



Collection of
photographs from
across Europe

Building an
inclusive society
for autistic people

#AutismDay2023

CONTENT

Foreword	3
Through the Looking Glass by Florin Popa.....	4
You don't look autistic by Joanna Musiał.....	8
Pietersplas by Kim Willems.....	12
You've got this, Autism in motion, Overwhelm, Social isolation & Raw and Exposed by Maxence Houël.....	13
But he doesn't look autistic by Ana Isabel Munguia.....	18
Greatness of Soul by Despina Zorlakis.....	19
Angels Amongst Us by Elena Paraskeva.....	20
Gaming with empathy by Giulia Manfroni.....	22
Pierre by André Weisberger.....	23
Farm4Autism by Carlo Giustini.....	24

FOREWORD

This collection of photographs is part of Autism-Europe's campaign 'Building an inclusive society for autistic people' to mark World Autism Awareness Day 2023. Ten photographers from all over Europe willing to share a range of experiences and personal journeys of autistic people, shedding light on their diversity. These twenty-five pictures highlight talents and enthusiasm. They also offer some precious insight into the lives of autistic people and their families. Thanks to these testimonies, the viewer perceives the richness of their difference and what they can bring to society, as well as their desire to be heard and empowered. However, some also call out the stigmatisation and exclusion that autistic people still too often experience.

This exhibition aims at promoting a better understanding of autism and its diversity to ensure that autistic people are accepted and valued for who they are. Understanding alone, however, is not enough. Society needs to be inclusive and accessible to all. These pictures highlight that autistic people must have access to the right support throughout their lives so that they can make their own choices and be fully included in their communities, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). As Autism-Europe celebrates its 40th anniversary, we call on all members of society to join in so that it finally becomes a reality.

Through the Looking Glass by Florin Popa



'Etan shows me his preferred books under the protective gaze of his mother.'



'Massimo has sport activities each weekend. He participates when asked but, if left on his own, he often retreats into a quiet corner.'



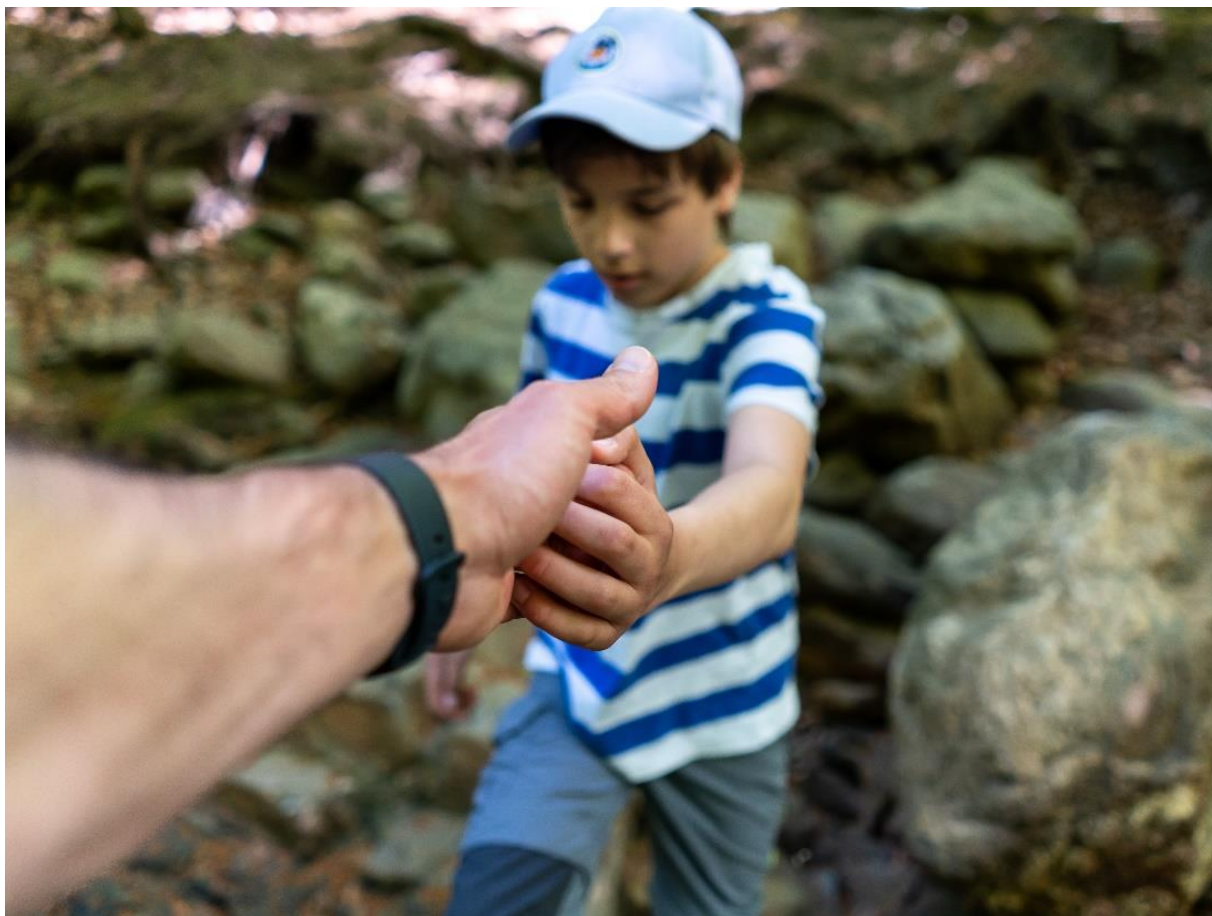
'Giuliano playing the trumpet in his room. Actually, he is just pretending to play. We both understand and play along.'



'Yannis completes a puzzle. His parents often engage him in joint attention exercises.'



'A moment of tranquillity in an ocean of movement. Yannis in his sensory room at home.'



‘Crossing the river. Matei asks for help during one of our hikes in the Ardennes.’

‘The photos are part of a personal project called ‘Through the Looking Glass’ (www.autismstories.eu) that aims to shed light on the lives of people with autism and their families. Although autism has received increasing attention lately, most people know little about what it means to live with autism.

Stereotypes and disinformation regarding autism still abound. The reality of autism remains largely invisible, and this is reflected in the scarcity of support services available. The project sets to present the way autistic people build their day-to-day lives, create relationships, and have their needs met. It does so by mixing photography and written material (life stories).’

Photographer: Florin Popa is a Brussels-based photographer working mainly on long-term projects with a social dimension. His projects include ‘Through the Looking Glass’, which explores the lives of people with autism, and ‘Green Borders’, which focuses on how cities negotiate their relationship with nature and bring nature back into the urban environment.

He combines documentary photography, writing, and audio in order to uncover the stories behind the subject. Florin is interested in storytelling and how it can be used to facilitate both individual and social change. He publishes regularly at *florinpopa.blog*.

You don't look autistic by Joanna Musiał



'Agnieska'



'Gizela'



'Klaudia'



'Maja'



'Coco'

'You don't look autistic' is my ongoing project about women on the autism spectrum, which I started in 2021 when I was diagnosed as autistic myself.

'You don't look autistic' – each of us have heard these words many times. I want to break stereotypes about autism being only about boys and men and that autistic people can be recognized at first sight. I want to speak about women's autism through photographs, to show that there are a lot of us and that we don't "look autistic".

After all, our brains are the ones that are different from neurotypicals, not our appearance. Being autistic means having a different nervous system and a different perception of the world, not a different body, so it doesn't "look like" anything. It is primarily a struggle with social interactions and conventions, hypersensitivity to stimuli, communication problems, literal thinking, difficulty with recognizing and regulating emotions. However, it's also about having a deep passion for our special interests, beautiful empathy, an analytical brain, noticing details, and much more.

Girls are diagnosed much less frequently than boys are, because diagnostic criteria were created for men's profiles. Women's autism is different because of social conventions in which girls are expected to be more communicative, polite, and not show anger - all these things and more make them constantly mask their autistic characteristics. The diagnosis brought me relief and was the door to self-acceptance, and to just simply be myself, as I am. Now I know that there is nothing wrong with me.

During the realization of my project, I met many beautiful women, and it always was a "click" - each of us is different but at the same time so similar, we understood each other perfectly from the start. I finally do not feel like I am the only one who is that much different. I found my 'neuro tribe.'

Photographer: Joanna Musiał is a Polish visual artist and photographer graduated from the Graphics department at the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, Poland.

In 2020 she defended her Master's degree with honorable mention.

She is a member of the Archive of Public Protests photo collective.

In 2021 she was one of the winners of the 'Female in Focus' contest by the British Journal of Photography in the Single Image Category. In 2021 she was also nominated for the Polityka's Passports (Archive of Public Protests).

Her works have been published in magazines such as Chime for change by Gucci, The British Journal, Vogue.com, Vogue Poland, National Geographic Poland, Die Zeit, Madrid no Frills, Le Monde Fr and others.

Pietersplas by Kim Willems



'I have been recently diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. I have been surviving for 42 years by copying the behaviour of other people around me in order to survive. Since I have received the diagnosis, I have understood the reasons behind many things from my past, including certain behaviours, as well as positive and negative actions.

It is not that my life has changed since I have known that I am different than others, but now I am trying to understand what is going on in my head with all the stimuli, and how to best explain to people around me that my brain works differently than some might expect.

It is not good or bad, it is different than the standard: but hey, what is the standard? 😊

I hope I can make a strong contribution through photography. This photo was taken at a time when I was able to go out in the field alone, to be in peace and quiet, and with nobody around to distract me. While taking this picture, it was just me, myself and my thoughts, which are always running ahead of my actions.

It showcases the need of autistic people to have time by themselves to put their thoughts in order and reflect. It is about having time alone and not being disturbed, as often mindfulness and / or yoga does not work as it can for people with a standard brain.

The best time to have nature to yourself is in the early morning at sunrise. Normally, most people are still in bed and the quietness and peacefulness brings me at least rest and a good start to the day.'

Photographer: Kim Willems is a 43-year-old Dutch photographer, and he has been recently diagnosed with autism.

You've got this by Maxence Houël



'Sometimes you just need a friend.'

Autism in motion by Maxence Houël



'No more walking past us.'

Overwhelm by Maxence Houël



'Social expectations make my head spin.'

Social isolation by Maxence Houël



'Your absence is felt.'

Raw and exposed by Maxence Houël



'The bare aftermath of an autistic meltdown.'

Photographer: Maxence Houël is a French autistic photographer based in Le Puy-en-Velay, France. His work focuses mainly on landscape and detail photography.

He likes mixing the natural with the artificial.

He started photography at a young age, in the darkroom at first and later with a mix of analog and digital photography.

But he doesn't look autistic by Ana Isabel Munguia



'It's difficult to raise awareness on my son's autism. Whenever I mention that he is on the spectrum, most people won't know what I am talking about, or if they have a slight idea, they quickly mention that he doesn't look autistic or that I shouldn't be so quick to label him. It discredits his struggles. Autism doesn't have a specific physical characteristic to pinpoint. People on the spectrum look like everyone else. Yet, they are not included in everyday activities. Right after I took this photo, he went into the freezing cold lake. He didn't know how to swim, and he was very close to drowning. Since then, we have been looking into swimming lessons but it's hard to find places that accommodate his needs. He doesn't speak, he's not potty trained, he has difficulties understanding complex instructions, and he finds it hard to stay in a group. People on the spectrum also have beautiful smiles, a knack for adventure but most importantly, want to be included too.'

Photographer: Ana Isabel Munguia, mother of Oliver, is a Marketing & Communications Manager living in Brussels, Belgium. Originally from Mexico, she followed her heart to Slovenia to marry the love of her life. While completing her MSc in Business Administration there, she reignited her passion for storytelling in the form of a travel & expat blog. This space quickly became a harbour for her to connect with others also going through the struggles of living abroad. In 2017, they welcomed their first baby Max and settled in Brussels to raise their family. Soon after, Oliver came along to complete it. Nowadays, they spend their time exploring Belgium together while hunting for dinosaur fossils, and helping Paw Patrol with their rescue missions.

Greatness of Soul by Despina Zorlakis



'The sea for Dimitris is a force of strength which enables him as an autistic person, to embrace life differently. Dimitris always has his parents and Saint Demitrios by his side. What he has achieved so far is thanks to them!'

Photographer: Despina Zorlakis is a 30-year-old Cypriot photographer.

She studied photography at the University of Technology, Department of Photography and Audiovisual Media, in Athens, Greece.

She has her own photography studio in Cyprus and her work covers various types of events (such as weddings, baptisms). For three years, she has been offering photography courses at the Training Centers of Cyprus.

She participated in various charity events of non-profit Cypriot foundations / associations, one of them being the Smile Project run by Autism Support Famagusta.

Through her photography, she aims to capture the true nature of each event.

Angels Amongst Us by Elena Paraskeva





'Angels amongst us is a series created in collaboration with the association Autism Support Famagusta, Cyprus, and exhibited in the Thalassa Museum. This collection was also a winner at the International Fine Art Awards. These photographs are part of an on-going series inspired by a friend's story whose autistic uncle was locked away in a cage, hidden from the world and eventually died in it. Autism is widespread in Cyprus, yet not many understand nor accept it. Many of these children are kept away from the public, never setting foot in a supermarket, a clothing store or a restaurant. Currently, there are no government schools dedicated to autistic children. The mother of one of these children, Stefanos, a dear friend, has managed to create the first center to support autistic adults, but the costs are high and the project relies solely on charitable work from individuals.

Inspired by iconography, the hands beneath each child's head are those of their mothers, pillars of strength and resilience. The two are inextricably tied together, the mother is bound to her child by love but also fear, for the question that is gnawing at her, that of what will happen to her child when she dies, is left unanswered.'

Photographer: Elena Paraskeva is an international Conceptual Photographer and Art Director and, most recently, an official ADOBE instructor. She is most known for her surrealistic conceptual work that is bathed in rich color palettes and strong graphic lines. She has exhibited her work in Barcelona, NYC, London and Paris, among other cities, and has been published on the pages and covers of a multitude of publications, including the UK Times.

Gaming with empathy by Giulia Manfroni



'This heart-warming photo depicts a group of guys playing a board game together with a man who has a communication disability. What's truly beautiful about this photo is how these guys have perfectly understood and included the man in their game without judging him. It is a powerful testament to the importance of empathy and inclusion, where differences are not seen as a barrier but an opportunity to connect and learn from one another.'

Photographer: Giulia Manfroni is a young Italian photographer. She has always been passionate about art and visual communication and attended the NID (Nuovo Istituto di Design) academy in Perugia, Italy, where she graduated in photography.

What characterises her photography is a strong sensitivity towards human relationships, the relationship between humans and nature, and the spiritual sphere.

Her photography focuses primarily on capturing expressions, portraying people as they really are, and capturing and imprinting the emotions of the moment onto the photograph.

Pierre by André Weisgerber



‘Pierre enjoys harmony with nature during a hike in the Alps.’

Photographer: André Weisgerber is a professional photographer based in Luxembourg and father of a 14-years-old autistic son, Pierre, adopted in 2002 at the age of 5 months. He is member of the Council of Administration of Autism-Europe, a Brussels-based European non-profit organisation.

Farm4Autism by Carlo Giustini



'In the past three years, we have collaborated with an Italian farm close to Treviso City in many farming activities. Here we are at work, in a field of radicchio, with our wooden boxes full of what we have collected. Different varieties of delicious radicchio, which is the symbol of our city: Treviso!

Farming has been shown to provide a great skill match for people with autism. In addition to providing peacefulness and being a naturally happy activity, farming allows autistic people to interact with others and improve their social skills.

From seeding to transplanting, harvesting to packaging, individuals with autism often do very well with this type of routine work. Being able to efficiently complete repetitive, predictable tasks, agriculture programs help them build their confidence and self-esteem.'

Photographer: Carlo Giustini was born in 1987 in Rome. He is married and has one son. He is graduated in DAMS at the University of Padua, Italy. Carlo directed communications and marketing for many European companies. Carlo has a long-standing experience in arts, social and professional services, non-profits and F&B.

Currently he is Digital Marketing & Social Media Manager at Nonno Andrea Az. Agricola Biodiversa, an organic and Biodiversity Friend certified farm in Treviso, Italy. Since 2014, he has been involved as Corporate Fundraising Manager & Communication at the foundation Oltre il Labirinto onlus.



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