



# ‘A Smaller Mask’: Freedom and Authenticity in Autistic Space

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Accepted: 5 June 2022

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**Abstract** Autscape is an autistic-led conference, organised annually in varying locations around England. Governed by a strict set of rules and regulations, Autscape is a social and spatial setup explicitly devised to accommodate the tendencies, sensitivities, and preferences of people on the autism spectrum. It is a design, in other words—as organisers and participants alike often profess—for an altogether autistic space. The uniqueness of the event, and consequently its value to anthropological theory, lies in the shared imagination of the setting by those who inhabit it as one in which neurotypical masks, otherwise worn daily in keeping with hegemonic society’s expectation of conformity, can finally be removed. I introduce the concept of un-festival as a means of depicting this event, similar to festival in its goals of defiance and inversion, but different from—and in important ways, opposite to—festival in its style and architecture, in the dispositions it encourages and mobilises, and in its potential implications. The un-festival offers a powerful comment on this moment in history, whereby masks are no longer seen as an item that affords freedom, but as one that stifles it. While Autscape participants remain doubtful as to the actual effect of this event on neurotypical society, they do nevertheless express a desire that this project will have some longstanding effects. That once a space has been designed for autistic people that considers their specific needs and tendencies, autism may then finally cease to be interpreted through a neuro-normative prism and freed to be understood in autistic people’s own terms.

**Keywords** Autism · Anthropology · Masks · Authenticity · Festival · Space

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## Introduction

Autscape is an autistic-led conference, organised annually in varying locations around England. Its claim to exceptionality lies in the fact that not only its participants, but its organisers as well—a dedicated group of volunteers—all identify as being on the autism spectrum. With this, Autscape aims to lead a step away from professional- or parent-led conferences; events which many members of autistic communities perceive as employing offensive and dehumanising rhetoric, while advancing unhelpful methods of support and treatment. Autscape, on the contrary, places its emphasis on participation, self-advocacy, identity politics, and grassroots initiatives of social change. Autscape is thus not simply a conference *about* autism, of which there are many. Rather, it is a social and spatial setup explicitly devised to accommodate the tendencies, sensitivities, and preferences of people on the autism spectrum. It is a design, in other words—as Autscape organisers and participants alike often profess—for an altogether *autistic* space.

Attendees to Autscape experience it as a profoundly special social space. 'Autscape is the most peaceful place in the world', I was told by one participant during a group discussion I had led, upon my raising the question of what it was about the conference that they most appreciated. 'It is the only time in the year when I'm not nervous or anxious', said another. 'It is home', suggested a third participant, adding that 'it is the only place where I can finally take off my NT [i.e. 'neurotypical', namely non-autistic] mask and simply be myself'. Yet another participant pointedly described the conference as a place to 'unlearn everything your parents said was wrong with you'. The peace and quiet, the postponement of judgement, a sense of belonging, permission to be oneself; it is these common themes of authenticity and freedom, unlearning and unmasking, that will be the focus of this study. What might it mean, in the context of autism, to be 'yourself'? Or in other words, to which alternative possibilities for being does the invitation to be oneself allude? Furthermore, how might participants' readings of the distinctive structure of Autscape help crystallise our understanding of the place of autism in broader society, and the unfolding subjectivity of its participants as they step in and out of autistic space? Finally, how do annual events such as Autscape shape—and are in turn shaped by—individual and collective notions of freedom and authenticity? What stands at the heart of this exploration is the question of how autistic people collectively work to cultivate an 'authentic' sense of self, especially as their social environments constantly encourage them to be otherwise (Bagatell 2007; Belek 2018; Schneid and Raz 2020).

The distinctiveness of Autscape, I will ultimately suggest, and consequently its value to anthropological theory, is reflected in the shared imagination of the setting by those who inhabit it as one in which neurotypical masks, otherwise worn daily in keeping with hegemonic society's expectation of conformity, can finally be removed. Through this temporary inversion of social order, characterised by a blanket permission to act freely, but paradoxically governed by a strict set of regulations, participants are invited to liberate themselves from the constraints of neurotypical society. Autscape participants thus exercise reflective freedom

(Laidlaw 2014) by redefining the terms under which their behaviours are evaluated, and reinventing their characters in light of this newly defined set of values. Autscope reflects an aspiration that this redefinition will persist outside and beyond autistic space itself; namely, that removed masks could be permanently retired. Yet as the title of this article suggests, upon the culmination of Autscope, one might have to settle on merely donning a mask of a more modest size.

Moreover, by taking seriously the metaphor of *unmasking* commonly used by Autscope participants, I aim to propose a theoretical lens that draws on some of the anthropological literature on festivals and carnivalesque events (e.g. Gilmore 2008; Handelman 1990; Napier 1986; Sexton 2001; Turner 1987) while exploring the ways in which this body of work might refine our understanding of events that are not typically considered under this framework. The concept of *un-festival* is introduced as a means of depicting an event similar to festival in its goals of defiance and inversion, but different from—and in important ways, opposite to—festival in its style and architecture, in the dispositions it encourages and mobilises, and in its potential implications on broader society. For example, while festivals often employ comedy, un-festivals mobilise solemn reflexivity. While festivals are spectacles of performance, un-festivals call for displays of authenticity. While extravagance is a characteristic feature of many carnivalesque events, un-festivals exercise prudence. While festivals encourage mischief, un-festivals encourage adherence to rules.

Although festivals and un-festivals are distinct, the value of this analogy goes beyond noting their differences, primarily as the two do resemble one another in what is perhaps both types' essential quality; that is, their attempt at a temporary inversion of hegemonic social order (Napier 1986). Both are powerful commentaries on the values and structures of ordinary society; yet while the festival might be seen to take the form of satire or parody, the un-festival might be said to resemble an exposé. It is an earnest, rather than mocking critique. The implications of the two types of events, as noted, also differ. Primarily, while scholars have tended to understand the festival as a temporary symbolic inversion which in fact reinforces the status quo (Handelman 1990) and therefore promotes no real change to broader social structures, the un-festival, I suggest, aims to actually be transformative. That is, by negotiating not merely social roles and hierarchy (as per Turner 1987), but explicitly redesigning the very system of rules that produces the social alignments associated with typical hegemonic structures, the un-festival seeks to articulate a viable alternative to the status quo. The un-festival is thus not meant to be fun, joyful, or entertaining (though it can indeed be all these things). The un-festival, rather, aims to induce real, sustainable change.

A short note on ethics and method: I was permitted by the Autscope Board of Directors to attend the conference in the capacity of researcher, in the condition that I will only observe and speak to attendees who had given their formal consent (via a consent form) to participate in my study. I adhered to this limitation closely. In addition, I had obtained formal ethical clearance to carry out this project from the Ethics Committee of the Division of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, with which I was at the time affiliated. Within Autscope I had had many informal chats with willing participants, conducted several in-depth interviews, and

led daily focus discussions groups. I had only attended lectures and workshops in the condition that the lecturer/host has given their explicit consent. I had not used any recording devices during the event and had practiced notetaking instead. While the event itself could not realistically be anonymised due to its distinctiveness, all names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms, and identifiable details were removed so as to preserve the anonymity of participants. Moreover, Autscope was but one of several settings where I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in the UK for a period of just over a year, focusing on the experiences, narratives, and reflections of adults on the autism spectrum. Other fieldwork sites included the weekly meetings of a small social group of autistic university students, the bi-weekly meetings of a group whose members met for games, chats and snacks in a local church, and the monthly meetings of yet another group whose members would meet at a local café for drinks. I had also conducted in-depth interviews with most of the members of these groups and had met with them frequently on various occasions outside scheduled group meetings.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was a neurotypical researcher working amidst and writing about autistic communities and individuals. Common negative experiences of being ‘observed’ by researchers, clinicians and therapists have understandably left many of my interlocutors sensitive to such one-sided, power-heavy interactions. They—very fairly—expected mutuality. I was more than happy to comply. I realised that my interlocutors’ sense of safety and comfort was crucial for a productive interaction, which is why I would often suggest that we met in person only after being in contact online for some time, establishing trust and rapport. I would steer clear of issues that I suspected could cause distress (experiences of violence or rejection, for example), unless I was certain my interlocutor was content to discuss such matters. I would allow for long pauses in conversation, giving my interlocutors ample time to compose themselves following a distraction or a momentary discomfort. I would phrase my questions in as clear and unambiguous manner as possible, so as to avoid causing confusion. And I would make sure to volunteer information about myself; to turn the interview as much into a dialogue as possible.

## Autism and Neurodiversity

The category of autism represents a very broad spectrum of neurodevelopmental conditions. Yet it has repeatedly been demonstrated that purely biological / neurological explanatory models are unsatisfactory in fully accounting for the phenomenon, as these overlook the complex matrix of political, historical, and sociological contexts from which this category has emerged and in which it is maintained (Belek 2019b; Eyal et al. 2010; Grinker 2010; Nadesan 2005; Silverman 2012). Ultimately, biomedical models typically construe autism inappropriately as an objectively accurate label, and imply that autistic people are fully, and passively, contained within this category (for an account of exceptions to this rule, see Fitzgerald 2017). Personal histories and idiosyncrasies, as well as structural constraints and mechanisms of social marginalisation, are thus often understated in

such constructs. Also understated are the vigorous and creative endeavours of autistic people to shape the meaning of the label that has been ascribed to them (Baggs 2010; Belek 2018, 2019a; Milton 2012; Yergeau 2010). As the emergent product of a plethora of interrelated social and biological processes, autism is therefore fluid, dynamic, and unstable.

In terms of the discourse it promotes and the politics it endorses, Autscope can be understood as a project of the neurodiversity movement. Counter to the biomedical view of autism which considers it a deficit or impairment, the neurodiversity paradigm has developed from the notion that autism constitutes a natural expression of human diversity (Bagatell 2007; Chamak 2008; Grinker 2007; Lawson 2008; Savarese 2013). In the same way that there exists a diversity of gender or ethnicity, neurodiversity advocates maintain, so there exists a diversity of cognitive structures; that is, of ways of being (Baggs 2010; Milton 2012; Yergeau 2010). And as with other forms of alterity, autism, too, is to be accepted and celebrated.

In Foucault's (1998) terms, various networks of biopolitical governance and mechanisms of biopower work to frame autistic bodies, behaviours, and experiences as indicative of a neurological or cognitive disorder. Yet biology-based discourses on autism also serve as powerful instruments of resistance (Brownlow and O'Dell 2013), in that they allow autistic people to oppose the mainstream deficit-based construing of the condition. In other words, in assuming an identity constructed around neuroscience, subscribers to the neurodiversity movement reject the assumption that because a form of difference is grounded in the brain, it necessarily constitutes an impairment (Ortega 2009). Biological essentialism thus serves to claim a natural difference between autistic people and the hegemonic majority, in an effective exercise of biological citizenship (Petryna 2002; Rose and Novas 2005). *Neuro-biological citizenship* is reflected in this case by a diverse group of people claiming the freedom to negotiate the notions of a governing regime, and alternately reject them, accept them, or withdraw from them entirely (Brownlow and O'Dell 2013). This view works to resolve the apparent paradox whereby a community allegedly marked by sameness is in fact so broadly diverse and heterogeneous; in emphasising choice and active engagement, it signifies members' experienced likeness not as an essential property, but as a collective achievement.

The neurodiversity movement bases many of its claims on the principles of the social model of disability (Ginsburg and Rapp 2013; Oliver 1996; Shakespeare 2006). According to this model, disability is not an objective fact of the body. Rather, it is the result of social processes by which a feature of a body or mind is excluded from what is judged normal in a given society—a judgement always governed by some kind of hegemonic normativity—and subsequently pathologised and medicalised. Disability, the social model alleges, is thus the result of disablement. If it were not for society's disabling normative values and structures, people with certain atypical traits might still face challenges, but the current understanding of disability as an essential individual property would lose its relevance. To accept this model is not merely to embrace an ontological standpoint, or to make an idle claim about mechanisms of social injustice; as it does also hint at an operative strategy. If society's disabling structures were to be altered, the social model implies, many of the obstacles currently facing those who exhibit atypical

characteristics would be removed. And as with the popular imaginary of a stairless world wherein wheel-chair users would no longer be disadvantaged, architectural design is often the most conspicuous target of accessibility programmes.

In autism, conventional architecture is often a barrier to social participation. Many people on the spectrum experience heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli, difficulties with spatial orientation, and an aversion to crowded spaces. Because of this, lighting, sound, levelling and acoustics are experienced as significant features of any built environment, which can either afford them access or altogether deny it. Still another feature of society which autistic people experience as obstructive is its common expectation for conformity to social etiquette; namely those implicit and unconventionalised rules that autistic people often struggle to make sense of, or to which they are reluctant to adhere (Belek 2018; Schneid and Raz 2020). Expectations for conformity are not merely coercive but disabling given that *failing* to conform is likely to impede on one's chances of securing employment, accessing social services, or maintaining social relationships. Consequently, a truly transformative space wherein autistic people would cease to be disadvantaged by society's typical structures would necessitate a careful revision of the very rules that typically govern and shape social interaction. It is from these two hindrances on autistic people's social participation, namely, the physical barriers and the social barriers, that the conception of a different sort of space—an autistic space—draws its full significance.

In her ethnography of a summer camp dedicated to live-action roleplaying games, Fein (2015) explores this setting in which the autistic tendencies of participants facilitate the co-creation of an innovative cultural space. Deeming it a 'folk healing practice', Fein argues that the camp encourages its autistic campers to draw on a rich assemblage of cultural motifs—characters, themes and narratives—in order to metaphorically conceptualise and express their turbulent phenomenological experiences. The camp, Fein explains, offers highly structured and sustained activities, the inherent formality of which is congruent with participants' needs. This rearrangement of social life into a stable network enables a reconfiguration of self and social role and holds therapeutic value in creating a non-stigmatising social environment that offers potential for positive change. Participants can in this way convert the challenges associated with autism from sources of estrangement into opportunities for mutual recognition and shared enjoyment. Fein's apt analysis constitutes a valuable starting point from which to describe and discuss a different autistic space; that known as Autscape.

## Autistic Space

In August 2014, Autscape was held in a large residential conference centre in Ditchingham, a village in Norfolk, East Anglia. Over a hundred participants from across the country—as well as a few who travelled from Holland, Spain, France, and Germany—attended what had been the 10th annual event. The clear majority of Autscape participants identified as autistic; only a handful did not—these were parents, carers, or professionals. Attendees ranged in age from several very young

children to a few elders in their 8th decade of life. There was roughly an equal number of men and women among participants, while a few identified as non-binary gendered.

The overwhelming majority of participants in Autscope were white. This last statement holds true for each of my fieldsites in the UK, and perhaps warrants some reflection. As Mattingly (2017: 253) notes in relation to the diminished prevalence of autism diagnoses among African-Americans in the United States, autism “reveals the role of race and class in the production of a psychological category ... [and] has been racially marked since its earliest presentation in 1943 ... In the United States, autism is still far more frequently diagnosed in Euro-American and wealthier communities.” While diminished prevalence may partially account for the limited presence of ethnic minorities in some of the autistic communities in England, I suspect this does not tell the entire story. It may be the case that not only autism as a medical category, but autism as a marker of personal identity and catalyst for community building were similarly racially marked and delineated already from the very early days of the neurodiversity movement.

In Autscope, the spectrum of autism traits also varied among participants. While for some, speech was either challenging or altogether impractical, most participants could express themselves verbally; and might thus be said to relatively more inclined towards the styles of performance elaborated on in this article. In Autscope, I had met a manual labourer, schoolteacher, software designer, lorry driver, artist, magazine editor, and receptionist, to name just a few examples. And as in many other contexts of disability, unemployment and financial hardships were commonplace. While Autscope organisers did aim to make the conference as affordable as possible, the overall cost of attendance ranged between £195 to £265. Yet despite this considerable cost, by the time the conference had started, all rooms in the large venue had been booked.

‘We hope you are looking forward to coming to Autscope’, read the first sentence in the information pack, which was handed to all guests upon our arrival. ‘We understand how important it is, especially for autistic people, to know what to expect’. The following explanation, remarkable in its level of detail, immediately followed:

You enter the building via the Overnight Guest Reception doors. There will be a desk facing you. The person there will give you your bedroom key. If you do not wish to speak your name, please show it instead. Use an ID card, or bank card, or write it down. There will be paper for this purpose. The venue has signposts to the different bedrooms from the Overnight Guest Reception area and in addition you will be given a map showing you where your bedroom area is.

I was struck by the thought the organisers had put into making participants’ initial entrance to Autscope as predictable as possible. The site was busy with makeshift signs, replete with arrows, indicating where everything was—rooms, toilets, desks, halls. The organiser who had just handed me my key complemented these visual aids with a very comprehensive oral explanation to the same effect. She had also handed me a detailed map of the venue. As I was making my way to my



next port of call, the registration desk, stopping frequently to look around and appreciate the site, two different organisers cordially pointed me in the direction they thought I needed to go.

In the registration office, another volunteer went on to offer me a thorough verbal explanation of the rules of the conference, all the while pointing to a table on which red, yellow, green, and white rectangular badges, as well as orange stars, black circles, and green leaves were laid out in a colourful display (Table 1). 'There is no requirement to socialise at all', read a section of the information pack, under the heading of 'Social Interaction'; 'and there will be no disapproval of those who choose not to interact'. Under the subheading 'Initiation Badges', the section continues:

Everyone will be provided with coloured badges they can use to indicate who may initiate social interaction with them. You are not required to use the badges, but you must respect those of others.

'Please take whatever badges you need', the volunteer urged me, amusingly adding: 'I don't suppose you'll be needing the green leaf'. I collected my name tag, but none of the other symbols; I did not feel I would need a badge to help coordinate my communication, seeing as I never needed one in the past. But I was mistaken. What neurotypical society considers neutral—and accordingly, what *I* considered neutral—was made into a distinct category here at Autscope; one possibility or preference among others. Rather than not wearing any badge, in order to indicate that I would regulate my own social interactions I ought to have worn a *white* badge. I thus returned to collect the red, yellow, green, and white badges, and for the remainder of the conference I wore the white badge around my neck. Symbolically, the white badge lay right beside my name tag. Name and socialising preference were grouped into a single presentation of self: 'I am Ben', the plastic rectangle on my chest communicated, 'and I will be regulating my own interactions'. Other participants' chests communicated other messages: 'I am Henry. Please initiate conversations with me, but do not offer me a hug'. Or: 'I am Shirley. I only wish to speak to my friends, and I do not want my picture taken'. Or: 'I am Dale, and I do not wish to be approached'.

Virtually all Autscope participants, including organisers and chair, wore their coloured badges continuously throughout the four-day conference. Yet rather than being hung idly around the neck and forgotten about, they were often actively employed as communication aids. Firstly, for many participants, the name tag and initiation badge acted as individualising aesthetic objects, decorated with stickers, drawings, and other ornaments. Secondly, some participants wore their badges from previous years' conferences, thereby, perhaps, communicating their eldership in the community. And lastly, it was customary, I noted, for attendees to direct their gaze at a person's chest—namely, at their badge—before starting a conversation. Often, this was accompanied by the initiator raising their own badge, emphasising their willingness to engage.

Red badges were rare in the public areas. These were mostly worn in times of distress, just before heading towards the safety of one's bedroom or a remote part of the garden. Yellow badges were more commonly worn. It is interesting to reflect on



**Table 1** Autscape initiation badges

Type	Colour	Description
No initiation	Red	Please do not initiate any interaction with me.
Prior permission	Yellow	Please do not initiate unless I have already given you permission to approach me on a yellow badge.
Please initiate	Green	I would like to socialise, but I have difficulty initiating. Please initiate with me.
Neutral	White (or no badge)	I am able to regulate my own interaction

Orange star: People who like being hugged can get an orange star to add to their badge. This is *not* a blanket permission to hug; this star indicates that the wearer may be *approached* and *asked* for a hug  
 Black circle: People who do not wish to be photographed or filmed will be wearing a black circle. Permission must be sought from every individual in a photograph before any publication

Green leaf: This is an additional symbol in use this year for people to signify if they consent to taking part in the research being conducted by Ben Belek

*Please respect all these badges for the safety and comfort of everyone.* (Italics in the original)

the temporal nature of relationships as mirrored by the use of this symbol. Its display would bring to the fore, in any given time, the history of a relationship. Past speech acts (namely, 'I give you permission to initiate with me when I'm on yellow') would resurface when their relevance reemerged. I was particularly struck by the meaning of the green badge, unique among the others in that it does not restrict a peer's actions towards oneself, but indeed it directs them; namely '*please* come and speak with me'. The very existence of the green badge marks a sharing of responsibility for successful communication, built into the very system of social interaction at Autscape. The dynamic, shifting, and relational nature of social interaction, and particularly the fluctuations in people's motivations to interact, had in this way taken a particularly material and visual form.

On various occasions, complaints about people not adhering to the initiation badge system were voiced with a distinct tone of harsh disapproval. I myself had breached the rules once, when on the second day I directed a question at a person wearing a yellow badge, without having garnered her permission to do so. Clumsily, I forgot to check what colour badge she was wearing. My approaching her was

received with a reprimanding raising of the yellow badge, and her walking away. I later apologised and was forgiven, yet this incidence was a reminder that there was no place for casual spontaneity at Autscope; at least, not the in the sense that I was used to. But what I experienced as constraining, my interlocutors, mostly, experienced as liberating. Below, I will lay out some foundations for a theorization of Autscope and comparable events as un-festivals. The designing of categorical rules, and the emphasis subsequently placed on their strict adherence, constitute crucial components of such collective imaginaries of possible alternatives to conventional social structures.

## Discordance

During an afternoon coffee break, I noticed a young man standing by himself. He was wearing a green badge that indicated he wanted to be engaged in conversation. He was also wearing the green leaf. I approached him and we began to speak. He told me, not without difficulty, that he did not make any new friends so far. He seemed less than happy. As did Stella, a convivial but reserved woman in her early twenties with a colourfully decorated name badge. This was her fourth time at Autscope, yet in previous years she was accompanied by her parents. This was her first time coming alone. In one of the group discussions, she admitted to feeling scared and alone. She was especially uncomfortable at constantly being expected to talk about her emotions; 'to present people with my soul'. Stella was not inclined for such introspection, and so this expectation made her nervous. Alongside individual disappointments and disillusionments there also emerged controversies that can be understood as questioning the very feasibility of such a thing as a single autistic space. For example, one participant referred to 'the unwritten rules of Autscope'; these included the blanket permission to dress as one pleases and walk barefoot, for example, but also 'to simply walk away in the middle of a conversation if someone is boring you stiff'. And yet a different participant confided in me that his feelings were hurt when someone has done just that to him, leaving him feeling isolated and vulnerable.

In the afternoon of the third day of Autscope, I was sitting in one of the corridors as Laura, an earnest and attentive woman in her mid-forties, was busily rushing back and forth through the corridor. We exchanged a few pleasantries whenever she passed me by, until eventually she sat down, exhaustedly, on the sofa opposite me. Although Laura was part of the organising committee at Autscope for several years now, she told me she was still surprised by the toll this was taking on her. All in all, Laura was more than slightly ambivalent about this annual event. Attempting to articulate the reasons why she considers her workplace easier to negotiate than Autscope, she eventually explained that in Autscope there existed all these rules, and yet things never seemed to go as smoothly as she would have liked them to. People tended to go on and on in conversations, and this bothered her, yet she could never manage to get away from them. At work, on the other hand, conversations always seemed to either progress or come to their natural stop. This, she felt, was how conversations *should* work. Laura concluded that there needed to be some

balance between autistics and neurotypicals in a single environment. The very ideal, then, of Autescape seemed questionable to her.

In a later email correspondence, Laura elaborated on this point: 'I am not convinced about the concept of autistic space ... People, and even me I suppose, seem to care more about *their* autistic space than the communal one. I don't think', she concluded, 'you can get a communal autistic space that suits everyone'. Autescape represents an effort to collectively design a mechanism that would foster seamless social interactions. It attempts this within a temporary social space that is distinct from participants' everyday social environments. And it is precisely to this ongoing, if not necessarily successful effort to produce a sustainable alternative to conventional social structures that my analysis below, employing the notion of the un-festival, will attend.

## Masquerade

Autistic behaviour is totally normal and expected at Autescape. Stimming (repetitive movements), echolalia, distractibility, atypical body language, and perseveration (obsessiveness), to name but a few possibilities, are expected and accepted. Appearing, or indeed being, completely NT (neurologically typical, or 'normal') is also perfectly acceptable. Most importantly, you can be yourself here!

A common strategy employed by people on the autism spectrum to mitigate the challenges of socialising is to attempt to mimic what they understand to be neurotypical behaviours; to pretend, in other words, to be 'normal'. The use my interlocutors have commonly made of the notion of 'normal', in this context, was rarely devoid of a certain bitterness, which stemmed from their acknowledgement that the sorts of behaviours usually deemed 'normal' were arbitrarily set, and in consideration of only neurotypical preferences and tendencies. From pointless small talk to false flattery, there is of course nothing necessarily rational about conventional standards of sociality. Yet seeing as any divergence from this standard is heavily frowned upon, and often results in various forms of exclusion and discrimination, they came to refrain from socialising in the way that they individually saw fit. Certainly, all people engage in some form of performance in their daily lives. However, the necessity to perform according to values experienced as alien, alongside the often-dire implications of performing unsuccessfully, is accentuated among autistic people (Belek 2018). Because of this, a prevalent feeling of disjunction underlines many autistic people's experiences. As Linda, a teacher and mother of five, told me once during an interview:

I could laugh when I am supposed to even if I don't find the joke funny. I could pretend to be upset for the person who is always in turmoil but I know she is attention seeking. I could do a lot of things but it makes me feel like a fraud, it is not me. [But] I am not acceptable to many other people as my true self.

Antze (2010) has identified the central contribution of the internet to the formation of autistic communities: by essentially enabling them to 'leave their autistic bodies behind', online media allowed autistic people 'to communicate without betraying their autism' (2010: 317). That is, without mimicking neurotypical gait, posture, or gestures, without suppressing their stims, without forcing themselves to maintain eye-contact, and without having to control their facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice. Without, in other words, pretending to be 'normal'. Under the mostly discursive, predictable, and a-simultaneous conditions of online communication, Antze claims, autism need not be an obstacle to successful communication; nor to the formation of relationships, or the establishment of communities. *Autscape*, I suggest, offers autistic people something more valuable still; that is, to remain faithful to their autism, *while taking their autistic bodies with them*.

Siebers (2004) has written about the necessity of working to pass as 'normal' in the context of disability. He fittingly adopts Goffman's (1963) notion of 'passing', which is a strategy for managing one's stigma of a 'spoiled identity', sometimes through means of concealment. Siebers also draws on Sedgwick (1990) in suggesting that *closeting* is a special and extreme case of concealment, one in which the implications of disclosure are particularly dire; when concealment becomes not merely a question of choice, but of compulsion. Closeting, therefore, is a constitutive marker of oppression. This is an important reminder that structural mechanisms of power play a decisive role in the management of stigma. Siebers further suggests that the logic of the closet often involves not mere concealment, but disguise; namely an exaggerated display of one's disability, or the masking of one kind of disability with another. He references Riviere's influential essay from 1929, on womanliness as masquerade; wherein women work not to pass as male, but to perform an altered femininity.

Comparably, the experience of any disability is heavily shaped by this factor of its visibility, with regards to whether it invites empathy or disbelief, condescension or criticism, inclusion or otherwise (Davis 2005). In their daily lives, autistic people are constantly required to negotiate the visibility of their condition, alternating between concealment of their autistic traits (suppressing them in order to avoid stigma and misconception), their exaggeration (strategically displaying certain tendencies in order that their difficulties are legitimised as pertaining to an accepted form of disability), and their disguise (by actively mimicking neurotypical behaviour). And it is in light of this incessant masquerade that the supposedly liberating license to 'be yourself', as so festively granted in *Autscape*, can be fully appreciated. Yet it begs the question: is one's self so easily found under the diverse layers of disguise—i.e. the different faces one puts on in various social settings, by differentially regulating body language, emotional expressions or visible discomfort—obligatorily cultivated throughout one's life?

Limburg (2016), an autistic author and poet, and a scholar in the field of rhetoric, has reflected on the difficulty she had experienced when once asked, as part of an exercise in a training course for facilitators of reading groups, to simply be 'herself'. 'Did they mean the person I shall call Self A', she ponders,

... who would throw her all at reading the poem, mastering it, seeking out its patterns, trying to guess the period if not the author, then answer every question and talk and talk and talk about what she'd found and what she knew, unwittingly dominating the group, inadvertently intimidating the other members and being that awful thing—off-putting? Or did they want me to be Self B, the person I'd spent the last 20 years of my life learning to be in order not to have to be that child anymore...

'In the end', she recounts, 'I went for the usual compromise, which meant that Self B spent the session policing Self A and rationing her contributions. And in doing so, as usual, I exhausted myself almost to the point of tears'. Upon obtaining her diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome at a relatively late age, Limburg recalls, she did believe she could now finally set Self A free. Yet she learned that behind the artificial veil of Self B there did not lie some authentic, true self awaiting its liberation. Rather, her 'true' self, too—her Aspergic self, as she calls it—needed to be consciously and effortfully designed; a view that is very much in line with that of such scholars as Goffman (1959) and Taylor (1991). Yet the logic of Autscope which explicitly invites its attendees to 'take off their masks' seems to presume, as Limburg had previously presumed, that beneath the 'face' one puts on in various social settings, exists the real or authentic self. The obligatory standards of etiquette in neurotypical society had effectively forced this authentic self into the closet, and thus Autscope's great appeal lies in affording its potential release. It is not my intention here to comment as to the success, or indeed, feasibility of this project, but to point to its significance and implications. What is it about Autscope that allows its organisers to claim it as a space so exceptional, so as to allow participants to remove whatever masks they might be donning? And what is it about this same space that allows many participants to accept this construal, and admit that Autscope does indeed afford them a certain liberation, freedom, unlearning, and unmasking? That they can indeed, as the organisers had hoped, be themselves? This will be the question I will approach in the final two sections of the article.

## Annual Events

Anthropological accounts have had much to say on events comparable to Autscope. Valuable examples include Louisiana's Cajun Mardi Gras (Sexton 2001), London and Frankfurt's International Book Fairs (Moeran 2010), the annual Burning Man celebration in Nevada (Gilmore 2008), the Miss Galaxy transgender beauty pageant in Tonga (Besnier 2002), and international hacker conferences (Coleman 2010). I am suggesting here a rather unusual grouping, of course. But although the events described in this far from exhaustive list are very different—different goals, different politics, different styles—important similarities can readily be found between the analyses offered by the anthropologists who have studied them.

Stemming from these accounts is an appreciation of the fact that these settings, the peak yearly events of certain groups or milieus, are particularly potent spheres for collective strategising, negotiation, and argumentation. Indeed, all articles speak

of the event's relationship with the wider field of which they emerge, and which they are seen to embody. This relationship can be one of mirroring, confirmation, reversal, or defiance; or often, of some unique combination of these. The annual event is, in the words of Coleman (2010: 54), an 'ethical and social commentary' on the broader society. Moeren (2010) offers a thought-provoking claim in this context, in maintaining that book fairs are 'tournaments of values', a term he borrows from Appadurai (1986, cited in Moeren 2010). Namely, they constitute temporary structured environments in which participants 'define and reassert the economic, social, and symbolic values that constitute the overall field of publishing' (2010:138). The dynamics maintained by these gatherings with the outside social world have, of course, everything to do with hegemonic power structures. Thus, it is Besnier who pointedly argues, referring to the Tongan Miss Galaxy beauty pageant, that '...the socially marginalised contestants claim to define the local, in ways that may oppose the received order ... controlled by the privileged' (2002:534).

But it would be lacking to only regard these events as idle commentary. Rather, they often serve a purpose. One end they can be said to work towards is directed internally. To their participants, such events offer tools of expression, performance, negotiation, and resistance. Cementing group solidarity, as Coleman (2010) had put it, while also ushering in personal transformation. It is a chance for a re-enchantment with one's community, and for imbuing actions 'with revitalised, or ethically charged meanings' (Coleman 2010: 53). Participants enjoy a shared experience of belonging, community, and familiarity; albeit one that is punctuated, perhaps due to unavoidable heterogeneity, by controversy, ambiguous inclusion criteria, and disillusionment. Within and in light of these temporary spaces of opposition and/or legitimization, strain and/or reinforcement, reality and/or fantasy, actors negotiate their own roles and subjectivities. Authors thus speak of participants' affirmation of their selves in view of a greater context, and in light of a unique social gathering of cognate peers, while also, as phrased by Besnier, 'adopting tokens of an imagined alternative identity' (2002: 536). Such events generally seem to offer participants a prevalent sense of liberation; a 'release from mundane structure', Gilmore has put it, quoting Turner and Turner (1978, cited in Gilmore 2008: 215). At the same time, such events work externally as well, towards broader society, as they constitute attempts to redefine the terms under which various social and economic dynamics unfold, and in light of these revised terms, produce an altered set of normative values.

A common theme emerging from this strand of literature is a reference to these spaces as festive and celebratory; sometimes, as carnivalesque spectacles. The practice of masking in particular, a prominent feature of many carnivals and carnival-like events, offers a potential for symbolic inversion of social order. "The mask", writes Bakhtin (1984), "is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; *it rejects conformity to oneself.*" Indeed, from a heuristic point of view, masks almost inevitably invite Goffmanian musings over one's relationship to oneself, as well as one's commitment to social rules, structures and institutions. And to complicate things further, a mask worn temporarily—as most masks are—compel

us to think about such relationships in temporal terms: what is the nature of the dissonance between presently masked me and future unmasked me?

For example, in affording anonymity, masks enable mischief, as shown by Sexton's description of the Cajun Mardi Gras. While Coleman, in her treatise on the role of the Guy Fawkes mask in the hacker movement Anonymous, argues that 'masking, so often thought of only in negative terms — as shirking responsibility or hiding — can also enable a positive, constructive ethics of interacting and of being-in-the-world that runs counter to state, corporate, and colonial interests' (2014: 426). In Autscape, the existence of masks is often told, though it is not *in autistic space* where masks are donned; but outside of it. Therefore, it is not masking that is experienced as a reversal of social order but *unmasking*. "It would be impossible to exhaust the intricate multiform symbolism of the mask", writes Bakhtin (1984), and this work shies well away from attempting this. Notwithstanding, notions of masking and unmasking do offer a path towards a more nuanced understanding of the special meaning of Autscape to its participants, and therefore to answering the questions posed at the onset of this article.

Since the Covid-19 outbreak, the anthropological discussion on masks has expanded to offer interesting analyses of a less-familiar politics of masking unveiled by the widespread use of surgical masks. Such studies draw parallels between this public health induced style of masking (as well as, in some cases, its surprisingly fierce opposition) and other, more familiar examples of masking. In doing so, authors have evoked such classic analytical themes as orientalism (Zhang 2021), power relations and structural inequality (Pillay 2021), and the 'crisis society' (Amaral et al. 2021). More relevantly still, the past few years have seen a surge in social science examinations of the role of *figurative* or *symbolic* masking—and, indeed, unmasking—in the social and cultural dynamics associated with autism spectrum conditions. These will be explored below.

## Unmasking in the Un-festival

The theme of carnivalesque events as offering to their participants a sense of social inversion is colourfully explored in Bakhtin (1984). Carnival, he posits, offers an image of an altogether different world, as well as of the people inhabiting it and their social relations. Yet paradoxically, this alternative, nonofficial and extra-political imaginary is at the same time just as official, and equally sacred, as the actual world which it stands to temporarily replace. That is, where and while it occurs, carnival encompasses everything and everyone. Life itself is thus subjected to its strange laws of freedom, familiarity, and equality, which (according to Bakhtin), are surprisingly consistent; universal, even. Role reversal is key: in carnival, clowns are kings, kings are dethroned and mocked. Truth and authority morph into dummies which a cheerful crowd might literally tear to pieces. '...one might say', he claims, 'that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.' This suspension of social



strata, and the emphasis on the very ambivalence of being, afford a style of communication which in everyday life is impossible.

Bakhtin's ideas of carnival and the carnivalesque have set off a rich and prolonged debate among scholars, establishing carnival as an analytical concept of a potentially universal relevance or applicability; a concept which transcends a historical analysis of a particular genre of transgressive social dynamic; one that points to the binary extremism inherent in all forms of structural classification. Yet an important expansion and further clarification of carnival as a heuristic is offered by Stallybrass and White (1986), who, building upon Bakhtin's study, work to identify and overcome some of its analytical limitations. Primarily, Stallybrass and White argue that to ask whether carnival, as proposed by Bakhtin, is intrinsically radical or intrinsically conservative falsely essentializes the social dynamic of the carnival, whereby the transgressive properties of the event are entirely historically and culturally contingent. Thus, only in situations where political antagonism is already in existence, Stallybrass and White argue, carnival may then 'act as a catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle.' (1986:14) As noted, political antagonism (namely a rejection of hegemonic values and expectations) is an essential characteristic of the neurodiversity movement.

Stallybrass and White further note an important blind spot in Bakhtin's somewhat utopian view of carnival, which does not acknowledge its innate inability to practically do away with dominant social structures. Sexton is similarly aware that the symbolic inversion offered by the festival is a very predefined and structured inversion, which does not in fact negate social order, but reinforces it. 'The commonly shared values of the everyday are not overturned, and are in most instances confirmed, given the sanctions that are levelled against over intoxicated Mardi Gras and those whose conduct exceeds the expected play associated with the run' (2001: 37). The play at Mardi Gras, in other words, is policed by a set of rules, which are ultimately consistent with—if certainly more flexible than—those governing normal everyday social structures. This is in keeping with Handelman's potent observation that 'far from upending order in consequential ways, inversion revalidates and reinforces order' (1997: 396). Yet whether festival as a technology of symbolic inversion breaks with social order or instead reinforces it, it undoubtedly maintains a complex relationship with prevalent structures of power, and is therefore indexical of them; and it is this indexicality that I wish to now foreground and illuminate.

Autscape articulates in practice attempts to redefine the meanings attributed to the category of autism, by collectively producing a vision of the condition as legitimate and desirable. Among other techniques, this is done by undermining what are taken to be central tenets of neuro-normative society, and redefining notions of what is proper and valuable. These attempts at a redefinition are exemplified, among other instances, by the use of initiation badge system. The notion of a 'work of culture' (Obeyesekere 1990) is useful in allowing us to appreciate the creative use of commonly accepted sets of meanings and symbols as means of articulating, and thereby relieving painful individual affects. The coloured badges thus serve a purpose that is not only symbolic but concrete, while also highlighting the authority with which agreed-upon symbols might inform relationships and embodied

practices (Chapin 2008). The strict regulation and the elaborate plan for a social environment that would be hospitable and accommodating serve as a blueprint for a differently structured society. Through this innovative design, normal society is temporarily deconstructed, the problems of its social and structural mechanisms are brought to the fore, and its disabling components are made apparent. The celebratory invitation to participants to 'be themselves', and 'unmask' is thus less an invitation to expose some authentic inner self, but rather to consider themselves in light of a different physical and sensorial architecture, a new set of values, and a revised mechanism of social interaction.

Moreover, while the carnival, as in Turner (1987: 77), for example, is said to be implicitly reflexive (and therefore lends itself to musings over the values and dynamics of the society that has produced it); the un-festival (or un-carnival), I propose, is *explicitly* reflexive, as it overtly considers (deconstructs and inverts), as an integral part of the event's own agenda and associated practices, those values and dynamics. Crucially, this explicitness is achieved through an extensive redesign not only of normal structure and social role, but also of the rules of conduct, etiquette, and expectations that work to police the emerging social dynamics. Insofar, then, as masking in the festival represents a symbolic inversion of social order, unmasking in the un-festival might be understood not as its negation, but as the inversion's further inversion. A useful way to relay my meaning here is by drawing on Turner's (1987: 77) suggestion as to the role of the mask in carnival:

The masks, disguises, and other fictions of some kind of play are devices to make visible what has been hidden, even unconscious ... to invert the everyday order in such a way that it is the unconscious and primary processes that are visible, while the conscious ego is restricted to creating rules to keep the insurgence within bounds, to frame them or channel them, so to speak.

According to Turner, festival, and especially when masking and role playing constitute some of its components, represents a creative anti-structure; an alternative imaginary of social hierarchy. While one could question Turner's assumption that the reflexivity afforded through such inversion is necessarily implicit (as reflexivity, it could be argued, must incorporate at least some degree of explicitness), it manages, through masking, disguising and the loosening of typical norms, to produce a model of society that could not otherwise have occurred, not even imagined. This I understand to be the basis for Turner's notion of the festival as a realisation of some hidden 'collective unconscious'. Yet while the festival often affords participants an opportunity to perform roles other than those to which they are typically assigned, Turner emphasises the importance of *rules* as nevertheless essential in keeping the produced 'sweet disorder' within predetermined boundaries. This is in keeping with Bakhtin's (1984) observation that while Carnival does encourage a certain liberation for human consciousness, any kind of nihilism is by no means implied. In the same way that a riverbed and riverbanks are necessary for water to flow and become a river, he explains, so are rules necessary for festival goers to achieve *communitas*, otherwise imagined as 'shared flow', the sensation of acting in total involvement with others.

To turn this assertion on its head would not therefore lead us to claim that unmasking in Autscope means making visible what was once hidden. Rather, to unmask in the context of Autscope is to bring to the visible social forefront conscious yet otherwise unattainable imaginaries of an alternative social structure. The rules of Autscope, moreover, are not merely means of policing the play and keeping disorder within bounds; rather, they are an integral part of the play itself. The anti-structure that Autscope produces thus has less to do with status and hierarchy—those components of social structure typically highlighted by Turner—and more to do with rules themselves: customs, norms, conventions, etiquette. To unmask, in other words, in Autscope, is precisely to play with those rules, as exemplified perfectly through the system of coloured badges and shapes. It is to explicitly negotiate the very system of rules that produces the social alignments associated with neurotypical hegemony, and to pose a potentially sustainable alternative. Hence a 'double inversion': not only the designing of a temporary anti-structure; but the taking of the additional step of adjusting and reshaping the very framework of any structure (the river's very bed and banks, as it were); namely the rules that make it possible. It is this subtle double inversion, I suggest, that affords the shift of participants' accountability in a significant way; from being geared, as a form of light protest, towards what they perceive as neurotypical hegemony, to being directed towards their own autistic community, as a blueprint for a sustainable platform for alternative sociality.

Upon the event's culmination, however, conventional social order is indeed restored, and the disability masquerade inevitably commences. Yet while participants remain doubtful as to the actual effect of this event on neurotypical society, they do express a desire that this collective project of self-fashioning—and the technologies of the self (Foucault 1988) it has informed—will have some longstanding effects; that this conference will be transformative in a broader sense than through individual empowerment. That once a space has been designed for autistic people that considers their specific needs, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities, autism may then finally cease to be interpreted through a neuro-normative prism and freed to be understood in autistic people's own terms. So it was, that during one of the home groups I had asked participants if they felt Autscope had any effect on the world outside it. The person who had previously spoke about feeling he could remove his NT mask at Autscope, now reflected that perhaps he could finally feel a bit more comfortable being himself, even after returning home; now that he knew that such an experience of safety and belonging was even possible. 'So you can keep the mask off?' I asked optimistically. 'Well...', he hesitated. My interlocutor was not entirely convinced of the permanency of his and his peers' project of inversion. With the following response, he conveyed a partly hopeful imaginary of a future in which the current social architecture, and the masquerade that it compels, still stands firm, but a social environment in which one, at least to an extent, can nevertheless assess one's worth in light of an altered set of values, already made explicit. 'Well... Maybe,' was his reply, 'I can at least wear a smaller mask'.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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