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Ripple Effect ADHD and Diffractive Practice

Darren O'Brien

Walkies

Stuck as I frequently am when trying to put pen to paper, and conscious of the restlessness this brings, I decide to do what comes naturally—I go for a walk with my canine companion and artistic collaborator.¹ Walking opens a new world of possibilities and worldly encounters when shared with a canine companion. As we walk, we generate waves whilst becoming entangled in the ripples of others, humans, animals, insects, flora, fauna, rocks, soil, and so on, developing new and interesting rhythms, cross-rhythms and patterns. Many of our collective walks take place in Leicester (UK) from our home just on the outskirts of the city, close to the remains of the Roman wall. My canine companion often draws me towards a local park or nature reserve. However, as age takes its inevitable toll, our more recent walks are limited to within 1km of our home. Today's walk takes us to Castle Park, a small park in the old town, and the site of an early medieval city defence. For my companion, the park no doubt holds different histories read in the olfactory traces of other canine travellers.

Erin Manning suggests, "What moves as a body returns as a movement of thought. Attention moves the body, activates the force of thought, creating a becoming-body in its passing." (Manning 2001, 24). Here, Manning encompasses the essence of sensory walking practices and goes some way to describing the phenomena of the "walkies" as an

¹ A note on my canine collaborator: I choose not to reveal the name or gender of my collaborator within the context of our practice. This helps to frame the equality of our collaboration. This is a complex position troubled by the very act of human-canine collaboration and speaks of the history and entanglement of humans and animals as techno-bodies shaped by proximity and exploitation. Such questions remain open and unanswered however to acknowledge its complexity is a vital position to any artistic practice that explores posthuman concepts. This said within the convention of art I do attribute all co-authored works as 'O'Brien and O'Brien'.

act of co-becoming. We walk with those thoughts and allow ourselves to become caught in the moment. Thoughts become secondary to the direct experience of moving through the world and take on their own rhythms.

On return from our walk, I sit with a coffee and with my canine companion curled up by my side, I begin to write whatever comes to mind, retracing our steps as I put pen to paper, and the following text emerges:



DARREN O'BRIEN

Figure 1. *Why look at Humans?* O'Brien and O'Brien, 2019.

Sniffing
 out
 the
 trails of
 other canine travellers,
 seeking messages
 left in the rich urinal soup of scent trails,
 dipping through the undergrowth,
 attending to,
 listening to,
 bouncing off reverberations,
 immersing ourselves in a
 symphony
 of soundwaves,
 a cacophony of light-waves,
 photons interrupting patterns,
 meeting leaves,
 photosynthesising,
 forming dappling sunlight and shadows,
 casting shapes,
 encountering openings,
 encountering obstacles,
 ripples,
 waves,
 interference patterns and
 oscillations,
 moments of encounter,
 always in motion,
 never fixed,
 echoes of echoes,
 a collective encoding'
 and decoding,
 of sensory inputs and outputs,
 always relational,
 forever in motion.

This form of writing in the moment is an example of my diffractive journaling technique. It offers a more-than-document and archives a practice by retracing ripples and echoes, resisting traditional, tidier forms of reflection. It is a method developed in order to capture something of the essence of our canine led walking practice. It responds to and follows the patterns and trajectories of the canine body as it moves through the landscape. Such trajectories are driven by a curiosity, an immediate sensory entanglement and encounter with and of the world. This is counter to the upright, bipedal and largely ocular position of the human figure whose trajectory is often linear, forging the quickest most efficient point from A to B. For me this form of diffractive journaling maps my own modes of what one might describe as ADHD patterns of thinking and doing.² Drawn by curiosity the process enabled by such modes offers a more diffracted approach to making which often bounces from one task or place to another rather than following a more focused line of enquiry.

In unpacking this idea further, I would like to think out loud by exploring the concepts of the ripple effect and diffraction, specifically how research and its archive might be imagined as an undercurrent of diffractive patterns. I will introduce the idea of the ripple effect, as discussed by Sara Ahmed, as a metaphor for how small actions influence wider movements (Ahmed 2017), alongside Donna Haraway and Karen Barad's definitions of diffraction (Haraway 2013, Barad 2007). I will also introduce my own lived experience of ADHD as a potential diffractive methodology and give a brief theoretical framework to situate the discussion in my current practice research, which I call "Deep Canine Topography."

As an artist and early career researcher, I'm interested in how new ways of doing, thinking, being and becoming generate ripples in

² ADHD, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, is widely defined as a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with daily functioning and development. Lived experience of ADHD tends to focus on the internal struggle with inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, manifesting as difficulties with focus, restlessness, and motivation, which significantly impact daily functioning at home, school, and work. In this context, I (the author) am interested in reclaiming aspects of ADHD as a creative methodology. Anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals diagnosed with ADHD often approach problems unconventionally, make unique associations between unrelated concepts, leading to innovative solutions. In the context of this essay, I liken ADHD patterns of thinking to concepts of diffraction.

an undercurrent which can be better understood through diffraction rather than traditional forms of reflection or reflexivity. In my own practice, which I will go on to discuss later, I seek to embrace serendipity, unknowing, and following the lead and instincts of non-human agents. The term undercurrents, therefore, relates to the connections made between human and more-than-human agents through collaboration. It can also be used to define how, as artists, we share and encounter practices and situated knowledge that are difficult to hold in neat definitions.

I'm not interested in defining a fixed model for diffractive practice here; what I'm exploring is how my own research contributes to a broader ecosystem, and how we take responsibility for and nurture healthy and open communities of knowledge. To do this, I pose the following questions:

Is diffraction a valuable metaphor for visualising or mapping my (our) own human-canine collaborative practice?

How could acknowledging and de-pathologising one's ADHD diagnosis as part of a diffractive approach work in practice?

Landing's provocation of the 20-Second Reverb in the open call immediately brought sound waves to my mind. This led me to wonder how Pauline Oliveros's concept of Deep Listening might strengthen ideas of diffraction and the more-than-document of research (Oliveros 2005). How might the document become enlivened by listening to its resonances?

Oliveros defines deep listening as a meditation that integrates sound, silence, and awareness (Oliveros 2005). Deep listening is more than a methodology for attentive musicianship; it represents an engagement with a collective more-than-human experience, listening across boundaries towards a more mutual collective existence. Here, the sonic encounter focuses on a much broader sensory engagement with research, as we transmit and receive knowledge as waves. Each wave-like encounter, be it with an archive or event, intra-acts to develop new and interesting diffractive patterns which keep knowledge fluid, open and alive.

During my PhD, I was diagnosed with ADHD, adding to my previous diagnosis of dyslexia, and I quickly found a rich community of

neurodivergent colleagues.³ Reflecting on the last five years of practice research and human-canine collaboration, it's clear that there is an undercurrent of ADHD that has in some way shaped my methodology. As a result, I'm starting to consider what an ADHD methodology might look like and, on reflection, how diffraction offers a more accurate analysis of the phenomena of the doings of research and how my artistic practice is both shaped and grounded in the more diffracted patterns of ADHD. There is no neat dialectic synthesis or negation with ADHD; it is more of a set of fractured thoughts, events, ideas, memories, ripples, encounters, and diffractive patterns encountered in the archive of one's practice and our encounters with the broader artistic community. For now, I feel it is essential to acknowledge and start to unpick the relationship between ADHD and diffraction.

The Ripple Effect, Diffraction and The *More-Than-Documents*

The phenomenon of the ripple effect suggests an ever-expanding waveform emanating from a single action, like dropping a pebble in a pond, converting the energy of impact into wave forms. When discussing feminist movements, Sarah Ahmed employs the ripple effect as a metaphor for sharing concepts and ideas as dynamic and interconnected waves and ripples that link what may seem isolated events into a broader movement (Ahmed 2017). I suggest that the same metaphor maps perfectly across research communities and is often present within practice, especially those practices which challenge human exceptionalism.

In the hands of Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, diffraction is employed as a metaphor for exploring a more attentive mode of consciousness. Such an attentive mode of consciousness explores the complexity of entangled, non-hierarchical modes of subject-object, identity, coexistence, and symbiosis. Furthermore, diffraction challenges the very borders, boundaries, and binaries of the subject-object paradigm. As

³ The British Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as: a specific learning difficulty which primarily affects reading and writing skills. However, it does not only affect these skills. Dyslexia is actually about information processing. Dyslexic people may have difficulty processing and remembering information they see and hear, which can affect learning and the acquisition of literacy skills. Dyslexia can also impact other areas such as organisational skills, working memory and visual sequencing.



Figure 2. *Why look at Humans?* O'Brien and O'Brien, 2019.

Haraway suggests:

“Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear but maps where the effects of difference appear.” (Haraway 2023, 300).

By acknowledging interference patterns, Haraway presents moments of newness which emerge from the complex diffractive patterns of relational encounter.

Physicist and philosopher Karen Barad explores the intersection between queer and feminist theory and quantum physics, specifically how photons behave in the double-slit experiment, as a powerful metaphor which draws attention to the limitations of traditional dualism in Western philosophy and exposes the interconnectedness or entanglement of all things. Barad proposes that we understand the patterns generated by diffracted photons in the double-slit experiment as patterns of difference that make a difference—to be the “fundamental constituents that make up a world.” (Barad 2007). Here, Barad offers a glimpse into a world that brings with it some valuable insights that might be mapped over existing modes of being and doing. I instinctively read diffraction as patterns; pebbles dropped into a still ocean; pebbles generating waves, signals transmitted through a fluid meeting other patterns to create new rhythms, making new diffracted meanings and understandings.



DARREN O'BRIEN

Figure 3. O'Brien and O'Brien, *Two Bodies Drawing*, digital animation, 2020.

As an undergraduate art student, I was encouraged to keep a reflective journal from day one. The same convention applies to counseling and broader mental health practice, where the journal is designed to keep us grounded in the self and ensures a critical distance to protect our clients and our own sanity. However, the limitations of the reflective journal include a tendency to adopt an inward, almost narcissistic subjectivity which, if left unchecked, reinforces subject–object oppositions. This, in turn, removes the practitioner from the practice and contributes towards artificial and impermeable boundaries. For example, I have always struggled to keep a reflective account of my artistic practice, which was also reflected in my mental health practice. Instead, what emerged was several mind-maps, diagrams, and illegible scribbles in numerous notebooks. In some cases, I found myself drawing seemingly abstract shapes to make sense of abstract and complex concepts. When I look back on boxes of notebooks with elaborately doodled covers and the scribbles and sketches within, I see a diffracted collection of thoughts, ideas, proposals, drawings and so on. This has recently extended to the digital realm with thousands of digital sketches, which I have titled, paintings I will never paint, or ideas that will never become reality.

The social sciences have addressed the shortcomings of reflective practice by introducing the concept of reflexivity. Reflexivity goes some way to critically acknowledging and addressing the researcher's thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs, as well as their direct influence on the research and vice versa. I argue that the diffractive approach better describes the practitioner-researcher position as situated in and of the doings of research. In my practice, this extends to collaboration between the human and more-than-human as an intrinsic relational encounter from which knowledge is produced. For example, in the following figure, which is a screen grab of an animation of GPS tracks captured during a human-canine walk, the trajectory of the canine body (light blue) follows a more curious sensory path through a local nature reserve. The human (me — darker blue) takes a more direct trajectory based on the visual senses. Together or perhaps in between both trajectories is where new knowledge is situated and revealed through collaboration.

The same could be said for the agency of materials and the intra-action between artist and material as an entangled co-production of knowledge. Knowledge is contained within the material and its properties, the artist's manipulation of materials, and the meeting point between the two. Therefore, diffraction ultimately calls for a radical

rethinking of identity and difference as dynamic, interconnected relational processes rather than static categories. My own experience of engaging with art and artistic practice is that through interspecies artistic collaboration (as seen in figure 3), we are constantly generating patterns and waves that leave traces as they interact across time, both in the moments and their archive, be it physical or virtual, that trouble fixed categories and definitions. I will return to this later when expanding on deep canine topography as a practice.

This perception of practice is perhaps influenced by my own ‘diffracted’ ADHD way of working. For me, the encounter with art practice does not follow a clear analytical process but sparks ideas and generates new and interesting diffractive patterns of thought, which seem to happen in the moment of the encounter. This is counter to a more dialectic, subject-object position. Therefore, what ADHD seems to enable is a different type of connection with the encounter which resists negation.

Returning to the journal as an archive or record of academic research, Vivienne Bozalek and Michalinos Zembylas argue that diffraction offers a viable and essential alternative to reflexivity. They suggest that, “Reflexivity remains caught up in sameness because of mirroring fixed positions, whereas diffraction is specifically attuned to differences and their affects in knowledge-making practices.” (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017, 2) Going on to propose that:

“Diffraction alerts us to the entanglement of the apparatus in addition to the embedded and embodied researcher, who is seen as part of the world. Diffraction provides additional affordances through its connection of the discursive and the material, with knowledges making themselves intelligible to each other in creative and unpredictable ways.” (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017, 2)

Diffraction, therefore, acknowledges an ongoing and ever-present spatial resonance between the document (or evidence) of practice and the world. Suppose we adopt a diffractive approach and imagine such ripples as waveforms. We must listen carefully to how such waves are shaped and reshaped to become a shared, collective, and open-ended more-than-document.

Deep Canine Topography—Defining Our Practice

Deep canine topography is a speculative practice in which I consider what might happen if we follow the instincts of our canine companions. It reframes the humble “walkies” as an act of multi-species artistic collaboration and formed the basis of my PhD (O’Brien 2023). It embraces the relational canine map of the world built on sensory entanglement and encounter.

Donna Haraway defines human-companion animal relationships as an ontological choreography, thus offering an insight into the complex, entangled relationship between dogs and humans (Haraway 2007). Rosi Braidotti positions the dog as a radical and significant



Figure 4. *Why look at Humans?* O'Brien and O'Brien, 2019.

product of technoscience, calling for a symbolic system of kinship which matches the complexity of our shared ontological histories (Braidotti 2011). To this end, I deliberately position my canine companion not as the subject of observation, inspiration, or muse, but as artist, collaborator, and co-author.

My canine companion and I undertook several co-authored walks throughout the PhD in the spirit of psychogeography and embodied sensory walking practice. The resulting practice research unfolded into a series of co-authored films, GPS drawings, stills photography and sonic works which attempted to bridge the gap between human and canine whilst acknowledging our co-dependency and radical difference. It was here that I first encountered diffraction as a concept and a way of describing the meeting point between humans and canines through a co-authored practice.

One such example of this co-authored practice is the images offered throughout this text. The canine-mounted action camera set to stills photography provides a unique compositional framing of the world from the canine point of view. They seek to document moments of our collaborative walking practice alongside my textural recollections and theoretical musings. Furthermore, they help to frame a more grounded olfactory reading of place due to their position, as counter to my own ocular-centric bipedal framing of the world.

However, it became clear that such documents operate as more than documentary evidence of practice. They are shared moments, co-authored artworks, waiting to be encountered, activated and enlivened. Rather than being static objects or moments, they remain mobile in their resonance and the diffractive patterns that emerge when their movement meets the eyes and ears of others.⁴ In this essay, these images should be read as a companion to the text, a visual essay chosen due to their resonance with the discussion in the text and how it unfolds in the writing. This is another example of how the prompt of the twenty-second reverb and the thoughts this provoked reactivated the images and took me immediately back to the moments of their inception. Meeting the images from a new angle is an example of diffraction in action. New and interesting patterns emerge, and new thoughts are formed.

⁴ For example, in an early experiment in deep canine topography, I attached binaural microphones and a small audio recorder to my canine companion's walking harness. The result was a short, 15 min sound walk from the canine perspective. Presented at a PhD symposium, listeners described the sensation of occupying the canine body and imagining the world from a new perspective.

Refrain

As age and frailty change the rhythms of our human-canine adventures to a slower pace, I find myself more in reflective mode. This reflection presents itself as fractured memories held in archival material which resist linearity. They present as diffracted patterns, each of which opens new possibilities and new ways of reading the past, our past, which informs the present and the future. I propose that each time the more-than-document is encountered, the movements stirred by reaching out and touching memories make ripples which touch other ripples to generate new diffractive patterns. The document is alive and echoes far beyond the 20-second reverb, which prompted this line of thought.



Figure 5. *Why look at Humans?* O'Brien and O'Brien, 2019.



Figure 5. *Why look at Humans?* O'Brien and O'Brien, 2019.

Returning briefly to the subject of ADHD and dyslexia, I'm aware that even attempting to write about diffraction presents its difficulties. Writing makes me feel uneasy, restless, anxious, and saps my energy.

The inability to focus on and explore such a slippery concept when one's thoughts are often fractured and spread across several interconnected concepts and ideas is a real challenge. Thoughts are wrestled into words that refuse to stay still and resist neat textual definition.

For me, clarity comes through the doings of artistic practice as thought in motion. Therefore, what is at stake in defining my practice through the lens of ADHD lies within the very fractured patterns and seemingly disparate connections that come to shape the very essence of attention. This form of attention I would argue enables new ways of thinking, doing and being which are counter to the neurotypical

definition of ADHD as a 'disorder.' Rather than defining ADHD as a 'disorder,' I propose we define it as a different kind of order, a dis-order, a diffracted-order, or diff-order, which generates new and interesting patterns of order, not confined by more linear modes of thinking and doing. Although lost in the moment of doing, I am not blissfully unaware of the broader implications of practice research and the need to make research as accessible as possible. The very idea of unpicking and attempting to define a practice that resists neat definitions will always be challenging. However, redefining ADHD as a creative energy which emerges from a different order, or different way of seeing or being, offers a more lucid account of how practice works for me. Working with another non-human agent, as in our deep canine topography practice, opens a collaboration where decisions and actions are shared. To follow the dog is also to follow one's own instincts and animality. This act in itself is freeing. It frees me from the need to conform to expectations of order and embrace restlessness, to follow the nose. Therefore, embracing ADHD as a diffractive methodology opens new possibilities as more fractured, rhizomatic, non-linear ways of becoming.

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