VICTORIA GRAY IN CONVERSATION WITH LOUISA MARTIN

KEYWORDS

autism, autistic, Sola System, people, world, perceptual, speak, idea, normal, sense, terms, self, question, meaning, journey, research, reproducing, experience, differences, process, thoughts

Louisa Martin is an artist working with immersive installations, sound, sculpture, live performances, text and videos. She explores sensorial, affective and sub-linguistic modes of communication to speak to embodied realities that don't fit in existing representational systems.

In this conversation we discuss The SOLA System, created by Louisa, which is a system of self-returning for late identified autistic creatives, the "limits of normal" and techniques by which bodies that resist static and dominant forms of representation, can evolve their own means of self-definition.

Content Warning: This conversation includes discussion about Hans Asperger, the classification of autism in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the origins of autism in Nazi Vienna, and eugenicist practices.

VICTORIA GRAY: Louisa, I'd like to start by setting the scene a little bit, in terms of how we come to know each other. And as I recall, we have Charlotte Morgan, the then curator of Bloc Projects in Sheffield, to thank for our introduction. And that was actually in 2014. So we both had exhibitions of our respective video work there at Bloc. And when I think back, what I find really fascinating is that, through seeing our work in parallel, Charlotte had identified a shared sensibility in our approach to making work, which is more than just aesthetic, and which I would say has everything to do with the fact that we are both autistic.

Of course in 2014 I hadn't received my diagnosis. It wasn't until 2017 that I was actually diagnosed. But that said, it was, I think, through seeing your work and seeing how it resonated with aspects of my experience, especially in terms of the sensory, that I'd come to consider that my sense of difference - which until that point had just been really elusive and really troubling for me - might in fact mean that I was autistic, too. So you've really been part of that journey before, during, and also after my diagnosis. So I wondered if we could briefly talk about your own journey to being diagnosed, to contextualize your work and the start of our conversation today.

LOUISA MARTIN: Yeah. Thank you. So having that show at Bloc Projects, I can't remember if I was diagnosed before or after. I think after, but in the same year. And when I was in Sheffield I’d also been talking to Charlotte about autistic embodiment. So when she put us in touch, and we had a Zoom call, you were sharing about your research interests into somatics, and body-based ways of thinking and being in the world. And it's been really nice to stay in contact and also [see] both of us evolve in that journey.

For me, it was something I came to years before being diagnosed. I was doing workshops in in galleries as an artist with school groups who would visit the galleries, and there was one particular school that was a specialist school for autistic kids and it was a group of 13-14 year old’s. It was as if everything that I'd been trying to articulate was being reflected back by this particular group. And the ease at which they were each empowered to learn in a way that they needed to learn, by the teachers that accompanied them. So some of them would suddenly stop the whole group and get on the floor and be jotting down notes. And the whole group would just stop and wait patiently. And then others would be right up front with me asking loads of questions. And that was a moment in which I saw myself and I saw my 13 year old self reflected back. And so that was really the first time that I took that on as a real possibility. It had been a thought that I'd had like, “oh, maybe I'm a bit autistic.” But this really [was] a moment of, “okay, there's something more here that I need to look into.” And this is years before. So this has been the kind of journey.

But what it also did, as well as giving an extra context to a lot of my own experiences in history, it also gave an extra context to my work. To the desire to articulate a way of being in a body and what it means to have a body. To be in a body and to have a self that I never felt I'd seen anywhere. That I didn't feel fit anywhere. And that motivated me to want to try and articulate it. From as far back as I can remember I was always drawing bodies, but always trying to articulate a kind of interior. And I guess a proprioceptive, or internal sense of grounding that our body afforded. But also this kind of immersive, energetic and sensorial way of thinking. A way of sensing and way of making sense. The whole realization kickstarted a kind of more critical inquiry into well, “what does it mean to be autistic?” “What is autism?” “Why is it seen as a disorder?” And “How can I, as an artist, speak to all of that, and bring that criticality into my work, while not wanting to reproduce that pathological model?”

I had a lot of friends who have different kinds of marginal identities who were saying, “you don't want to become the autism artist.” “You don't want to pigeonhole yourself.” And it's been a really long question of how to make the idea visible, and how to be visible myself, but on my own terms.

VG: That experience that you described with those workshops and seeing yourself in something else, that witnessing of something else and then seeing yourself, is exactly the experience I was describing when I got to see your work [‘Lighthouse’]. There was something really specific about the interiority of that video. Something somatic and surreal that really articulated something that I'd never been able to articulate, except for in my artwork. There's a curious, almost mercurial quality to some of the differences that I was experiencing, and that leads to the next kind question which is around what you talk about in terms of “the limits of normal.” How we inhabit those limits and are bounded by those limits, I guess. Particularly in relation to neurodiversity and neurotypicality or the predominant neurotype. So in your work, you talk about a false notion of normal that comes from very specific political agendas and histories. You refer to that as the “autism industrial complex.” Could you help us unravel this a bit more, particularly by mapping the political agendas and histories that construct and maintain those limits of normal?

LM: Yeah, definitely. So first, what I find helpful is to distinguish between autism and the people that it's meant to signify, who we might in this conversation call “autistics.” So it has the same root word, but distinguishing between the two allows us to understand the way that we might describe them, the story we have about what those differences are, and what they mean. The current story that is kind of mainstream is autism is the story about a group of people. So in thinking about what's going on, it helps to think about autism as a story, as a construct. A story or a construct that is reproducing certain ideologies. Certain ideas and values that come from very specific historical roots. And the word normal. This is important, because in the DSM, the Disease and Statistics Manual, it's like the Bible or the reference book for psychiatry. And in Europe, there's two others that I think is the ICD, which follows the DSM in terms of how autism is defined and described. So in the DSM, if you look at the definition of autism, a lot of it is defined through abnormality. And it's defined without ever describing what normal is. So what is normal? Well, normal comes from statistics and mathematics. And so in that sense, it simply is kind of a graph, it's a graphical representation of a certain probability of how things are distributed.

So for example, it's one that can be applied to human traits. So if you think about weight, or height, or hair color, and so on, those human traits, if you were to plot them onto a graph, it would create this kind of bell curve shape, where you have a majority in the middle going up, a kind of a pile in the middle, but then on the edges, you have the less common tendencies or traits. And so that is a kind of mathematical diagram or representation of normal as a completely neutral statement. And so when it comes to psychiatry, and specifically defining autism, there is this idea of abnormal. And so what it's doing is it's drawing lines on the edges of that graph of normal, on that bell curve, and making these cutoff points.

So beyond that cutoff point, where the little tail is on each end, is abnormal. And, yeah, my position is that those lines, where they get drawn, reflects particular values. It’s not some kind of natural truth or, you know, reality that you can be really sure about. That is imposed by people, by certain people who have decided that beyond that cutoff point is abnormal. And the issue with that is that when you are making that kind of judgment, which is what it is, it's a judgment of “this is a type of way of being that is undesirable, or that is not fully human.” Because it's abnormal, normal becomes human and abnormal becomes not quite human, or a human but something went wrong. And it's an issue because the majority of autistic people don't want to be cured, don't want to be changed, and don't see themselves as abnormal. But rather, as being disabled by the world that we live in that is catered to that majority.

It's an issue because of what that perspective justifies. So when you decide that there are certain ways of being that are abnormal, that are undesirable, when you pathologize them, when you make them a disorder, then you end up with, for example, a really specific agenda and a justification for where resources go. And you can see it reflected in, for example, where autism research money goes.

So the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee in the US gathered data in 2016, showing where that autism research spending was going. And only 2% of it is going on lifespan issues, and only 5% is going on services. So effectively, only 7% of that funding is going towards actually improving the quality of life of autistic people. And the rest of it is going towards research into biology. So looking at genetics, looking at the brain, or treatments. And just to be clear, it's not possible to treat. Autism is not a thing that happened to a “normal” person. You can't treat it, or try and conform the individual to look more normal, look more like the majority population. And there's funding going to interventions. This idea that this is a developmental issue that needs to be intervened with in order to conform the person to fit within social structures that we're in. And also things like surveillance and technology, which I'll sidestep today. But essentially, what's going on is that when you make that cutoff line, suddenly there's an agenda which is trying to normalize those that fall out of that. You'll be on that line, and that line is arbitrary.

So where does it come from? Well, it comes from the very roots of autism as a story. So there's always two books that I recommend in this regard. One is ‘Asperger's Children,’ by Edith Schaeffer, which is just incredible. And then another one is ‘War on Autism’ by Anne Maguire. Edith Schaeffer, in ‘Asperger’s Children,’ did this incredible amount of research into specifically Hans Asperger’s involvement in the Nazi regime, and the killing of children who didn't fit the Nazi supremacist ideals. It also reveals how much this notion of autism was invented by that context in which psychiatrists were promoted and rewarded for coming up with ways of naming and delineating and separating out and making wrong those people that didn't fit this kind of Nazi Aryan ideals. So it comes straight out of eugenics. And it's my position that those eugenicist beginnings are carried through and reproduced by the notion of autism.

VG: There so much there to think about, particularly because both of us have a diagnosis of autism. And because that word is so loaded with its histories, its context, and what it comes out of, we're kind of carrying that. So when we talk about the word "label," it implies something that you stick on the outside of you that exists externally, which often is the case with say a diagnostic assessment. But when we're talking about something more embodied, something more cellular that you can't extract, and when we're thinking about cure or intervention, it's as if you could extract the autistic part of somebody in order to normalize them or to maintain those kinds of agendas. I don't know about you, but my diagnosis was Highly Functioning Autism, which of course is contentious, i.e., the idea of the high and low functioning. But [my diagnosis] would have been Asperger's Syndrome. And so we are bearing all of those names and those histories as well as, interestingly, a very low level of understanding in society about autism. So it's a very, very complicated diagnosis, and it's very complicated when I find myself conflicted, even when I come to use the term autism.

LM: I think if we think about ourselves in terms of diagnosis, then yeah, we are reproducing that pathological model and not contesting it. And so this is why I generally don't talk in terms of diagnosis for myself. I think we also have to look at how this plays out now. So okay, it had these huge eugenicist beginnings. How is that working now? Like, is it still eugenicist? Obviously the research shows that it is, but also there is now - according to market research, future.com - a nearly 7 billion US dollar global autism disorder and treatment market. And that mostly consists of behavioral therapies. And so this is the only available way to self-recognize and be visible, but it's visible within these terms. It's visible in ways that don't disrupt the idea of what normal is. So essentially, it's an ideological construct that is not only maintaining this kind of eugenicist idea of the body, but it's also maintaining an ableist and supremacist idea of normal. Of what a correct human being is. One that's independent, one that's productive, one that fits within the systems. You know, school and work and all of those social structures.

And there's attempts to try to find another way of being visible, and that would be the neurodiversity movement, for example. [But] I think it's important to also notice how the word “neuro” is being co-opted in a way to try and have authority. So we are taking terms from neuroscience as a way to say, “look, we are different in an interior way, and that this is a valid way of being.” And yet, as I learned when I spent a year with Manos Tsakiris who's an embodiment neuroscientists at Royal Holloway University, he explained there is no such thing as a neuro type. And so, even in trying to contest this idea of autism being a disorder or something that went wrong, [something] that happened to a person that would otherwise be correct, we're still trying to use those same tools. And we're still trying to be visible within a society that is having their embodied reality constantly affirmed. And we're trying to do that in their terms, or in their eyes. And I think the solution is actually to center how we sense ourselves, rather than keep trying to see ourselves from outside and make sense within the external gaze. Yeah, I can't remember what your question was . . . !

VG: Well, we started at the limits of normal, and I had actually framed that in relation to an idea of neurodiversity, or neurotypicality, or the predominant neuro type. And so it's really interesting that you brought in that question again, around not only the term autism, but questioning the idea of neuro types as these are terms that we use, and that we don't necessarily question. And I think it’s really important to do that in the way that you're doing it. Sensitively.

I really liked what you said towards the end about defining ourselves from something that's coming from outside. Again, this idea of labeling. And one of the things I’d like to do is not shy away from some of the conceptual frameworks that you're using in your work, because that gives me joy! I'm really drawn to some of the philosophical ideas around, not necessarily autism per se, but what you talk about in terms of ‘perceptual capacity,’ and how that relates to differences in sensory processing.

So I'm really interested to talk a bit about things that come up in your edited book, ‘Lossy Ecology,’ – particularly ‘perceptual load theory,’ and ‘larger perceptual capacity’ - in relation to autistic people. Could you just unpack this a little bit for us, just to understand that more?

LM: Yes, so if we just go beneath those kind of externally assigned ideas and roles, then what are these tendencies? What are these differences? And how can I, how can we, get to self-clarity? How can we see ourselves within our own cognition and within our own bodies? And also from a kind of philosophical standpoint of the idea that how we create meaning, how we structure and organize everything, our experience, our material world, our thoughts, our knowledge, we can think of those as technologies or ‘technologies of self.’ And obviously, that's coming from Michel Foucault. This idea of technologies or techniques or structures that enable, that support, that make sense, that allow for what is within to be extended outwardly. To be enabled. The idea of extending the self has felt really productive.

So there is an idea from cognitive neuroscience and embodied cognition which is that we are not a brain in a body. Our bodies are not vehicles for our brains, but rather, the way that we make sense of and understand the world is through being in the world. But also, the way that we have agency [depends on] how much our interior processes can be extended outside of ourselves. So all of that to say that, I like this idea of technology as anything which is structuring and creating meaning and agency. Be it a pen and paper, or a computer or be it a thought, or some kind of sensation. And yeah, the idea that if we perceive, if we think differently, if we're in a body differently, we necessarily need different forms of knowledge that might be structured completely differently.

And so part of the research that I did for ‘Lossy Ecology’ was to spend the year with autism researchers at University College London at CRAE, Centre for Research in Autism and Education. I spent time understanding what their research into perception, and the work of Anna Remington, who is the director of CRAE now, into perceptual capacity. Essentially I really loved it because it spoke so much to the sensory and to the internal experience of what we're speaking about, rather than behavior, and rather than what can be perceived from the outside. It's drawing on some early work by Nilli Lavie which had nothing to do with autism or anything, but was more to do with concentration. The theory from Nilli Lavie is called ‘perceptual load theory,’ and it's the idea that we only have a limited amount that we can take in and absorb and process at any given moment. And beyond that point, there's a kind of adjusting that happens or a kind of summarizing, or some of the details drop out. And it's something that can be really easily measured through what you do and don't notice when you're on a particular task. So for Nilli Lavie, it was like, here is a task where you have to find certain things within a field of vision. And it would be about how many extra other things you might take in, or at what point do you stop noticing the details, and it suddenly becomes groups of things.

Anna Remington thought, and I'm going to summarize this in a really clunky way - but then there's an interview in the book, and we're going to do a podcast as well together soon – but what her research was about is, how she suspected that there's a larger perceptual capacity in autistic individuals, so that we are processing and taking more in. And that would make sense of why we're better at visual search. We've been known to be better at that or having perfect pitch and things like this. So in any given moment, we are processing more perceptual detail. So not the details that we might normally think of in terms of someone that is good at attention to detail. But rather, the amount of sensory and experiential detail is larger. And this has implications for how you present information, how you design spaces, how you design learning, and so on.

I love this. And I could also see how much this made sense of what I was trying to articulate in my work. So what I now do in my work is use this idea of having a larger perceptual capacity to speak to the “extra,” to the ways that autistic people often report hearing noises that other people don't hear, or being overwhelmed in certain contexts where other people are fine. But also that this leads to needing different cognitive structures. So, different structures in the way that we make sense of what we're experiencing. And so my proposition is that rather than simply “chunking” at a later stage of perception – and by “chunking” I mean that [I perceive that] thing over there as a chair, rather than absorbing all of the additional sensory details that maybe come first - my proposal is that instead of chunking, that we actually are sensitive to the relationship *between* perceptual details.

So this is a lot of clunky scientific, big words, but essentially, we are sensitive to energy and to emergence. So if you think of a flock of starlings, is it starlings that make those kind of formation shapes in the sky? Or a school of fish that are all like in tune with each other? Those are examples of emergence. So a pattern, or a system, or a field of vision, or field of hearing in which the sense is you can understand things in how those details relate to each other.

So an example of this is hearing the kind of vocal intonation of a voice and that being where meaning is, where meaning is carried more easily than hearing the words and what they represent. So if you think of words as representing chunks of world, to some of us that is less easy to kind of hook into and make sense of in process. [Instead] it’s the energy in someone's voice or the energy in someone. Just their energy. It has all kinds of implications for how we might think about knowledge, think about communication, and also think about autistic-labeled difference, because this will obviously play out in how you move, how you process, what helps you think, and what doesn't help you think. What sensory environments contain patterns and emergence or make sense as a whole where the parts are speaking to each other? Certain environments are not full of patterns and are not speaking to each other, but are very clunky and very separate, and therefore harder to process. Let me know if that makes sense!

VG: Yeah. Yeah. No, it does make sense. As much as it needs to make sense, because actually, what we're talking about is actually something quite complicated, quite nebulous, particularly when we are using language to do that, which isn't always the best or easiest way of getting that across. Which interestingly, perhaps, is why you and I have both been drawn to making artwork, because there is an ability in that to focus on those nuances of detail that aren't necessarily about looking at where someone's missed out a coma, or, or whatever. It is really about the nuance of energy.

And it makes me think about the autism assessment. I remember one of the questions was around being able to follow a narrative in a film, and that is something that I had always struggled with. And also remembering people's names. I could remember a shape, a quality, a color, a gesture, something tonal, rather than their name or even what they had said. And that was somehow the way that I had made meaning and understood that as a form of knowledge, I guess. Earlier on I talked about some of these differences that I had experienced being troubling. It was precisely this inability to explain that to other people. And I think that frustration can be very, very damaging, but also very, very productive if we're channeling that through a more creative mode.

I also loved what you said about technology. I was thinking about stimming and if it's a technology that enables one to express or make meaning, or produce different forms of knowledge. I'm stimming now. I'm swaying from side to side, it's enabling me to process all of these new ideas, concepts, some words, and so on. That for me is definitely a technology. So when I use my somatic practice, it's a technology that enables me to inhabit that world of meaning and knowledge differently to how I might when I go into the world “out there.”

LM: I love that, exactly. If the sensory is where meaning is created, then it makes sense of why echolalia or repeating phrases is not nonsensical, it's actually a way of understanding, and reproducing, and recalling, and returning to certain experiences and thoughts. And it's the same with movement, it's the same with stimming.

Actually, I don't use the word “stimming,” it's another word I contest because it comes from the clinical “self-stimulatory behavior.” I think it speaks to so much more than self-stimulation. First of all, if that extra capacity can be filled up with something intentional, that grounds us. But also this meaning can be returned to. And it’s also how a sense of safety can be created, where, if the environment is changing, and you have an additional sensitivity or additional perception, then the level of change that you experience is going to be greater. So what that movement aids is not only a kind of making sense, but it reinserts your own physicality into what you're perceiving, so that you aren't disappearing. And I think disappearing was something that used to happen to me, because so much of what I was taking in I couldn't process at the pace that I needed to. And I would disappear into it. I would be absorbed into it. So it afford so much more than what I think the word stimming says. But, I also appreciate how much visibly stimming or using that can be a form of activism, or a form of resistance.

VG: Thank you for questioning the word stimming. I think it's important to question the language. I don't find it contrary, or combative. I actually think it's really productive, because we take for granted so much that's handed down through the process of the diagnostic assessment. And I do often think, well, what would the word for that be for me, or for you, or for each of us? And I think what I'm also sensing is that there's this irony. Often I've been described as over sensitive, too sensitive, as if I can't take in information, like I have a limited capacity for information. When actually, it's precisely the opposite. It's that I am already wide open. In some ways, and I have found that quite difficult to get across. I'm finding, in your descriptions of perceptual capacity, that very disjoint between the perception of autistic people as having a limited capacity, when perhaps it's actually the opposite.

LM: Yeah. And it simply requires different ways of being in a body, but also different ways of learning. So if things make sense through being able to perceive the relationship between the parts, this kind of systems thinking or energetic sensitivity, then it makes sense that we need to go into things in a deep way. And in a singular way, one at a time. So there's strength there. There's depth of insight. There's things that we are perceiving or connections that we make, or forms of intelligence that are not available to the majority. But because their reality is constantly being affirmed, their models, their ways of making sense, it's much harder for them to see outside of that and see that something else might be possible, and to admit their lack of understanding. It's being projected onto [autistic] people, making them an enigma, making them miss a puzzle piece, or making them wrong. Ableism plays into this and the idea that we are supposed to be independent and that interdependence is bad. Actually all humans are in interdependent, it's just that some forms of interdependency are widely available and widely resourced and therefore normalized and other forms stigmatized.

VG: It would be really nice, then, to think about your sensory experience, because I think for me, one of the important things, or one of the things that we could do, both in our artworks and also in the world, is to externalize that more, or express that more. You've mentioned already, maybe some autistic people have processing qualities like visual acuity. You mentioned a kind of high definition vision or auditory acuity in terms of volume or frequency and pitch. I want to sort of lean on the joyful aspects of these things, but I also experience that that kind of intensity can come with a slightly more negative experience. I think that there are difficulties there for me, and I think that needs to be said, too, to balance it out. So I wonder if it might be the case for you?

LM: I think for me, it's really helpful to not to think of it as good or bad. And to see these experiences as neutral. For me, it's visual sensitivity. And I think also, auditory, but visual is where I hang out. And so I'm always trying to make sense of everything through the visual. And it's helped me to think that, okay, sometimes there might be another way in. Or if I'm planning or goal setting, not to do it visually, because then I'm always looking for reproducing that visual in my experiences, and there's a disconnect.

I think there's two types of negative. One is simply that I haven't got to know that experience yet. And so it's an affront to deal with, to have something that I haven't yet had time to process. So this might be a new environment. For me it's mainly a new environment. And then there's other types of sensory experiences which simply are hard to make sense of. So that might be like a shopping center, where there's a lot of conflicting parts that don't speak to each other, and that are also intense, and so require time and attention to process. For me it's really been about structuring and reorganizing my life around what feels good and what doesn't, and avoiding what doesn't. Or to allow it the time it needs for me to process it. So for example, I won't get on public transport more than one day a week, if possible. And yeah, about reducing the number of relationships, reducing the number of projects, but then really going deep into those.

VG: That’s really nice because that can take us into the ‘Sola System,’ which we can talk about in more detail. So you've developed the ‘Sola System,’ and I'd like to read a little bit from your description because I think it's really, really beautiful. And I think it draws together all of the learning that you've shared with us. So the Sola System is:

“a laboratory, a step-by-step, orbit-by-orbit framework, that uses of the planetary solar system as a metaphor for the process of becoming. It's specific to late diagnosed autistic experiences, and it's a non-pathological, cosmic themed, disability justice informed, science based reframe of our differences.”

Wow. So I think you've already said a little bit to help us understand why you might have been drawn to developing this model. What I'm interested in, I guess, is whether you see this as a departure from making art “proper” in the sense of making videos and installations. Or actually, do you see this as a continuation. I really love the idea that the Sola System is an artwork. I think that's really wonderful. So yeah, this is an invitation to say something more about your Sola System, but especially in the sense of it being part of your creative output.

LM: Thank you. So this was really about trying to condense my own journey in thinking about unmasking, and coming to self-clarity. Recognizing, first of all, that those are systemic issues, and not a case of just simply taking off the mask. And yet, there are also things that we can do in our relationship to ourselves. And so this is really about thinking about self as not fixed, and self as not separate and distinct. But self as always evolving and always unfolding in unison with everything else in the universe.

And so the Sola System offers a kind of diagrammatic way of organizing my own journey and the fruits of that into a system. A system of selfhood, a way of thinking about this process of becoming more of who you are, in lieu of the fact that this is a question. This is a liberating thing, this is a collective thing as much as it is an individual journey. And so it's really about how to be autistic when autism is based on outdated paradigms. And that no amount of research accounts for the things that you can do in practice, to heal and repair that relationship that you have with yourself, your thoughts, and the new actions that you might take to undo this kind of habitual self-negation.

But also that those create more room for others who need to do the same, and who want to do the same. It is an extension of my work. I see it as the product of everything else I've done. But it's also rethinking my relationship to the gallery and institutions and how, in making art, I had been in a way making art that makes sense within those contexts. And those contexts, not necessarily being that accessible. So not being able to speak to these things without then re-performing the same paradigms I was trying to question. And so really wanting to hone in on the people who can make the most use of this. And doing the thing that most artists don't do, hone in and speak to one particular type of audience member.

In the Sola System, there's three kinds of themes, and then within each theme, there are three planets. So there's nine planets altogether, not eight, nine! The first theme is Self-Definition. So I call this ‘The Tunnel of un-.’ And it's really about how self-becoming is a process of unlearning who you are not. And that that is an uncomfortable journey into an unknown. We don't know, you have to let go of who you think you are in order to find out. You have to let go of received knowledge in order to go deeper into your own experience. And for that to then emerge in your own decision making. It's also nodding to the fact that this discomfort is about confronting that cognitive dissonance of, “well, I think these things about myself, but then I seem to be acting in ways that just conform and mask and hide who I am.” So it's really acknowledging the courage that is required to confront that cognitive dissonance and to choose yourself over being liked, over being approved, over being understood, recognized, affirmed, and to affirm yourself. To belong to yourself.

And then the next theme is Self-Connection. And that's really about how self-clarity doesn't come from self-knowledge, it comes from self-connection. And this is not thinking about the self, but connecting to the self. And this is the kind of core concept of the Sola System. At the center is the sun, and the solar source of energy is your energetic lifeforce. And that is carrying the kind of coding or frequencies that you are here to emit, and to manifest or to realize. And so how do you do that in practice? How do you self-connect? Part of that is about self-belief. It's about questioning your thoughts, and recognizing where your thoughts are coming from, and sending them back to the people, the institutions, and the systems that mis-taught you who you're supposed to be. And then in choosing more empowering thoughts you're coming to understand your strengths.

And then finally, the last theme is Self Organisation. And that's really about this idea of technology and structures, and how you can reorganize your day-to-day life in your world. How can we do that on a collective level, in ways that support that self-connection, that do the opposite of that kind of alienation? These systems that don't fit us. So we exist, you exist, I exist, that is the proof that we are valid. That’s the only thing that we need to know. And beyond that, it's then recognizing that this world is infinite. And so a different invitation is to make who we are more possible, to develop ways of being - technology, structures - that open up these whole worlds and allow for a lossy ecology of perceptual realities, of differences, and different ways of being in a body.

So to bring it back to autistic joy, it’s my personal belief that joy comes from growth, from that stretch. The way plants reach towards the sun, they open up to the sun, to that solar center, but they also do that in opposition to gravity, to habit, and all of those things. So undoing the habitual normalizing of self-negation, and growing into our potential is what I would define as autistic joy.

VG: In the sense of the Sola System, what was lovely is how you decided to limit the amount of times you get onto public transport. So on a very pragmatic level, [growth] could be something like that. But there is also something, not necessarily deeper, but in the sense of this self-connection I'm thinking about. For myself, it's telling me something if I decide to turn away from something. If I'm repelled by something or something is difficult, then I need to lean into that a little bit to find out more about what that is. And then design my life differently in order to be able to be more in the joyful aspects of being autistic.

And so I found it really helpful to think with and through the Sola System and to find the possibility for a sensory oriented selfhood, which is really appealing. And like you, for me, autistic joy would be that sense of being fully embodied, fully embraced, fully seen. Being able to fully live out without masking, without medication, and without the need for meltdown, because in my experience it’s so exhausting. So I guess, to simply be unapologetically autistic, without needing to evidence that neurologically or to say that you have this diagnostic assessment, and so on.

There’s so much that you've encapsulated in the Sola System. And as I've said, it is so helpful to hear other people articulate it in their own way, because you can borrow some of that language and repurpose it appropriately in order to explain that for yourself.

LM: Absolutely. Also, there's been recent studies that show that we [autistic-labelled peers] have cognitive empathy, so we understand each other to a greater degree. So the empathy gap is not something innate to us, but rather, it's mutual. It's that certain people have certain tendencies and certain people have other tendencies, and we need to mutually bridge that gap. This means that we can afford each other that sense of embracing. You know, this isn't just an individualistic thing that we do within ourselves. It’s systemic, and it's societal. And so that's also why I created Sola Siblings. [Sola Siblings] is the container for people to move through the Sola System in community. It’s like a sanctuary. It’s separate from having all the pressures of being in the world that isn't designed for them. Yeah, it's a community and it's a container in which people can join and then kind of be guided through the Sola System, and cut out all of the unnecessary rabbit holes of research that are often part of that post-diagnostic journey. And then really focus on what is joyful, and what barriers are in the way that we can begin to solve?

VG: This is exactly the reason for wanting to have these conversations, which are hopefully not interviews necessarily, but more like live peer support or live demonstrations of what it sounds like to hear two bodies who feel similarly in the world speak, and try and grapple with language, and explain difficult concepts. Maybe allowing ourselves to talk into existence these bodies, these worlds, these new languages. And it's a very difficult thing to do, especially publicly. I think you've really helped me, as an example, to think I could produce something which can actually be put out there in the world. My habits have also been around disappearance, retreat, extracting myself from the world. So thank you for the conversation. Thank you for sharing everything today on the Sola System, Sola Siblings, and thank you for the autistic joy.

LM: Thank you so much. It's really an honor to be part of your project, and to get to do this with you because of our history and our friendship. So thank you so much.

LINKS

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