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# An Arts-Based Inquiry into Autistic Meltdown

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## Abstract

This arts-based inquiry aims to evoke empathy and understanding of autistic meltdown by exploring representations in various artistic modalities of my personal meltdown experiences. I also reflect on the process by which three creative arts therapists created artistic responses to my multimedia video about meltdown. I chose to explore this topic through artistic expression because meltdown is an intense sensory and emotional experience that is hard to capture in everyday language but may be more expressible through artistic modalities. An arts-based inquiry into autistic meltdowns is meaningful because the experience has rarely been studied from the perspective of an autistic adult, even though meltdowns are a significant part of autistic experience. Meltdowns are misunderstood and pathologized by non-autistic individuals, who are referred to as allistic individuals within the autistic community. In addition, therapists often treat meltdowns as behaviors to be punished or eliminated. The reflections by the allistic creative arts therapists, however, show that the meltdown video created empathy and increased understanding and a desire to create a soothing space in which to keep the autistic person safe and protect their privacy during their meltdown.

**Keywords:** arts-based inquiry; autistic meltdown; creative arts therapies

## An Arts-Based Inquiry into Autistic Meltdown

In this arts-based inquiry, I draw on my personal artistic responses to autistic meltdowns to illuminate an experience that is often misunderstood and pathologized. I also reflect on art created by one dance/movement and two art therapists in response to the multimedia video I created about the experience (Figure 4). I chose to explore this topic through artistic expression because the experience of autistic meltdown is hard to describe in ordinary language. Arts-based researchers suggest that this type of beyond-words

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experience may be more expressible through artistic modalities (Macdonald et al., 2021; Scotti & Gerber, 2017).

Meltdowns are autonomic responses to sensory or emotional overload, which is common in autistic individuals because of the way that autistic brains process sensory information (ASAN, 2021; Lewis & Stevens, 2023; Milner et al., 2019). I hope to increase empathy for and understanding of autistic meltdowns by sharing my attempts to express the experience through different artistic modalities and by illustrating how allistic creative arts therapists responded to a multimedia attempt. I will begin by defining terms, providing contexts, and describing several of my artistic expressions of the experience. Finally, I will discuss the artistic responses created by allistic, or non-autistic, creative arts therapists.

## **My Positionality**

I am a white, late adult-diagnosed genderqueer autistic living in the U.S. Many people of my generation (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015), especially people assigned female at birth, were not diagnosed as children (Beggiato et al., 2017; Leedham et al., 2020). Diagnosis in adulthood means decades lived without any supports or understanding (Harmens et al., 2022; Milner et al., 2019). Getting my diagnosis helped me make sense of my life, but it also evoked a sense of loss as I wondered how my life might have been different and perhaps easier if I had been diagnosed earlier. These multilayered emotional responses are common among late-diagnosed individuals (Leedham et al., 2020; Lupindo et al., 2023). After decades of trying to fit in and not being able to, it is helpful to understand that we are, in fact, different. Our differences are not due to a character flaw (Leedham et al., 2020; Lupindo et al., 2023), but to the differences in how our brains are wired (Baum et al., 2015), which leads to sensory processing differences and increased emotional dysregulation (Dell’Osso et al., 2023).

As an autistic individual, a professional music therapist, and a creative arts therapies researcher, I want to understand, explore, and research how autistic individuals express the uncontrollable out-of-body experience of autistic meltdown and how this might change the way it is perceived by mental health professionals, family members, and the public. Meltdowns are seen as problem behaviors, as signs of lack of self-control, as unprofessional, and as something that adult autistics should have outgrown. Autistic adults recognize that meltdowns in public could have strong repercussions on their professional careers, relationships, and even on their safety from police or bystander violence (Hull et al., 2017; Lewis & Stevens, 2023). They therefore try to mask what they are experiencing by internalizing their meltdowns which is exhausting and often leads to self-injurious behaviors and thoughts or autistic burnout (Lewis & Stevens, 2023; Raymaker et al., 2020). If allistic individuals understood the experience better, it could both reduce the need for autistic masking and help allistics understand how they might support autistic individuals. To understand the experience better, I turn to the arts.

## **Why Use an Arts-Based Research Approach?**

Arts-based research uses arts in all stages of the research process (Eisner, 2008). As many scholars have written, the arts, including visual arts, music, dance/movement, theatre and film, poetry and literature, multimedia, etc., express feelings that are not expressible through the literal use of language (Eisner, 2008; Gouzouasis, 2018; Langer, 1966; McNiff, 2019; Polanyi, 1967). The arts are also inherently sensory and embodied experiences (Eisner, 2008). They are therefore good tools for increasing understanding of the intense sensory and emotional experience of autistic meltdowns, which can be difficult to describe in words. On a personal level, I am drawn to using an arts-based approach because I am a

composer, music therapist, and textile artist, and I think primarily in shapes, colors, and gestures and only secondarily in language.

Arts-based research can lead to dialogue, stimulate new questions (Eisner, 2008), and support new ways of understanding (Chilton & Scotti, 2014). As McNiff (2019) writes, art “can help us access complex issues and problems that are inaccessible to linear logic and language” (p. 164). Because art can hold multiple meanings, it is a way of “raising awareness of complex subtleties that matter” (Eisner, 2008, p. 7). This is important when addressing autistic meltdowns because they are difficult and multilayered experiences both for the one who experiences them and the one who witnesses them.

Arts-based research can increase empathy and insight (Eisner, 2008) by bringing people into an experience outside their direct, lived experience. Creative and action-oriented types of communication and inquiry can reveal more about the nature of misunderstood and pathologized experiences such as autistic meltdowns. Taken a step further, arts-based research can lead to arts activism because it reaches people outside of the academy and can inspire community engagement and action (Frostig, 2011). As people reach new understandings and gain empathy and insight into a misunderstood experience, they may try to change situations and beliefs surrounding that experience (Eisner, 2008; Frostig, 2011; Macdonald et al., 2021). I believe that well-formed arts-based research methods and designs could effectively challenge dominant narratives about autism and autistic meltdowns. Presenting and sharing autistic individuals’ artistic works about their meltdown experiences changes the narrative from one of autistic dysfunction to a narrative of autistic voices as creative, aware, insightful and intelligent. The works created could be disseminated to targeted groups and communities for more immediate impact and ongoing dialogue (Macdonald et al., 2021). Having allistic individuals respond to this art by creating their own response art can help deepen their understanding and empathy (Nathan et al., 2023).

## **What is Autistic Meltdown?**

Autistic meltdown is what happens “when autistic people get overwhelmed by our senses... That can make us lose control of our body” (ASAN, 2021, p. 14). Lewis and Stevens (2023) recently published an article that focuses on autistic adults’ lived experience of meltdowns. They position themselves as having been trained in the medical model of disability, which situates the problem in the individual and focuses on symptom management. More recently these same researchers have been working to reframe their understanding of autism through their exposure to the neurodiversity movement and the social model of dis/ability, which understand neurodiversity as a normal part of human biological variation and situate disability as being created by environments that are designed only for neuronormative and able-bodied people.

## ***Temporary Paralysis, Gender, and Masking***

The specific experiences of autistic women are rarely addressed. Women are often undiagnosed (Beggiato et al., 2017; Harmens et al., 2022; Milner et al., 2019). Some research suggests that women and girls are better at masking, which leads to underdiagnosis (Beggiato et al., 2017; Harmens et al., 2022). They also are more susceptible to sensory challenges, which can be exacerbated by hormonal fluctuations, periods, and menopause, leading to increased meltdowns, either internally or externally expressed (Milner et al., 2019; Moseley et al., 2020). Although I identify as genderqueer, I was raised and socialized as a female and much of my personal experience of autism is reflected in what autistic females have to say (Foster, 2021; Moseley et al., 2020). Because women and girls are socialized to mask their autistic traits to a greater degree, while

autistic individuals share that masking and reducing stimming behaviors leads to increased emotional dysregulation, autistic women are more susceptible to experiences of meltdown (Charlton et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2017; Kapp et al., 2019) and mental health challenges (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

## How to Frame My Creative Expressions of Meltdown

I brought into the field of music therapy my experience as a creative artist and composer and my belief in the power of the arts to express what is beyond words in ways that generate compassion and understanding of the experiences of others. Until recently, I did not understand that art is a way of knowing (Eisner, 2008). I had never encountered the use of the arts as a form of research or as a way to broadly share the results of research. Music is a particularly challenging art form to bring into research practice because it is less translatable into specific ideas than other art forms (Eisner, 2008) and because our culture is more visually oriented and less able to talk about music (Gouzouasis, 2018). I began to question how to combine my multiple identities (Carlton, 2018) as a music therapist, composer, researcher, and autistic person with a particular interest in finding ways to bring music more deeply into arts-based inquiry. It was important for me to be self-reflexive and to write from within my own individual and community experience (Amaral & Tesfaye, 2021; Nabizadeh, 2019).

As I began to explore art as a way of knowing, I came to realize anew how much my sensory experiences are focused on sound. Working in the same room with two art therapists who were creating visual arts collages, I found myself first distracted by and then interested in the sounds of their work, which I recorded and used for a sound collage (click [here](#) to listen). In a later experience, I mirrored and witnessed their physical movements by creating music on the recorder. My musical gestures influenced their movements, and their movements influenced the sounds I made, in a way reflective of Oliveros' (TEDx Talks, 2015) model for Deep Listening. In creating a visual image of a soundscape, I illustrated the way that the sounds of the ventilation system gradually took over my experience until I could no longer distinguish the other sounds that were taking place because of my sensory distress. In group discussions of videos by Monet (2023) and Young (AIC, 2016), I realized that, in contrast to my visual artist classmates, I could no longer process visual information when I became sensorily overwhelmed. Recognizing the ways that my sensory perceptions differed from those of my peers led me to think about how my autism affects my sensory experiences, and I began to wonder how I might bring allistics into my world through artistic expression.

I felt it was important to use these methods to approach the topic of autistic meltdown, because it is an experience that sets autistic people apart and can be a source of shame. Although I had previously attempted to express the sensations of a meltdown in artistic ways, my focus was directed towards trying to help others who experienced these sensations by communicating to them that they were not alone in the experience. I had not imagined how these materials could help allistic individuals understand the experience in a way that might lead them to greater empathy and understanding. I began to imagine ways to reframe some of my earlier work, and create new work, that could bridge this gap in understanding.

## Musical Imagery of Meltdown

As I reviewed my earlier work, I realized that I have tried to express the experience of meltdown in broad gestures in many of my compositions, even in pieces that were written before my autism diagnosis. For example, my orchestra piece, *Kriobolos* (Gumert, 1993;

Figure 1), begins with crashing chords that include every note in the scale because the sound needed to be as intense as possible to express the feeling/sensation/experience of meltdown. I experimented with ways to maximize the intensity of the chords by voicing the chord across as many instruments and as wide a register as possible. It is an all-encompassing chord to express the all-encompassing experience of meltdown. Later in the piece, there is a buildup toward the climax in which all the instruments repeat different melodic patterns that are rhythmically independent of each other, creating layers of diverging lines that converge to create an intense chaotic experience that becomes a cathartic moment from which emerges a resolution. This is a recording of a reading session by The Bay Area Women's Philharmonic.

**Figure 1.** Kriobolos.

**Kriobolos**

Lynn Gumert

The musical score for 'Kriobolos' is written for five parts: Winds, Brass, Xylophone, Percussion, and Strings. The piece begins with a tempo of 60, marked 'Passionately'. The Winds and Brass parts play complex, dissonant chords. The Xylophone part features a melodic line with triplets and trills. The Percussion part includes Bass Drum, hard yarn mallets, Tam Tam, and Tom Toms. The Strings part plays a dense, rhythmic accompaniment. Dynamic markings range from *fff* (fortississimo) to *p* (piano). The score includes various musical notations such as accents, trills, and triplets. The tempo changes to 84, marked 'accel.'. The score is copyrighted by Lynn Gumert in 1993 and 2011.

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Note: This figure illustrates the density of the complex dissonant chords in the first four measures of *Kriobolos*. To listen to a recording, click [here](#).

## Visual Imagery of Meltdown and Shutdown

In the following two images, I tried to capture the feeling of Meltdown and Shutdown in visual art. Figure 2, drawn with brush pens and markers, expresses the feeling of being overwhelmed, with sensory information and emotions attacking me from all sides. My mind is trapped inside, and areas of my body that feel most distraught are darkly scribbled over. Even though I am being attacked, I am also separated from what is going on outside me. Figure 3, which expresses the feeling of shutdown, began as a collage, with strips of red paper woven behind and around the figure, creating a cage. I then took a photograph of the collage and imported it into Photoshop, where I experimented with color saturation effects to increase the intensity of the colors. One of the things I altered was the original color of the back leg, which I changed to match the bars of the cage, to suggest that the leg is thoroughly enmeshed in the cage. Even though the figure is walking, their back leg is trapped so they cannot get anywhere. I notice that both pictures emphasize primary colors, especially reds and blues. I do not know what that signifies in visual art. It does remind me, however, of how my music compositions use strong contrasts between opposing ideas, which I now understand as being about Sensory Overload/Meltdown and Catharsis/Release.

These images also reflect my two primary approaches to working in visual arts modalities. Figure 2 is color- and gesture-driven and process-oriented. I was not thinking about the meaning of the image while I created it but rather was drawing to externalize my emotions and to self-regulate. Figure 3, on the other hand, is driven by patterns, structure, and metaphor. I often use collage to intentionally express an idea or emotion with the intention of communicating it and sharing it with others.

My relationship with visual art is complex because visual imagery is less accessible to me. I often choose to close my eyes and focus on input from my other senses. When I am in sensory overload, I lose my ability to process and understand what I am seeing. At the same time, I enjoy experimenting with colors and patterns and appreciate that art results in an artefact, while music and movement only exist in the moment.

**Figure 2.** Meltdown: Marker Drawing.



**Figure 3.** Shutdown: Paper Collage. (Manipulated in Photoshop)



### **Written Narrative of a Meltdown with Multimedia**

Writing the following text was hard. I felt the words waking up the sensations in my body, and I felt the urge to embody and perform the experience as a multimedia movement piece (Spry, 2011), although I do not know if I could perform the text live because of the

intensity of my emotional responses. I intentionally used techniques like run-on sentences and repeated words or repetitions of closely related words to capture the blurry, rushed, and yet out-of-time feeling of the experience. I used familiar metaphors, such as the feeling of having the flu or drinking too much caffeine, to express the physicality of the bodily experience in a way that would be meaningful to allistic readers. Even though I do not think about facts when I am in meltdown, I included some facts about autism in the text as a further way to emphasize to allistic readers that this is an experience related to my neurotype and not an intentional behavior. I attempted to maintain the experiential nature of the text by making the factual statements short and weaving them into the narrative.

Some portions of the following narrative come from journals and poetry that I wrote before my diagnosis when I could not understand what I was experiencing. Reframing and rewriting it helped me better understand my experience and alleviated my sense of shame. I also wrote it to try to help allistic people understand what the experience is like.

### **Meltdown Narrative**

*Sometimes I know it's coming. I can feel the tension building up; it's that twisty feeling when you have the flu, or you're twitchy from too much caffeine. I don't fit inside my body. Nothing is background, everything is foreground. Now they're saying that's because autistic brains don't prune their synapses. Everything is present all at once. This world is not made for me, I'm always translating and it's exhausting. When you live in a country where they speak a different language you can take a break. When you live in a world made for neurotypicals you never get to rest, you are always on high alert, always trying always trying trying to understand anticipate respond the way you're supposed to. And your own mind is always busy busy busy busy it's like being surrounded by a constant scream: my socks are pushing on my toes and my shirt is twisted and the sound of the heating system is too loud and the color of the light is wrong and the sound of the electricity in the walls and I hope my daughter is okay and did I remember to write that email and what about that thing I did when I was 5 years old that embarrassed me and am I doing the eye contact thing right and the seam in my pants is bothering me and it's too hot and maybe if I could sleep it would be better but I can't sleep because autistic brains are 42% more active at night and if I do fall asleep I wake up already mid-thought and my dreams run seamlessly into my thoughts or maybe they collide and it's too hot and there's a crease in the sheet and the sound of the air is too loud and my breathing doesn't align with my partner's and there's a train going by and I think that's a squirrel on the roof and there was that idea in the book I read and maybe that's what my paper is about and did I remember to write that email and the moon is shining in the window and I'm worried about my daughter and maybe she thinks I text her too much but maybe she thinks I text her too little because I don't care and maybe my classmates don't understand that when I tell stories about myself it's my autistic way of communicating empathy because we do it through sharing stories and when I'm trying to do the eye contact thing sometimes I can't hear anything and maybe if I reread something familiar it will help my brain settle down and I can go to sleep go to sleep go to sleep!*

*And sometimes I feel the vibrations inside, the electric currents are overcharged and I know it has to overflow because it's uncontainable and I try to find a place that I can be alone because I don't want to accidentally hurt anyone and I don't want you to think I'm crazy or that I'm having a temper tantrum or that I'm just not practicing my DBT skills hard enough because it's none of those things, I don't have control over it, it's my brain that is overloaded and overcharged and overextended and just won't quit won't quiet won't quieten and sometimes it's just too much and sometimes I think if I just hurt myself a little bit it might bring all my attention to one sharp point and the overload could leak out but mostly the lightning bolt just picks me up and throws me down and I have to throw something and I have to make loud sounds they're not really words that mean something they're just sounds but I think I say Whywhywhywhywhywhy IcantIcantIcantIcant and then I find myself on the floor and I am hitting my thighs really hard*

*with the bottom of my fists because the overload takes over my hands and I can't control my movements and I pound really hard until my hands hurt and sometimes when I break something I grab the sharp parts and I think it might help focus all this NOISENOISYNOISESNOISIERNOISOMENOISING in my brain. it is such a tangle of sensations there is no light through the spaces. there are no spaces. the weight is crushing me it has no shape colors assault sounds slam touch stings smells disturb there are no words. the page is too small the keyboard is too limited the voice too controlled movement too contained colors too constrained I shatter*

*Sometimes the bolt strikes me paralyzed paralytic incapacitated inoperative all systems stop I can't move I can't speak I can't hear you I know you are saying words but I can't understand them I can't see where I am, everything turns black, there are no shapes the whirlwind is trapped inside but you don't know because I just look*

*still.  
But I can't feel what I'm touching  
Vision goes dark  
Sound is an indecipherable black mass  
I am mummified  
but the sarcophagus is full of knives I can  
feel them break my skin  
But  
I  
can't  
escape  
through  
the  
cracks*

### **Multimedia**

Inspired by the multimedia experiences created by Monet (2023) and Young (AIC, 2016), I created a multimedia collage (Figure 4) to express the experience of meltdown. I brought together excerpts from several of my music compositions, photographs from Wikimedia Commons, visual images and collages created by me and my neurodivergent daughter, and the Meltdown Narrative reproduced above. Ideally, this piece would be presented on a large screen, with speakers in all corners of the room to intensify the sound experience. I also envision a live movement artist embodying the images and texts in the space while the video collage plays.

**Figure 4.** Meltdown: A Multimodal Experience.



Note: Click [here](#) to watch and listen.

### **Broadening the Scope**

To evaluate how this artistic inquiry into autistic meltdown and shutdown could be used to generate empathy and understanding of the experience in allistic individuals (Amaral & Tesfaye, 2021; Chilton & Scotti, 2014; Frostig, 2011), I took advantage of an opportunity to work with three cisgender female creative arts therapists in an arts-based experiential during which they watched *Meltdown: A Multimodal Experience* and then created artistic responses to it. This experience took place as part of a class on Arts-Based Research methods. One Korean dance/movement therapist, one Afro-Caribbean art therapist, and one white North American art therapist participated.

## Method

We began the three-hour session by watching the video together in a large dance movement therapy space. The participants then moved to different areas of the room to work on their responses while they continued to listen to the audio track through headphones. I spent time in each person's space as they worked, with the intention of being a supportive witness and of being available in case of questions, but I did not interact with them nor take pictures of them while they worked. At the end of the session, the participants shared their artwork with the group and described their creative process and some of the emotions they had experienced. With their permission, I videorecorded their comments and took photographs of their artwork. I transcribed the audio recordings and conducted a thematic analysis of their comments about their artistic process.

## Results

The dance movement therapist and one of the art therapists used movement, and the second art therapist used visual art. The participants who used movement did not perform their pieces but demonstrated segments of them while explaining their creative process; therefore, I will use still images rather than video to discuss their responses. The visual arts piece, while static, made use of some of the same dance/movement therapy props used by the other two participants. I created image names based on language participants used in their reflections on their process.

Participant 1 created a visual artwork representing a fetus (Figure 5). In describing her process, she said that “the video...reminded me of a feeling of wanting to be protected, wanting to...go back into that protective curled state, symbolic of the fetal position.” She also described the feeling that even with an emotional withdrawal, “there’s still stuff that’s...escaping, like the strands, the threads, the connections with other things...which may or may not necessarily be helpful.” She shared that she chose red thread because it expressed her experience of emotional overstimulation.

**Figure 5.** Fetus.



**Figure 6.** Nurturing Space.



Participant 2 created a tableau (Figure 6) around and through which she moved purposefully, creating a narrative about the balloon in the center. Her initial response was that she wanted to feel a sense of order by creating a boundary between herself and the rest of the world, which she did by using the blue fabric as a secondary skin. In thinking about how to empathize with the feeling of losing control expressed in the video, she thought of her fear of having a balloon pop when she was blowing it up. She chose to blow up a balloon to experience that fear, which helped her relate to the intense emotions. She then thought about how she should “treat this source of fear, of losing control.” This brought her to imagine the dark blue side of the fabric as a roaring ocean, another source of the sensation of overwhelming fear for her. She began to drag the balloon around on a stretch band, which helped her feel both the tension and a sense of control and helped alleviate her anxiety. She then felt a need to nurture the balloon with the one silk scarf in her collection because “this balloon, person, needs to be treated with the most gentle, nurturing, precious material.” She mentioned that she did not like the rainbow color because she wanted a more soothing color, but because it was the only silk one, she used it to carry the ballon across “the roaring ocean” and over to “this corner where there was less light and where it could be quiet for a while.” She found she did not want to leave it in the corner, so she modified the circle by flipping the fabric over to the lighter blue side, which was “less scary...and more comforting kind of water.” She smoothed the edges, so that it became a

“different kind of space, soothing, nurturing, accepting, embracing, and then, finally, shaping this [the silk scarf] into a star—and now it is okay that it is colorful, because you are shining, so that it is [unclear] and beautiful and special. And my final kind of walk around it—not looking at you, you might not like me to look at you, so I have my back, but I’m like guarding you, but I’m still aware of you, and I check in with you.”

As she described her creation of a nurturing space, she walked around the circle with her back towards the balloon at center, while occasionally slowly spinning her body around to glance at the balloon out of the corners of her eyes.

Participant 3 responded primarily to the musical gestures, including timbres and pitches. She shared that she wanted to engage with certain sounds by using the scarves and sphere to make matching movements. She described “responding kind of improvisationally as I was listening.” She felt that she was unable to clearly say what she was doing, saying “it’s interesting, I’m having trouble using language...and also the sound... I do not have words...I come back to how hard it is to describe what it was like.” She shared that she felt the experience in the core of her body, and that this sensation was the impetus for many of the kinds of movements that she made with the sphere and scarves. Although she is a visual artist, she made a conscious choice to respond using her body because “it talks about how it really physically impacts your body, and I felt like I wanted to be physically engaging.”

**Figure 7.** I Felt it Kind of Here.



## **Discussion**

In this discussion I will focus primarily on what participants said about their creative process rather than the artworks themselves (see “Limitations” section). I noticed two themes: Theme 1: Protection and Theme 2: Empathy. Theme 1 has three subcategories: (1) protectiveness towards self, (2) protectiveness towards the autistic person, (3) protection is limited. All three participants expressed ideas relating to protectiveness towards self. Participant 1 developed a visual art representation of their need to protect themselves at times of emotional turmoil by withdrawing from the world, which they envisioned as returning to the womb. In one of Participant 3’s gestures, she placed her head inside the sphere to experience the safety of being inside a protective wrapping, referring to the image of the mummy in the Meltdown narrative. Participant 2 created a second skin that she first used to create a sense of safety and protection for herself. Two of the participants expressed ideas relating to protectiveness toward the autistic person. Participant 3 verbally displayed protectiveness toward me as an autistic person by expressing her concern that creating the video must have been difficult for me. Participant 2 transformed the second skin she originally created for self-protection into a way to protect the autistic person. All three participants reflected on the limits of the protective barrier. In the case of Participant 1, the red threads “connect to things that might not necessarily be healthy or helpful.” Participant 3 commented on experiencing the sharp edges of the collapsing sphere when she put it over her head. Participant 2 found that the first version of the fabric skin had sharp edges that needed to be softened by turning them under to protect the balloon.

The three participants expressed empathy and understanding in different ways. For participant 1, the video elicited empathy and understanding because it resonated with her own experiences of emotional distress and the need to withdraw from the world. Participant 3 concluded that “although I’m having difficulty articulating why I feel like I have a better understanding of it, I do feel like I do.” Participant 2’s narrative reflected a process of moving towards empathy and understanding. At first, the participant needed to put some order and distance, to create a boundary around herself. Then she was able to begin to empathize with the balloon, which was seen as something that is both dangerous and scary because it might pop, but also as something in need of protection. For me, the most significant moment in the narrative is when she unconsciously shifted pronouns and began to refer to the balloon as “you.” The balloon, which was first a source of fear, and then an object in need of care, has become connected and personified as me, the autistic person who created the video. She has moved from a need to protect herself through the urge to create a safe space to a willingness to stand as guard and protector of privacy between the person experiencing meltdown and the rest of the world.

I found it significant that all three participants engaged with the body; even Figure 5, the non-movement-based artwork, used the metaphor of a protective womb. The experience of meltdown is in the body, which is why it is best expressed through the embodied experience of art (Eisner, 2008). The participants’ empathetic responses came from seeking to feel within their own bodies the experiences described in the video. Using the arts made this possible. I also found it meaningful that all three participants recognized the inadequacy of the protective barrier, which is something that I expressed in my own visual artwork (Figure 2).

As I walked around and shared space with them while they were working, I was very aware of my own body and movements. When I become hyperaware of my body, I become clumsy, and I start stimming more. I didn’t know whether to talk with them or to be silent. I felt anxious about how they would respond to the video and how it might change their perceptions of me as a therapist and scholar, particularly because of the descriptions of self-injurious behavior. I noticed one of the participants copying the movement of collapsing on the floor and hitting her thighs as part of her process of embodying.

Afterwards, I shared my anxiety with the participants, particularly in relation to whether my silent presence was adequate. One participant said that she experienced my silent witness as a reassuring presence.

I engaged in member-checking by sharing my analysis with the participants and seeking their feedback. The three participants shared that they felt my descriptions and analysis represented their experience. They also gave permission to publish the still images of their work.

### **Limitations**

In retrospect, I realized that my decision not to take pictures of the participants' creative process was rooted in my own experiences as an autistic creator. Like other autistic individuals with whom I have interacted, I experience intense anxiety when I feel that I am being observed. If I had thought to ask beforehand, the participants may have agreed to be photographed or videorecorded during the process, which would have made it more possible to describe my perceptions of their process.

Although I would have preferred to analyze the participant's artwork using arts-based methods, I felt that it would be unfair in this case because the participants were experimenting with ideas and did not have time to produce finished artwork. This study was also limited by the small number of participants as it included only one artistic representation of autistic meltdown, and only three response pieces. The multimedia video was limited because it represented only one autistic person's experience, and the response pieces were unfinished due to the time limitations of the experiential.

### **Reflections**

Writing this article has made me think about how much of my life has been dedicated to translation. As I wrote above in the Meltdown Narrative, I am constantly translating both language and social cues to manage living in an allistic world as an autistic person. It is exhausting, and I write this as someone who is linguistically bilingual and has lived in another country. This exhaustion increases the risk of having a meltdown. The translation track runs parallel with any conversation, as I am constantly viewing and assessing: what do I need to adjust so this person will continue to speak with me? Am I engaging in sufficient eye contact? Is my face appropriately reflecting the "correct" emotions and interest? Am I allowing the right length of pauses? Am I correctly gauging the person's interest level? What do they mean by this question—should I answer the question they actually asked, or the question that I think they intended? As in linguistic translation, the more comfortable I am in a relationship the more I can focus on communication even though I may make more "errors."

I must also translate my thoughts into language. As I mentioned at the start of this article, I don't think in words or images, but in shapes, colors, and gestures. To coalesce the shapes and gestures of an idea into words or art is challenging. For example, when I imagine a musical composition, it is present in my mind in its entirety. I don't mean that I imagine hearing the notes or seeing what they would look like written in a score. What I have present in my mind is gestures, colors, shapes; something sculptural and textural that I could touch with my hands; movements that I can feel in body. Putting that into a musical score, which is only a map of the piece and not the actual piece, is a process of translation.

I have been thinking about how to describe this relentless process of translation. Sometimes I think of it as code-switching, taking on the language of the dominant neuronormative culture so that I feel safer and so that my words will be listened to rather than ignored. Sometimes I think it is camouflaging, and that I am hiding my authentic self

behind a contained and constrained radio edit. As with all translations, some meaning is lost in trying to reach a broader audience.

Trying to write about an experience that is beyond words is also a process of translation. I've learned the language of academia, but forcing my experiences into that language is a constraint. I have tried to compensate for that by including multiple artistic forms, but they are also translations of experience. This article might be considered a translation of a translation. My hope as an artist and arts-based researcher is that academia will come to accept art does not need to be explained by language to be valid research. My hope as an autistic person is that more allistic people will be willing to translate their language and social cues because the burden of translation should not fall solely on autistic people.

## Conclusion

An arts-based inquiry into the experience of autistic meltdowns is meaningful because the experience has rarely been studied from the perspective of an autistic adult, even though meltdowns are a significant part of autistic experience. My lived experience brings a valuable perspective that is otherwise lacking, as I was not able to find any research on meltdowns written by other openly autistic researchers. Autistic meltdowns are better addressed through various artistic modalities because they are intense sensory and emotional experiences that are hard to capture in everyday language. As someone with experience in various artistic modalities including poetry, music, and textile arts, I bring an artistic worldview and skills for multimodal arts-based inquiry.

Although only three creative arts therapists developed artistic responses to the video, their reflections show that the experience created empathy and increased understanding. All three were able to increase understanding by drawing on personal experiences. Two of them also consciously chose to challenge themselves by either embodying the physical sensations described in the video or by incorporating objects that evoked heightened emotional responses.

Meltdowns are often addressed in therapy as behaviors to be eliminated or punished. In response to the video, Participant 2 created a safe "soothing, accepting, embracing" space in which she could protect the autistic person and their privacy, allowing them time to get through the experience while keeping them safe. The autistic people with whom I have discussed the meltdown experience express the need for a safe and accepting space to get through it after which they can return to engagement with the world.

My vision is to expand this inquiry into an arts-based research project with many more participants that could be presented in public forums to elicit understanding, empathy, and compassion from allistics who are unfamiliar with the experience and meaning of autistic meltdowns. Art-based experiences shared among a network of autistic individuals could provide validation and support for other autistic individuals. This inquiry could also lead to the creation of transformational dialogues with allistic individuals, including family members, therapists, and the public.

## About the Author

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