

Un/Masked

Naoto Yoshida

in collaboration with Priyanka Pattni,
Reeve Hart, and Lizziy Parker

8 March – 4 May 2024

Aperture Gallery

Opening Reception

6.30 pm / Thursday, 7 March 2024



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"Disability is a social state, not a medical condition" is the manifesto of the 'Social model of disability,' advocated by Vic Finkelstein and later developed by Mike Oliver, which defines disability as a social rather than personal matter.

Un/Masked is a documentary project focused on the lived experience of neurodivergent individuals. Viewing human development as a spectrum rather than the binary disabled vs. non-disabled, the term neurodivergent is preferred for individuals with these developmental differences. However, it remains a fact that they often face challenges in specific environments and interpersonal relationships, as they are susceptible to social stigma and misunderstandings due to their invisible conditions. As such, neurodivergent individuals often mask their traits to conform to social norms. This behaviour can result in chronic mental health issues caused by exhaustion and low self-esteem. The impetus for this project was a sense of unease towards my attitude as a journalist from the realisation that I simplified the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals in my writing when I reported about the challenges faced by young Japanese people with disabilities in their job searches in 2019. Figuring out this sense of unease, I became interested in Disability Studies, located within the political, cultural and sociological realms. The collaborative approach involves interviews and image-making, which are portraits, landscapes and still-life images with the concept of the moment of repose for the neurodivergent participants. Besides that, the collaborators have photographed their daily lives and written down their thoughts based on

their first-hand experiences as neurodivergent individuals with Polaroid cameras and markers. With collaboration and Disability studies as crucial formats, the project celebrates the ordinary life of neurodivergent individuals, addressing the question of what constitutes disability in society.

A sincere acknowledgement is extended to dedicated professors, lectures and technicians at the University for the Creative Arts (UCA), Anna Fox, Sunil Gupta, Emmanuelle Waeckerlé, Matt Lindsey, Jennifer Patterson, David Rule, Gideon Fisher, Michael Clement, Simon Gardner and Michael Chan as well as the course mates at UCA MFA Photography. Their generous provision of insightful perspectives and substantial contributions have been a significant driving force in shaping and enriching the project. Last but not least, I cannot thank Priyanka, Reeve, and Lizziy enough for being part of my project. I could not have done anything without their help.

Naoto Yoshida

Aperture is pleased to present the new exhibition *'Un/Masked'* by Naoto Yoshida, a Japanese documentary photographer and writer.

Un/Masked is a unique photographic project that attempts to visualise “invisible disabilities” by documenting the everyday life of neurodivergent young people and celebrating it. “Neurodiversity” is the term used to recognise that our brains function and process information in a variety of different ways. Unlike “neurotypical” people whose brains function and process information within the standards that society expects, “neurodivergent” people, whose brains do this in a slightly or significantly different way, face many challenges in social contexts. As a result, many neurodivergent people are forced to adjust their behaviours or hide their uncomfortableness in public spaces. Some of them describe themselves in these situations as “masked”. On the other hand, when they are free from these social expectations or can “unmask” themselves, they feel relaxed and more like themselves. Neurodivergent



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people also often find their own ways and routines in their daily lives to cope with or to be free from stressful environments. Finding an environment that is comfortable for them, spending time with familiar people or small animals, or finding tools to help calm their nerves are significant to their daily life.

In this project, Yoshida visualises young neurodivergent individuals' experience of the world from four different photographic approaches. His portraits show these young individuals in their everyday environment, where they can feel relaxed. Often it is their own bedroom, or an outdoor space surrounded by nature. In these portraits, the disabilities or difficulties they experience on daily-basis are not visible. Shot with a medium-format analogue camera, these portraits show the result of the trusted relationships between the sitters and the artist developed through conversations and meetings between them over many hours prior to the shootings. Landscapes are shot in places that each individual chose and represent the environments in which they feel free from social stresses. These landscapes are shot with a pin-hole camera on 4x5 format colour film creating a slightly out-of-focus effect. This soft-focus effect functions as a metaphor of the comfort these individuals feel in each environment. On the corridor, the viewer will find object photographs, each shot in the same studio setting. These colourful objects are called 'stim toys,' which



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give people who are neurodivergent, such as those with autism, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or Dyspraxia, sensory stimulation to help reduce their stress and anxiety, or increase concentration. People also often use found objects that give them sensory relaxation as their own stim toys. They are daily necessities to neurodivergent people, and show their personalities as well. The audience are also invited to use some of the examples of these stim toys in the gallery to share their sensory experience. Lastly, the polaroid photographs were shot by Yoshida's neurodivergent collaborators documenting their everyday life and are accompanied by their comments. These snapshots show how they see and feel their environment from their own perspectives. The handwritten notes on the frames help the audience understand how they feel in those environments or situations.

A project documenting neurodivergent young people's everyday life, *Un/Masked* is surprisingly relatable to all types of audience. Indeed, the term "neurodiversity" is intended to recognise that we all have more or less different ways of feeling and reacting to the outside world. Some environments are more challenging to some than the others, and we all try to find a way to cope with it consciously or unconsciously. The project is a reminder of this fact and hopes for a society that is more accepting, understanding, and easier to navigate for people with different conditions. By choosing the collaborative production process, Yoshida's *Un/Masked* also tackles the much-discussed issue of representation in photography. It tries to visualise what the world is like for these neurodivergent individuals through their own perspectives as well as explores a more ethical way of documenting people with the disabilities.



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This exhibition is curated by Sonoko Nakanishi.

Naoto YOSHIDA 吉田直人

Naoto Yoshida, born in 1989, is a Japanese independent writer and documentarian based in the UK and Japan. He has focused on social issues related to disability and para-sports over the past six years, publishing three co-written books. His subject matters stem from the question of what constitutes disability in our society, exploring collaborative and participatory approaches with people concerned to enable them to play an active role in the creation of a project, utilising digital and analogue processes.

His work has been shortlisted for the Taylor Wessing Photo Portrait Prize (UK, 2023) and Pitch Grant (Japan, 2023). His work was selected as a winner of Portrait of Britain vol. 6 (UK, 2023).

Artist's Talk

2 pm / Saturday, 23 March 2024

Artist Naoto Yoshida will discuss his project *Un/Masked*, its background, concept, and collaborative production process, as well as its challenges. This event is free to attend and there is no need for RSVP.

Curator's Tour

6 pm / Thursday, 11 April 2024

Sonoko Nakanishi, Programme Curator of Aperture Gallery, will guide you through the exhibition focusing on collaboration in art and photography. This event is free to attend and there is no need for RSVP.

Aperture Gallery
(Basement level of Aperture UK)

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Opening Hours

Tuesday – Saturday	12-6 pm
Mon, Sun, & bank holidays	Closed

For any inquiries about the exhibition, please contact Sonoko at gallery@apertureuk.com.