

This text is an interview with artist-producer Kayt Hughes, by curator and writer Lesley Taker. It attempts to navigate the conversations they had around her DYCP, and to capture Kayt's current view of her practice at the end of this development grant.

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Estimated reading time: 10 minutes

LT: Can you talk a little bit about your practice and what you've been focusing on in the past few months?

KH: I'm coming back to my studio practice which has been laying dormant whilst I focused on producing for the past few years. I'm revisiting ideas and techniques I previously touched on in my sculptural work, but now I feel like I have the tools to drive this further as I feel like, through producing, I've learned a lot about what questions to ask, how to find information, and generally how to get things done.

In terms of the conceptual driving force of my work, this really centres around my experience of synaesthesia. I'm also reflecting on my autism diagnosis a couple of years ago, and thinking about how my autism has played a role in my previous work. I'm thinking about how my autistic traits are so inseparable from my creative practice. I use a lot of rule-making and framework-building as a jumping off point. Creativity isn't based in logic, and that can seem quite daunting to me. By devising a framework or parameters for creativity to exist within, it feels manageable in a way that allows me to think more freely. For example, limiting an artwork to one material would allow me to really test the potential of that one material. These parameters can be a really useful starting point for me to work things out, or test ideas in a way I guess not too dissimilar from a scientific experiment with controlled and measurable variables.

This period of development has really pushed me to think about my practice as both an artist and a producer, which I am now clearly framing for myself as one practice with varied outputs, rather than two separate practices competing for attention and time. My artist-producer practice encompasses everything, and all of the work I do is drawing me closer to defining exactly what this is.

A reframing is really useful for me, as the guilt of neglecting a part of my practice had become a barrier in itself, and there are already so many obstacles that creating a new one for myself wasn't ideal. In reality, I've always been producing for other artists alongside my own studio practice, even during my BA I was producing exhibitions and public programmes, and I have a clear need to collaborate which is inseparable from my own time alone in the studio.

LT: What is synaesthesia and how do you investigate it in your practice?

KH: My definition of synaesthesia is: a neurological condition where one sensory input involuntarily triggers an unrelated sensory experience. In simple terms, this might manifest as

seeing shapes and colours when you hear music; or thinking of letters and numbers as having distinct colours, or even personalities.

There's been a lot more awareness of synaesthesia in the last few years. It's thought that between 4-12% of the population have at least one form. Some are more commonly known, like chromesthesia (where sounds have shapes and colours); or experiencing colours for letters and numbers. Less commonly experienced and known forms include experiencing words as tastes or smells, or hearing movement as sounds. I have a number of types of synaesthesia: I experience sounds, numbers, letters and days of the week as colours, shapes and textures; I see dates, times and numbers visually within space; I also have mirror touch and tactile synaesthesia – where I experience physical sensations when I see them. As I research more about synaesthesia, I understand I have actually been experiencing more forms than I had thought.

There's a really useful website called [The Synaesthesia Tree](#) which has a pretty thorough breakdown of the known forms, but I believe that new ones are being found and researched.

When I first started making work about synaesthesia, I was making graphic notations and sculptures of my own saxophone improvisations, and I was surprised to realise others didn't experience the shapes and colours of music. It took me a long time to accept that this really wasn't a commonly shared experience. I started to look into the work of neurologist [Dr Richard Cytowic](#), who is pioneering in his synaesthesia research, and through learning more, I became aware of the different types I had, and was better able to unpick the fact that I had been experiencing a lot of these things without overtly registering. It has also made me much more aware of the ways in which a single thing can have multiple interpretations, or create completely different experiences for everyone. For me, this relates closely to the very individual and personal way in which people experience art or art spaces. This is linked to my need for collaboration and exchange. When working in this way, we enter into a space where we share our individual perspectives and experiences, learning more about one another (and ourselves) as we do.

LT: In your artist statement, you talk about the 'politics of understanding: how communication happens outside of language and the importance of finding alternative routes to create, and share, knowledge' - what does this mean for you?

KH: I prefer to think about information and development of knowledge as they are explored in sensory-based and tactile education, where learning is led by the individual. This can be seen in the research of educators and designers like [Maria Montessori](#), [Bruno Munari](#) and [Friedrich Froebel](#). Rather than being given the information to recite *a thing*, you gain understanding by interacting with objects and materials, and through self-guided exploration. These more sensory forms of understanding are important in arts spaces: which can be, or feel, inaccessible. In this approach, everyone can have their own genuine experience with an environment or object, in a way that works for them; without relying on a difficult text, or a challenging medium.

I have thought a lot about the space of the gallery in my previous work, especially using it to open up the way artists make work, and reveal the artist's process so the audience can engage with it. An example of this is an exhibition I did in Grizedale Forest. I wrote prompts (or, performance scores) on the walls, as well as placing wooden building blocks on plinths for the audience to make their own sculptures. Some of the prompts were narrative-based like 'make a story with the blocks', others were considerations of colour and shape like 'make a pattern with the shapes'. This open invitation required the audience to create and change the space they had first entered. I am continually interested in how audiences can take control over the space and become a collaborator with the artist.

Generally, I am most interested in what happens when we rethink, revisit or reversion something. What gets lost and what do we gain? When I'm trying to express or share my synaesthesia, I'm aware it will never be fully accurate - it's not an experience I can replicate or give to someone else - I can only attempt to represent it. New information is created in this process of translation, it gains visual language and begins to develop a stylised aesthetic. This feels similar to translating between different languages where words and phrases don't have a direct translation. There is something special about the specificity of a single word to describe a complex or unique concept: the way it feels or sounds, or the context that can't be precisely explained with a different word. A characteristic of synaesthesia is its specificity. The letter 'a' for me is such a definite shade of warm buttery yellow, the sound of my cat's meow is a sharp pinky-red. In a similar form of translation, my work is about capturing the gesture versus trying to replicate something exactly, and as a fixed point. I will often make multiples of an object that describes something specific, in an attempt to 'get it right' and to see what the possibilities of the material are, but actually having multiple versions gives a better idea of the intention than one definite 'correct' object.

LT: You've talked a lot about how your synaesthesia has influenced your practice but could we think about the ways being diagnosed as autistic has given you a different way to understand your practice?

KH: I've been thinking a lot about neurodivergent ways of creating, and understanding creative processes, particularly the importance of stimming and sensory-seeking. This has been even more acute whilst I've been making physical objects: the repetitive and precise processes which need to be used really resemble some of the mechanisms of sensory-seeking behaviours, and also have some of the same benefits. For example, working with ceramics requires "wedging", where you knead the clay, there's also lots of repetitive processes involved in fettling and cleaning objects ready to be fired and glazed. It really suits me that ceramics have clear rules and guidelines to learn and follow - sometimes it's interesting to break these and see what happens, but I find it reassuring to know there were rules to begin with.

More widely, I'm also understanding my own levels of tolerance differently, and how I manage to navigate having a creative practice as well as needing to work. This has forced me to reflect on

the ways I engage with arts organisations and collaborators, leading to me writing an access rider. The way I produce plans and navigate project management are now all seen through the lens of being autistic. It has really drawn together the different areas of my practice because the concepts and ideas which exist in those seemingly disparate spaces of producing and making look and feel the same to me. I require the same amount of context and detail for either managing someone else's project workflow, or creating an exhibition of my own work.

My synaesthesia can make tasks more creative than they might appear, and my autism really likes detailed planning. I experience time and ideas visually, and conversations as textural colourful shapes. This can make working with an artist, or managing a project, such a similar process for me to making my own objects that might share these same characteristics. This does also mean that I take longer to process all of the information my brain generates and attaches to the information I receive, but then my understanding and memory of that information is encyclopaedic.

LT: How does your work as a producer connect and relate to your studio practice?

KH: I never intentionally set out to be a producer, I did a fine art degree and wanted to be an artist. I had a clear interest in working with communities, and using creativity to enrich peoples' lives and experiences. This led me to working in engagement-type roles in arts organisations, starting with my first arts role supported by the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursary. Due to the financial precarity of being an artist, I took up roles within creative and arts organisations which allowed me to work with a diverse range of artists, curators and producers whose work I respect and I have learned so much from.

I have often been told that you're unable to sustain both a making practice and a curatorial or production role. It's taken me a while to decide if I think that's true, but I don't agree, and feel that there's a mutual benefit to working in both spaces. Your creative work changes and fluctuates over time, and I feel that working as an arts producer has equal creative value for me as working as an artist. I really enjoy the process of being part of a multifaceted whole (whether it's the multiple roles in an organisation, or collaborators for a studio practice). The way that a project is shaped and the consideration of the audiences is necessary creativity which takes place at every part of the production workflow.

For me, producing centres around how the audience and artist connect: either physically to view or experience the work, or in understanding the artist's ideas and research. Producers create the space for the artist and audience, and support the development of a project by holding the production framework, and being the central point for many different agendas, collaborators, and voices in the process. They ensure the project makes the most of its space, budget, and context. I like the way that producing, when it is done well, can become invisible and I like the option to become invisible, sometimes.