges... but should I be part of a movement that defines me - my art defines me and I develop from my health to SELF to my environment...”
- Challenges with language around neurodiversity
- Queries around defining what neurodiverse art means – it is the art itself or the artist?
  - “Does this mean artists specifically making art about being Neurodiversity? Or for example, exhibitions with just neurodivergent artists included, or both, something different?!”

Those responding that there should be, or already is, a neurodiverse art movement echoed some of these sentiments; particularly around the challenges of language.

Multiple respondents stated that a **neurodivergent** art movement rather than **neurodiverse** would be their preference for definition, because neurodiversity as a term is often used to encompass both neurodivergent, and neurotypical people.

- “I'd say Neurodivergent rather than Neurodiversity...”

- “I prefer to use the term neurodivergent as it would more accurately reflect what I believe the goal of this survey to be - to create a movement to centre neurodivergent artists, who face barriers to accessing the mainstream art world. (Neurodiverse refers to a group encompassing both neurodivergent, and neurotypical people who are already centred in mainstream society.)”
- “Neurodiversity is complex to talk about because it involves all brains including ND and non ND. I think there should be a Neurodivergent Art Movement, which would include lobbying for change like Disability Arts”

Respondents also state that neurodivergent artists face additional barriers that are not faced by other artists; ranging from the art world itself, to the world in general. There was a recognition that working in the arts can be actively hostile; respondents noted difficulties with funding and lack of adjustments for neurodivergent artists. Those reporting these difficulties almost uniformly felt that recognising a neurodivergent art movement would have a positive impact on resolving them.

- “the existing structure of the contemporary art world is in many ways inherently hostile to people with social disabilities.”
- “They didn’t make reasonable adjustments for me - never mind people I was helping. It almost broke me, trying to ask for neurotypicals help or adjustments. It knocked my confidence bad.”
- “...more and more the art world has become so pretentious and overly academic that applying for funding is a barrier.”
- “I also think a ND arts movement is necessary as we experience barriers that people who aren’t ND don’t.”
- “I believe that society as it is needs to change because I know from much bitter experience that it doesn't people whose brains are just different.”

The idea that recognising neurodivergent art as a movement would have a positive impact was stated by many of the positive respondents; some of the reasons given include:

- Improved understanding of neurodiversity generally
  - “Education is so behind on neurodiversity, the arts are behind, we need to voice up about hidden disabilities and make society stop seeing us as "stupid".”
  - “writing in a popular genre and reaching readers who aren’t autistic or involved in the neurodiversity movement is an extension of my activism and a way to help change perspectives and perceptions on autistic and other neurodivergent people”
  - “Neurodiverse experience can be illuminating for deeper and more diverse explorations of our relationship to ourselves, each other and the universe.”
  - “More awareness needs to be raised about the invisibility of neurodivergency and how this impacts the way in which Neuro divergent individuals are treated and seen...”
- Better understanding of what neurodivergent artists can bring to projects
  - “...I think it would encourage more designers to acknowledge how brilliant their brains are and get curious about how it works.”
- Space for neurodivergent artists to get support in their work
  - “there really isn't the platform out there for ND Artists to receive solid support and permission to share and develop work - and most importantly a space that actually welcomes and encourages the ND quirks and experiences...”
  - “An art movement could give these platforms and the artists involved in them a chance to be more actively involved in all areas of the art world.”
  - “...I think if we could form an art movement that actually acomodated our needs then so many people who are so talented could actually have a chance...”

Other respondents who support a neurodivergent art movement suggest that neurodivergent artists have a different way of seeing and responding to the world which would be centred if there was a specific art movement recognised.

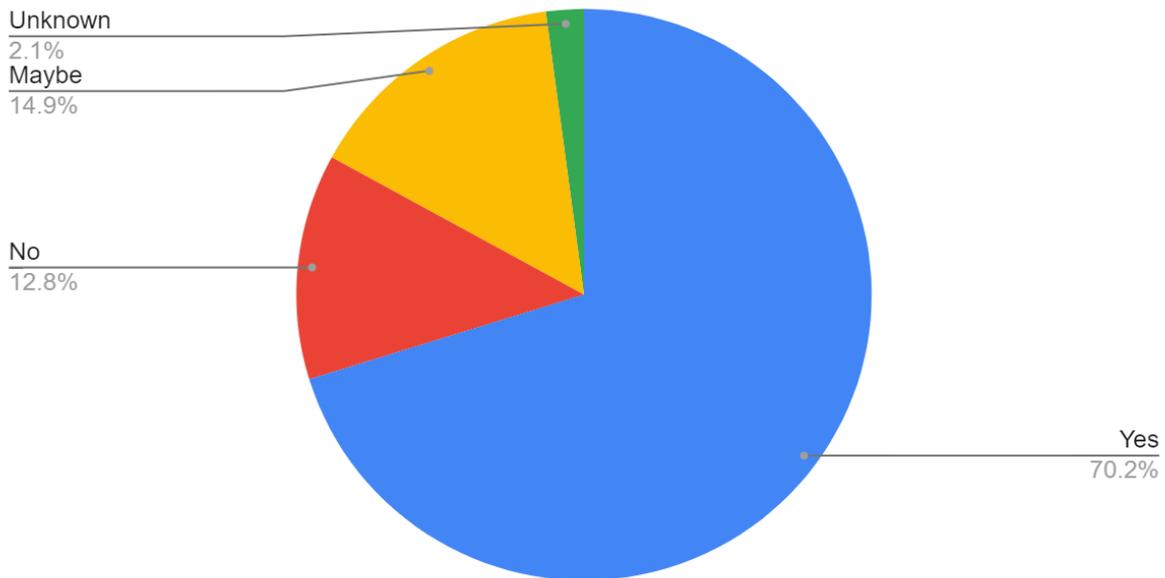
- "...neurodivergence is often associated with a different way of experiencing and responding to the world around us: we see things through a different lens..."
- "I think we operate in very different diverse ways. Less hierarchical. Different pace (which is important). More sensory. More likely to help and knowledge share with each other. Less competitive. Genuine. Enthusiastic. Less pressurizing."
- "...we perceive and interpret things differently - our outputs come from that specific approach."

Some respondents noted that its important neurodivergent artists are able to create whatever work is most relevant to them; if a movement exists it shouldn't push artists into boxes they are not comfortable with, or be exploitative of their experiences; and must allow artist to retain the differences between their work.

- "I do not believe that neurodivergent folks should be pressured into creating work that specifically focuses on their neurodivergence. Doing so for public entertainment is inspiration porn or even crosses into freakshow territory"
- "I don't think my work is in any way similar to another neurodivergent artist's just because we have the same disability, so I think it wouldn't make sense to be grouped together in that regard."

The second question focused on whether there has been an increase in work being created that focuses on neurodiversity in recent years.

Do you think there seems to be more artists creating work with a focus on neurodiversity in recent years?



As you can see in the chart above, the vast majority (70%) felt that there had been an increase; and many reasons were suggested for this:

- More awareness of neurodiversity in society, and increased access to diagnosis
  - “i belive due to more awarness, media in mainstream has made pwople like myself feel more able to step out of the nuerodivese shadow...”
  - “...better access to diagnostic services has enabled better understanding.”
  - “I feel it’s easier to identify as neurodivergent now as more is known about it and it’s celebrated rather than the term disabled/disability which uses ability as a marker...”
  - “..more understanding about neurodiversity, more acceptance from medical practitioners...”
  - “I think possibly motivated by research being undergone and certain books being published and more exhibitions/events being held, focusing on neurodiversity...”

- "...possibly because of improvements in adult diagnosis. I've noticed a lot of the big name artists in the scene are late-diagnosed..."
- As part of increased awareness, people are more willing to experience arts by neurodivergent artists or about those topics
  - "There seems to have been a change in how people in the wider community perceive neuro diversity, so they are more open to experiencing art by neurodiverse people."
- There is funding available for this area of art, although this is not seen positively
  - "...there seems to be an increased awareness of neurodivergence by funders."
  - "It's where there's money at the moment so depressingly lots of people want in on this arena even when they are ill qualified for it."
  - "...funding bodies are actively seeking to fill their diversity quotas."
- Technology has made it easier for artists to find each other and build networks and participate in art
  - "I think this is partly because the internet has allowed people who support the ND movement to find each other and support people's art and encourage ND focused work"
  - "Most vitally - the internet - people forming subcultures online globally and being able to compare symptoms and states - doing their own research, building communities and support."
  - "The internet provides workarounds which obviate the necessity for engaging with the social obstacles which prevented them from participating sooner."

Some respondents suggest that this isn't an authentic process; with the focus being created outside the neurodivergent community; and barriers to participation still prevalent.

- “I believe that this focus is also being pushed onto us from the outside world..”
- “I worry that art orgs trying to be inclusive are not consulting with us in the ND community - I see forms I just can’t fill in - accommodations not met. I miss a lot of opportunities because of this. I just can’t do it.”

The 28% of respondents who felt there either aren’t more artists creating this work, or that there might be, mainly suggested that the change isn’t in the number of artists and amount of work being produced; but in the recognition of the neurodivergent identity within it. The role of the disability art movement in this was also cited.

- “The work that many of these artists have been creating over the years has always been informed by their neurodivergence, but it is only in recent years that we have had this umbrella name and identity under which so many of us find we are living and working.”
- “I don't think there's more but there's probably more visibility for it.”
- “I would argue that there isn’t more artists creating work with a focus on neurodiversity, but simply more awareness of these types of work. The disability arts movement has definitely provided more opportunities and better accessibility for neurodivergent and other disabled artists.”

Across all respondents there were statements about the work still to be done in this area.

- “A little bit, it's getting better, but there needs to be more work done.”
- “...i think there is a huge shame culture around artists who are neurodiverse and they are totally ignored and overlooked by the art world...”
- “[I] would like to see more of a shift of people speaking up about their experiences with being neurodiverse.

## Report format notes

### Note on rounding

Throughout the report, numbers in the text have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and so may not exactly match the supplied charts. Due to multiple answers being selected in many cases; results will not total 100%.

### Note on quotes

All quotes used in the report are reprinted as written; the only editing was for length.