# Working Paper Series

**Working Paper Number 4**

**Worthwhile Activities or Just Arting About? Draw your own Conclusions.**

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**CASIC, Keele University, October 2017**
**Library Catalogue Reference: CWPS0004**

**Published by: Community Animation and Social Innovation Centre (CASIC)**
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**Keele, Staffordshire, ST5 5BG**
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# WORTHWHILE ACTIVITIES OR JUST ARTING ABOUT?
# DRAW YOUR OWN CONCLUSIONS

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**In this working paper, I present an ethnographic exploration of the creative experience using arts practice as a data collection method and describe a small-scale qualitative study which explores the value and role that art-making activities play in the lives of individuals and within society. The methodology outlined is primarily ethnographic and adopts an immersive, participant observation strategy. To fully understand the lived experience of the participants, the working paper outlines how the researcher undertook an active participatory role of art facilitator to the art group under study. Creative research practices and sensory ethnography are discussed in relation to capturing all the 'essences' of the situation. The paper reflects on the value of collecting data that is not solely focused on conversation. Supporting extant research on creative methods, it is argued that these research methods are becoming increasingly popular, and are felt to be a more inclusive way of collecting rich data that is multi-dimensional. Existing findings relating to the psychological, physical and social impacts of art participation are discussed in relation to this contention. The paper concludes that researchers need more channels to disseminate their findings for while art participation is said to aid wellbeing and have a transformative effect on the individual and society, quantifiable outcomes are difficult to achieve through standard reporting techniques in the social sciences.**

**Keywords: arts; ethnography; creative methods; transformational learning; well-being.**

## Introduction

What are the motivations for human behaviour and how do we attempt to understand another's life world, in relation to particular phenomena? The long-standing literature within the discipline of ethnographic analysis suggests that bodily immersion within a field-site allows us to feel the lived experience of others and share their environment, engaging all the senses. Indeed, this forms the cornerstone of the methodology as an embodied mode of work. Following this, the aim of the current study was to explore the immersive, embodied and experiential nature of artmaking within a group setting and to unravel why these activities may be important to the individual and potentially to wider society.

Participation in arts activities have been found to have transformative effects on the individual and society. Studies report that art-making aids social cohesion, improves self-esteem, attitudes to risk taking and contributes to an enhanced form of reflection on one's own identity (Matarasso 1997; Brown, Novak 2007; Chan, Goldthorpe 2007; Arts Council England 2014; Reeves 2002). For example, the immediate experience of participating in an engaging and challenging activity has been studied in relation to the 'Flow State' (Csikszentmihalyi 2000) that fosters complete absorption with a task and an enhanced ability to 'switch off' outside influences such as time pressures or even other bodily needs such as hunger. It is arguable, however, that the outcomes of embodied processes such as art activities are difficult to 'prove' and that creative processes are difficult to capture using traditional forms of ethnographic dissemination, particularly the written word. It is this problem that the current paper seeks to explore and reflect upon.

The contribution of this paper, then, is to illustrate that experience is not just interior or exterior, and that our sensory experience is positioned by meanings with the conceptual merging of one's body and mind. It draws upon Merleau-Ponty's (1996) theoretical approach to experiential phenomena, specifically his idea of phenomenology as the 'finding of essences' (Merleau-Ponty, Smith 1996, preface vii) as well as the insights into the human-material relationship provided by Ingold (Ingold 2010). How one finds, understands and communicates these essences, mediated through human-object interactions, was precisely the methodological challenge that I encountered when embarking on my ethnographic study

of the adult art group that I facilitate. In what follows, I describe my approach to this field site, reviewing literature which is relevant to my phenomenological lens. The paper outlines how, through a participatory ethnographic study the researcher's 'whole self' was utilized to explore and reflect upon perceptions and experiences. The paper then argues that it is a mistake to seek to separate out the senses as they are all connected (Ingold 2000, p261) and highlights how materials became interwoven with lived experience. The argument is then made that an ethnographic, immersive approach into an environment, deploying all the senses, creates an empathetic approach to an experience and helps us get close to the meaning for others (Okely 1994). Hence, the researcher's body is used 'as a living, physical, sensing, and experiencing agent enmeshed in practical and intimate encounter' (Retsikas 2008, p127). First, however, I turn to a discussion of my methodology.

## Methodology

An ethnographic methodology was adopted to capture tacit, ephemeral data through complete, sensory engagement. It went beyond the method of interviews and observation to create a more emplaced three dimensional picture of reality (Pink 2015, p64). The strategy did not involve merely observing the activities as an outsider in order to extract meaning (Berger, Luckmann 1967), but adopted the approach of an insider, where I witnessed and instigated art activities in the same environment as the participants. A consideration of place and space was vital, and how this may influence social behaviour, including my own. An awareness of one's own and others' physicality and action and inaction (Gatewood 1985) as cognitive processes is important when looking for meaning.

The recounting of my own ethnographic study will take the form of a 'confessional tale' (Van Maanen 2011, p73-100) and is influenced by autoethnographic writing (Ellis, Adams et al. 2011). Details have been collected over two years and took into account the cognitive, physical and emotional nature of artmaking in relation to the social contexts and lifeworlds of the participants. The study was designed to use active participation and creative methods in order to understand the experience and role of artmaking individually and within a group setting. The sample was a small art group of five adults who meet at my home, once a week, for a two hour session and it has been a group with a changing membership over the last two

years. My decision to explore the members' artmaking experience was born out of a curiosity relating to their motivation and commitment to attend and make art, despite pressing, outside responsibilities. The study was undertaken with the consent and knowledge of the participants.

The participants varied dramatically in age, from 18 to 76, with a mix of genders who have attended the group over many months. I had built up a rapport with them and natured mutual trust. This, I feel, is an asset when attempting to 'observe' natural behaviour. The criticism of traditional participant observation is that it results in an outsider's interpretation, with the possibility of a misreading the context (Kusenbach 2003). The advantage of my ethnographic, participant observation of this group is that I have a deep knowledge of the setting, the participants and the nature of their activities. Ethically, I was aware that, as the host, the art facilitator and the researcher, I held a perceived position of power which could, as Foucault described, affect 'self-identities, attitudes and psychological predispositions' (Derek 1994, p101). No undue pressure was put upon those studied to participate, however, and all identities are anonymised. The whole study was undertaken with reflexivity and awareness of these issues (Mason 2008, p177; Cohen, Manion et al. 2013; Etherington 2004) and a respectful relationship with the participants was cultivated so as to foster continual reflection on the possibility of any harm.

As the facilitator of the art group I had to switch roles from an insider, to a researcher outsider, but then to an insider again in order to allow for relaxed ethnographic conversation. It is an underpinning principle of the research design that successful ethnography occurs when the environment and behaviour is completely 'natural' and when the researcher forgets that they are a sociologist (Goffman, quoted in Manning 1992, p154). This method of total immersion is necessary to become physically and socially part of the situation and feel the 'rhythms' of the people and place to be examined, something which is informed by my phenomenological lens. Hence, my experience as an art teacher and practitioner influenced the design of the project and made this method of research a natural and practical way to collect data and, although meanings were subjective, they were also deeply informed by personal experience (Burgess 2002, p89).

My practical and theoretical knowledge about what it means to make art allowed for a situational empathy. Piirto (1998) argues that researchers employing arts based research must be artists in their own right in order to legitimize the methods and to ensure quality. I consider that my experience as an artist does aid understanding, but argue that the results of a study by a non-artist, where quality artwork was not produced would be equally valid if the aim was to explore the experiential nature and value of the experience. If too much emphasis is put on *what* is produced, then the way in which it is produced may be compromised. With regards to being an outsider there is an argument for 'stranger' value' (Ibid p23-24) as the familiar, and things taken for granted by someone too familiar with artmaking, can be overlooked as Spradley writes (year):

> *'The more you know about a situation as an ordinary participant, the more difficult it is to study it as an ethnographer…The less familiar you are with social situations, the more you are able to see the tacit cultural rules at work.'* (Spradley, p61-62).

While few ethnographers would claim that it is possible to learn everything, even of familiar cultures (Werner and Schoepfle 1987 pg 68, cited by Ely 1991, p17), it is generally accepted that any mundane situation - viewed with fresh eyes – can turn even the most familiar social scene into something worth closer investigation. Perhaps, then, one of the principles of fieldwork is to 'be surprised' and to give rise to 'new knowledge' (Willis 2000, p113). My approach to the ethnographic study was to seek to enter the field with an open mind and to expect the unexpected. Over many weeks, I conducted my active participation ethnography, making field notes within the group, as well as retrospective field notes, directly afterwards using a style of 'thick description' to enable me to view the experiences and interactions at a distance later on (Geertz 1973).

During the sessions I participated in informal conversation while the participants were actively making (Spradley 2016) which supports the contention that interviews conducted in a conversational manner are more effective than a structured interview (Burgess 2002, p102). There was no attempt to guide the conversion or to ask formalized questions in order to illicit particular answers. The naturalistic style of approach is akin to Margarethe Kusenbach's approach of a 'go along' (Kusenbach 2003). Rather than a formalized interview in a removed

setting, conversations and activities occur in a natural environment which allows for the capturing of 'practices of the body' and emotions and perceptions. These things would not be evident in a conventional interview and a natural flow of ideas may not be forthcoming in an interview where answers are expected immediately (Gauntlett, Holzwarth 2006).

A flow of consciousness is important to reveal thoughts that could not be predicted by an interviewer. Nonetheless, prior to the participant observation phase I constructed a list of areas to be mindful of such as: the style and nature of informal chat, seating patterns, movement, interaction with one another, with objects and their surroundings, emotional states; frustrations and elations. In reflecting upon these themes after the sessions, I contemplated why participants chose to say or do certain things and reflected on the silences too.

Visual fieldnotes were vital in my reflections as well as my participation at the field site. Although my intention was to capture the 'action' with photography I felt it would be too intrusive and disruptive and hence I took photographs of the environment – rather than the participants - in order to record the intimate environment where the study is conducted.
Instead, I created my own drawings, on occasions, to help capture seating patterns, to write notes, but mostly to watch, listen and 'lurk' without appearing to look. The drawings became an aide memoire, a physical reminder of the situation. Creating art during the research process is believed by some artist-researchers to be the best way to understanding creative actions (McNiff 1998). In this instance drawing enabled me to 'blend in'. One of these is shown below:

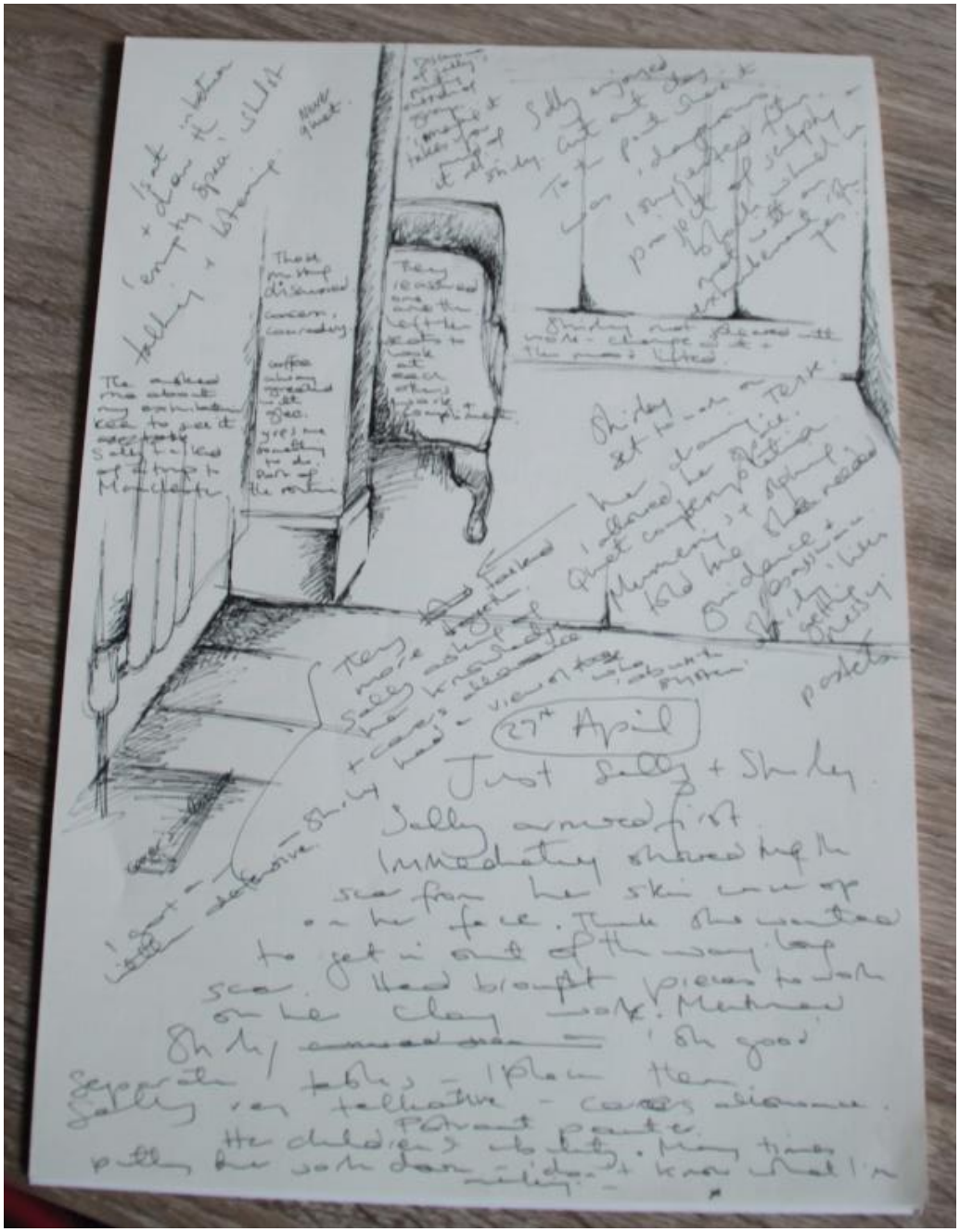


*Figure 1 Example of artist's fieldnotes*

## Into the Studio

Prior to the start of the art group, the transformation of the environment from my home, into art studio begins. A ritual of moving of furniture, the setting up of trestle tables and easels and, making a mental shift to my role as art coordinator.  For this ethnographic study I am required to adjust my thinking, as my role is now not just to facilitate but also to look for meaning.

Figure 2 The Art Room

Sensory and material interactions, processes and environments, such as my living room, turned art studio have specific cultural meanings (Pink 2015, p28). A place has the ability to gather experiences and memories (Casey 1996, p24). An innocuous space can hold meaning for those who share an experience there and who take part events, such as the art group. It is a 'zone of entanglement' (Ingold 2008). Here that entanglement incorporated artist's materials such as paper, paints and craft objects, tables, chairs and lights all positioned in such a way as to foster and support the creative atmosphere.

On arrival to the art club, the initial conversation of the participants is of a social nature. George, a retiree and Sue, the full-time carer of her adult, autistic son, regularly reveal several pieces of artwork, produced at home to show myself and others. The tone of any feedback is of a supportive nature. To feel confident enough to share in this way seems to indicate that they feel safe in this environment. Sue revealed that, prior to joining the group, she had never shown her artwork to anyone, but she did not divulge the reasons for this secrecy.

Foraging in bags ensues and the opening of art boxes by Sue, George and Nitin, a 78 year old, retired doctor. They all usually come prepared with an activity in mind. George and Nitin, particularly, take pride in their equipment, with brushes and paints neatly aligned in compartments and boxes. As retirees, these objects seem to be the new tools of their trade; part of their new identity and an 'extension of self' (Belk 1988) and help to reinforce 'social membership' and 'selfhood' (Dunn 2008, p121). The equipment unpacked marks their space and enlarges their 'sense of self' (Sartre 2012) reinforcing their identity as 'an artist'. Sue, who is the most prolific 'maker', often pulls out half-completed works from a carrier bag. Sue's chaotic bag seems to reflect how little time she has for herself. The others, who are less confident; Tracy, a shift worker, Pat, a mother, new to the area, and Fiona, a 65 year old divorcee and self-styled 'free spirit', arrive and I suggest where they sit and wait for instructions.

Conversation is constant for two hours, with topics ranging from religion and art to gynecological issues, however, not all participate. Fiona, who classes herself as a complete novice, once set on a task, often distances herself from the conversation through her silence.

I give her space, taking my cues from her sighs and demeanor. At the end of the activity she immerges, expressing how she has ignored her coffee having been completed engrossed. This psychological 'flow state' (Csikszentmihalyi 2000) and is something that only Fiona seems to fully achieve. Despite her lack of confidence she has professed that she likes to get messy and chooses to work with materials such as clay and charcoal. The banging, scratching actions and dirt on her face seem to reveal a rebellious interior, in contradiction to her outward, polite, middle class demeanor. Meanwhile, Nitin dips in and out of conversation. He likes to work standing up with an easel and stands a little apart from the others. As the ladies often talk and joke about medical issues, they will direct a comment at him, perhaps aware that he may feel uncomfortable, and he will return with a dry, witty comment, in a way, perhaps to reassure them.

Although I am not guiding my participants' activities in order for them to explore a specific theme, such as identity, the activities themselves do instigate conversation. When people are engaged in making it is thought that they think on a deeper level (Gauntlett, Holzwarth 2006). My experiences show that when one to one with participants Sue and Pat individually, with the shield of 'doing' the conversion becomes extremely revealing and soul bearing. I cannot imagine that this would occur sitting face to face in an interview.

### Understanding the art-making experience

On analysis of my fieldwork and notes, with multiple readings, several important themes emerged. I used cognitive mapping techniques to find connections and groupings in order to code and cluster (Creswell 2012, p89). My notes and drawings were used, as suggested by ethnographer Judith Okely, as 'a guide and a trigger' (Bryman, Burgess 2002, p18-20) but I also relied on my emotional and sensory memory of the experience. In reflecting upon my experiences as faciliatator, artist and observer, I noted that several themes emerged more clearly than othera, specifically the concept of identity formation. It appeared that the making of art, being part of a group and the use and ownership of art materials helped to shape 'the self'.

Those supportive of arts-based methods have shown how art activities can help to defy stereotyping, particularly in later life (Reynolds 2010) and help form positive self esteem and identity. Increased self esteem is a commonly recognised outcome of art participation as reported in the study 'Use or Ornament' (Matarasso 2003), and through the research process it is evident that the participants have gained in confidence, within their artistic practice – a few exhibiting publicly for the first time. The art group appears to fulfill a role in reducing social isolation and, in reference to the bravery to exhibit; it has increased 'safe' levels of risk-taking among the participants. This was made possible through the observable ways in which participants offered support to one another, personally and artistically, creating social cohesion among a diverse group. Empathy is shown, for example, when Fiona comments to Sue that her art making "must take her mind off things". This supports studies that assert that creative practices increase the capacity for empathy (Brown, Novak-Leonard 2013, p13).

Interestingly, it appeared that the supportive friendships extended outside the art group with visits to galleries and messages to check on issues such job hunting and operations. There was also support shown to me with their attendance at my exhibitions (although perhaps to check my 'artistic credentials' rather than to cement social ties). In characterizing the group, one could certainly describe it as sociable and mutually supportive in nature, evident in the sharing of ideas as well as food and drink. The smell of brewing coffee, the sharing of food (particularly biscuits) was a 'looked forward to' part of the shared experience (Pink 2015, p68). Barriers to artmaking were discussed frequently. They included lack of time, money and the resentment of their artistic activities by a spouse due to the draw of time and the mess. Caring duties and heavy shift work commitments were regular topics of conversation that seem to need to be 'exorcised'. It seemed that sharing such grievances served to strengthen the ties between those in the group. The conversation always returned to discussion of the artwork, artists and future plans for making which provided an escape and mental shift away from societal constraints and difficulties.

Throughout the field study there were ebbs and flows of engagement, absorption and inactivity. It became evident that intrinsic effects of artmaking occurred when in a 'flow state', lost in the process; during the merging of paint or when overcoming a problem. Although

there were anxieties within the creative process, all participants seemed determined to overcome the challenge and the artwork itself became something of deep significance and importance to the maker. This was undoubtedly the driving force for all; the outcome was a personal triumph, even when they may have not been completely satisfied with it. The reported and witnessed experience is energizing, meaningful, absorbing and fulfilling to the participants which concurs with the theories and empirical evidence from prior studies referenced earlier in this report (Reynolds, Prior 2006; Reynolds, Vivat et al. 2011; Norton 1976; Ryff, Singer 2013; Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

## Discussion and Conclusion

In the analysis of information and in the search for meaning it is important to realize that it is only ever possible to suggest interpretations and try to find the participants' personal meanings in their behaviour. Ethnography is not a 'picture of reality'. In the foregoing section, I have hinted at only a fraction of my recorded data and am mindful that it remains challenging to get close to the lived experience of others in the confines of a single working paper. While the prolonged contact with the subjects 'in the field' has given me a deep insight, enhancing the substance and validity of my study (Fetterman 1989), it is difficult to explore and analyse the findings of such research within a traditional ethnographic framework – particularly since the normative method of dissemination is text-based and my data comprises photography, drawing, installations and recorded speech and interview. In this assemblage of materials and text, experience and detached reflection, there are challenges for contributing to ethnographic literature. I am aware of them and the limits that these conventions place upon rendering a full portrait of the lifeworld I have sought to describe.

One of the main stumbling blocks for the incorporation of artistic forms into ethnographic field results is that the artist-ethnographer 'selects and filters' through their memory and experience, phenomena which are prone to exaggeration and distortion (Willis 2013, p115). It is difficult, for example, to place reliance upon art installations to tell a story about 'real life' for there must be an element of trust in any ethnographic tale that the account is based on 'reality'. When such an account is constructed from art-making processes, what can the

onlooker truly learn of the lived experience of others? Okely (date) warns that all ethnography lacks a degree of scientific objectivity, however, because data is collected and analysed by the same person (Bryman, Burgess 2002, p18-20). As an artist, however, there is a clear case that this caveat can, in fact, be a key strength: who better can make sense of such 'messy data' than the person who collected or created it?

My contention is that rich data has emerged from the polyvocal and artistic quality of the study, illustrating different perspectives often through visual means. This, rather than diminishing the 'validity' or rigour of the analysis evokes and foregrounds the participants' voice rather that the researcher's. In fact, through the experience of making and doing, it encourages those who would not normally regard themselves as research participants to share their views, collaborate and co-create physical forms over which discussion can be mediated. This was evident in the diversity and difference of the participants who, nonetheless, formed lasting social ties that persevered in their lives outside the art room. In this, it appeared that art-making carried the potential for a powerful legacy that could support future study and research opportunities (Magolda 2000, p230). A co-constructed ethnographic project would be an exciting extension to this project, for example. Participants' thoughts in the form of sketchbooks and audio recordings could be displayed alongside their artwork to facilitate a deeper understanding of their lived experience. Indeed, exhibition-work has already been used to do precisely this (Kara, 2015).

Witnessing the production of the work, not just the physical action that results in its formation, but the 'physic energy' (Belk 1988) invested in it, allowed me to generate a deeper understanding of how artmaking happens for the individual than through interview alone. It prompted me to reflect upon the value of phenomenology as a theoretical frame for regarding the embodied experiences of making and doing, process and product. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, it is attending to the lived and sensory experience that we best acquire our insights into the world, and the ways in which others experience that world. Through the 'how' one can try to decipher the 'why' and this enables the researcher to ask 'what does it mean?' The object of attention in many cases is not simply a separate entity but part of the maker's extended self.

In conclusion, this paper has argued that art-making allowed ethnographic insights to be gained in a non-intrusive way and meant that the study was more inclusive and generated richer data. I have supported extant scholarship into creative methods that suggests that research incorporating art activities has been found to help 'mediate interaction' (Kara 2015, p22), particularly with people who are marginalized and may struggle with conventional interview techniques and questionnaires. Within this study an ethnographic, creative approach enabled the collection of a variety of sensory and visual data and it removed the reliance solely on text. As a result the identities and aspirations of the community under study began to reveal themselves (Beebeejaun, Durose et al. 2013). Those who may be shy or under-confident with language skills were able to participate and contribute interesting data through the fieldwork. Yet, the academy remains tethered to a number of conventions that limit the dissemination of ethnographic findings. I consider that there is a pressing need to showcase new and creative forms of data in ways that reveal rather than hide away the potential for art as a method and as a form of ethnographic work in its own right.

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